

"Orpheus and Eurydice,"  
acrylic painting  
by Kylee Maidhof

# A Modern *Myth of* Hades & Persephone

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That's the thing about gators, they're always where you least expect them," Renee had said. "You may be tempted to look for them on the ground, but they're always in the trees. They fall down and get-cha real good. That's why my mama tells me to look up every once and awhile."

Avani remembered that conversation vividly. She frequently found herself longing for those days when she'd moved to southern Florida to start college, when she'd met Renee, who had insisted on giving her a crash course on Florida survival on the way home from history class.

"Oh yeah! And their skin is bullet proof," Renee had said matter-of-factly. Then she'd whispered, closing one green eye framed by blazing red hair. "My daddy says you can only shoot 'em if their mouths are open. That is, if you can shoot faster than they can bite."

Tall and permanently sunburned, Renee stood in sharp contrast to Avani, whose dark brown hair lay against smooth, golden brown skin, and who, according to Renee, was at the "perfect gator snatchin' height" of just over five feet tall.

The pair had strolled through the sticky Florida heat, swatting at lovebugs. As the sun beat down, they'd passed kids running through water spraying from a broken fire hydrant while others placed bets on how long it would be before the tar started to melt. Another group had surrounded a cracked egg on the pavement, waiting for the gooey mess to fry.

Those months had passed faster than a peregrine falcon diving into the swamp. The neighborhood had seen the pair as soulmates, a single entity. Renee planned extravagant outdoor adventures: they skipped rocks in the shipyard, danced in the soft morning rain, and caught fireflies in the woods at night. Avani kept Renee grounded, nurturing her creativity while always preparing for whatever the gods threw at them.

They had gone on dates at the drive-in-theatre and had held hands under the blankets. They spent weekend nights camping in a tent pitched in a blooming field and living in

their own perfectly happy world.

But then that one day while Renee picked flowers and Avani tanned in the sun, a man had come stomping towards them, red in the face and spilling ash from his cigar on the soft clovers.

"Renee!" the man had said with forced patience, glancing at his 14 karat gold watch. "I've been waiting for you all morning! If we don't leave now, we will miss our flight to Virginia."

"Oh! Damien," Renee had said with embarrassment. "I'll be right there."

After Damien had headed back to his red Ford truck, Renee had quickly explained that her father was forcing her to marry Damien, a wealthy man who had taken interest

in Renee's liveliness and beauty. She'd been reluctant to tell Avani—Renee's father insisted his daughter marry rich and refused to allow her to "do the devil's work" by dating another girl.

For Renee and Avani, it had felt like the earth was opening from under them, letting them fall into the depths of nothingness.

Avani had tears running down her cheeks when she'd whispered, "Will you ever come back?"

"I hope so," Renee had said with glazed-over eyes. "I have been thinking long and hard about it all. I think I can get him to allow me to come back to Florida to see my father for half of the year while he is off runnin' his business. Durin' that time, I'll come straight to you, and we can spend the spring and summer together!"

Avani had wrapped her arms around Renee and prayed to whomever was listening that her lover would be able to come back.

Suddenly, Damien had reappeared behind Renee and grabbed her at the elbow, his knuckles turning white.

"Come on, Renee!" Damien had sneered. "I'm tired of waiting for you!"

Renee had glanced back at Avani with tears streaming down her face while Damien had dragged her to his truck.

"They skipped rocks in the shipyard, danced in the soft morning rain, and caught fireflies in the woods at night."



She had dropped her bouquet of flowers on the muddy ground. "I'm so sorry, Avani. I love you. Wait for me!"

Avani had waited. During the fall and winter, she had huddled in her house as the sharp rain flooded the couple's field and wild winds of hurricane season blew all the Florida life inside their shelters. She scrolled through social media, liking Renee's half-hearted posts about her new life with her husband, Damien. When Renee had left, she'd taken Avani's energy and liveliness with her.

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Suddenly, Avani's phone rang, jolting her from her thoughts. She rushed to grab her phone and answered it immediately when she saw it was Renee.

"Renee!" Avani shouted with relief.

"Avani, I needed to hear your voice," Avani answered exhaustedly. "I can't stand it here. Damien lies and cheats. I'm stuck inside this dark house. He smashes liquor bottles when I beg to go outside. I'm a bird trapped in a cage. So, I sit here watchin' him hunt sweet animals in the woods out back. His eyes scare me; they're merciless, dead," Avani said softly, her voice breaking as Damien's black great dane barked, pulling against his chains which were hooked to a tall, dead oak tree.

"I'm so sorry," Avani uttered with a shaky voice. "You are supposed to catch your flight today to come back. Will you still come?"

"Yes!" Renee gasped. "Damien desperately wants me to love him, be content with the comfort of a barred cage. He tires himself tryin' to buy my love with jewelry and wine. He thinks if I go, I will see how much I'd rather be with him."

Renee chuckled at Damien's narcissistic and ridiculous ideas. "I'll be there soon."

Renee did return, and Avani's world opened up. After Avani picked Renee up from the airport, they ventured to their field. Florida was alive and warm again. The peonies bloomed and oranges ripened. Renee quickly removed the pearly bracelets that shackled her from wrist to wrist and the golden chain that hung heavy around her throat, flinging them on the grass and leaving them behind.

The pair spent the summer in their bright yellow tent in their field with more vibrance and intensity than before. They picked pentas, swam in the clear ocean, and drifted in canoes in the lake. The two knew they loved each other with the same intensity as the Florida summer sun.

When it was time for Renee to go back to Damien, Avani didn't mourn. She knew Renee would always return. Avani daydreamed about all of their adventures and thought over their past conversations, still grinning at Renee's jokes.

Every time she walked home from class, Avani made sure to glance up at the trees once in a while and look for gators.

She smiled to herself. They were always where you least expect them. 🦎