

## Love and the Gods

by Caroline Schwartzbeck

The gods found themselves immersed in choosing their successors. There was nothing more engaging than sitting around the great stone table, peeking into mortal lives like one might check the first page of a library book, trying to decide who best embodied each of their domains.

“I like this one,” said Journey, pointing through the shroud of mist that separated the gods from the mortal realm at a man riding on horseback across a rocky ridgeline. “Been living nomadically since he was a teenager. Traveled the entire realm, knows each and every place like the back of his hand. Now takes to guiding adventurers and travelers to their next destination, since he doesn’t need a destination to enjoy the journey.”

War scoffed. “Are you going to choose anyone who isn’t just a carbon copy of your mortal life?”

“Says the one who wants to choose a soldier that fought for the same army as she did,” retorted Knowledge.

Before they had been gods, each and every one of the figures crowded around the table had been just like the ones they now watched over. Centuries ago, they’d all been chosen by the gods of their era, plucked from their humble lives and given the task of watching over the world. Now their time was up, and it was their chance to choose who would become the next generation of gods.

It had been Knowledge who suggested how this decision should be made: each god should deduce why they’d been selected for the position, and then choose someone for that same reason. For the others, this was simple. They had all devoted their mortal lives to protecting, learning of, and experiencing their domain. Journey had been a traveling merchant known for making the entire world his home. War had been a soldier who put her honor over her life. Knowledge was a librarian who devoted everything to helping others learn, and Nature the fierce protector of a small forest.

But Love wasn't quite sure why she'd stood out to the gods. She hadn't been anything special. She wasn't a soldier or a nomad or a librarian, she was just a person. She had been a mother, and her children's father had left the entire family behind as soon as a more beautiful woman showed her face. Love had been spiteful, but she pushed through. She took up odd jobs to pay for her children's food and clothing, and when she wasn't working, she had been caring for her offspring day and night. It was grueling, but she didn't stop until the youngest child went off on her own to begin her adulthood.

She had loved those children, sure, but when times grew hard that love sometimes came through gritted teeth. Besides, everyone loved *something*. War had loved her army and Knowledge had loved their books and Nature had loved his forest and Journey had loved life itself. And every single candidate they were looking at for godhood loved something, or someone, to the point of protection. But no one loved love. Love was everywhere. Love was monotone. Love was a common point in everyone's life, whether they were a soldier or a scholar or a sailor or just a parent trying to make their way in the world. And love simply *was*, it wasn't an object or an event. You couldn't put a finger on love, nor could you distinguish love from not-love. How could any one person embody something so universal?

Yet the gods had chosen Love to define her domain. She had nothing special to offer to the table, no experience or knowledge that wasn't common in the world. What was it that made her embody the domain of love more than any other mortal?

Maybe she didn't. And maybe that was the point.

"I know who I'm going to pick," said Love suddenly.

The others looked up at her. Knowledge had been in the middle of a monologue about the achievements of the child prodigy they'd chosen, and they weren't used to being interrupted. "How? You haven't even looked at anyone yet."

“Exactly. I’m going to pick a random one.”

“What?” Knowledge’s mouth fell open in shock.

“You heard me. Just an ordinary person. Nothing special.”

“Why? Why would you think that just anyone deserves to take up the mantle of godhood?

Isn’t there anyone in particular - that princess who we always see sneaking out of the palace to meet up with her commoner girlfriend, or a parent who would give up their entire life for that of their children? Someone like you?”

“Indeed. Someone like me. Someone with no special achievements, or with achievements beyond simple human gestures. It’s clear why you all were chosen, you lived a whole life devoted to your domain. But I didn’t devote my whole life to love, and neither does anyone else. Except I think everyone does, simply by being with the people around them and helping others up and admiring strangers on the street and being... human. Love is distinctly human, and humans are distinctly loving. No matter who ends up here, they’ll be able to do the job. I believe it.”

“If you say so,” shrugged War. “I can’t say I’d think the same, but hey, there’s a reason I wasn’t chosen for your role.”

“Maybe you could have been,” pointed out Love.

They all stood in silence for a few moments, before Knowledge asked, “So? Are you going to choose?”

Love stepped forward, squeezing her eyes shut before she let chance guide her deciding hand across the mortal realm. Her hand landed on someone, and she could feel vindication flow through her as she rescinded her reach. She had no idea who she’d just bestowed with centuries’ worth of power and responsibility, but there was no doubt in her mind that they’d do the job.