

THE LEGEND OF SAPPHIRE

Long ago, when the world was young and humans believed in such things as magic and unearthly power, the gods who resided on Mount Olympus would often visit the mortal realm. More often than not one god or the other would find a comely face and form in which they'd become enamored. You see, their perfection made them bored and their power often led them to believe they could do and have whatever their whim.

Zeus was no different than the others. Even more so, perhaps, as he was the king and ruled over all the other gods. He'd met and bedded many a pretty maid, much to his wife's displeasure. Which is why, legend tells that Hera, the goddess of marriage and childbirth, was often jealous and angry with her husband.

Many of these matings, of humans and gods, resulted in the birth of demi-gods like Hercules. The great beauty Helen of Troy was even said to be the daughter of Zeus and Leda, the queen of Sparta. These are but a few of Zeus' children.

One bright, sunlit morning, after Zeus and Hera had quarreled, he decided to take himself back to the island of Atlantis. It was a beautiful place filled with wonderful pleasures. He was worshipped there by most mortals and found it soothed the ego that Hera took such pleasure in trying to destroy. While walking among them in the crowded marketplace, he scanned their wares and the faces of the pretty maids. His philandering character may have been maligned by many, but nothing truly dented his need to seek the company of a female, be she goddess or mortal.

His eyes fell upon a face that nearly stopped Zeus' heart, halting the breath in his lungs. "Atalanti," he whispered her name in lustful admiration.

She was more beautiful, it was said, than Aphrodite herself, with eyes bluer than Poseidon's seas and skin as soft as the finest silk. Her hair was the color of the setting sun and lips as red as the sweetest wine.

He knew she was the daughter of a rich merchant and had been betrothed to the son of a nobleman. It was part of his godhood that let him know these things. It had never stopped him before and thought nothing of charming her to his bed.

As he wooed and charmed, promised and cajoled, nothing would sway her; she'd been promised to another and would go to her husband pure. Being one who had pride in great abundance, Zeus refused to use his god-power to persuade her to his bed. So, he tried to bribe her with jewels and immortality, both of which she refused.

As all of his attempts were spurned, and his desire for her grew hotter, Zeus created the most precious of gems as a gift. It was flawless and the purest of blue to match the color of her eyes. The gem was large enough to fill the palm of a man's hand and worth more coin than any man on earth could earn in several lifetimes.

When he came to her one last time, he did something he'd never done, not even when he'd wed Hera. He bent to his knee holding the blue stone in the palm of his hand. He offered her his heart, his throne, and the gem, if she would be his queen.

With a tear in her eye and her heart breaking, Atalanti wept in refusal of all three of his gifts. Though she did not love her betrothed, and Zeus' pursuit of her swayed her to want to accept, her home was here on earth and the island of Atlantis. She could not leave; not even for the king of the gods.

She was not unkind with her refusal of Zeus' offer, but it angered him beyond comprehension. He was Zeus! No one refused him! He'd come to her on bended knee and offered her everything he had; would give her everything her heart desired.

In his rage, he flung the gem as far as he could, his godhood giving it the power to pierce the deepest part of the sea. He cursed the woman who had broken his heart with the pain of watching all she held dear destroyed as she begged him for mercy that would never come.

Uncaring of his words, spoken more from his wounded ego than a broken heart, Zeus' curse had far reaching effects, as he returned to Olympus. His anger was evident, making the mountain rumble and lightening flash across the cloudless sky. None approached him, fearing they'd be his next god-bolt target; even Hera kept her distance.

The blue gem he'd heaved into the sea, flew through the deepest depths, lodging itself in the heart of a young mermaid. Her name was Sapphire, and she was the joy of her father and his kingdom.

Sapphire's heart had already been bruised and shattered beyond repair, as she'd fallen in love with a mortal man. Being the daughter of the king of the mer-people, and a mermaid, her times on dry land could be no more than a few days each month as the moon rode high and full as it pulled at the tides.

When the gem pierced her heart, and she was brought to her father's finest healers, King Ortheos wept as there was nothing could be done to save his only child. Death did not come swiftly to Sapphire. She suffered in agony and her life's energy dimmed as the king of the mer-people pleaded with Poseidon to heal Sapphire. He would relinquish his crown as payment, should Poseidon wish it.

Alas, with a heavy weight on his own heart, for he too loved Sapphire as if she were his own child, Poseidon could not undo what his brother, Zeus, had done. He could not remove the blue stone from the mermaid's heart lest it kill her immediately. His only recourse, Poseidon told the king, was to try to alter the young mermaid's fate. The sea god bestowed his blessing upon her and infused the blue stone with enough magic to ensure her immortal life, and because of the pain that Zeus had caused in his anger at being rejected, he blessed the stone to grant her all of her greatest desires.

But, he warned, should the stone ever be removed from Sapphire's heart, she would die. He could do no more for her, and Poseidon left his ocean-realm to confront his brother on Olympus.

When King Ortheos asked Sapphire what her fondest wish would be, she wept piteously in his arms and confessed her love for a human man. Being the son of a nobleman, he was betrothed to a merchant's daughter. She knew that she could never be with her beloved and she would die of a broken heart, in spite of Poseidon's gift, she lamented.

Holding back his own sadness and wanting only his daughter's happiness, he caressed her face and kissed her goodbye.

"Go, daughter. Find your true love and be happy. But," he warned. "You must let your love know he cannot let the gem be removed from your heart or you will surely die."

With her solemn vow and a kiss for her father, she made her way to Atlantis and her true love. Her heart was light as she reached the white sandy beach where she knew Apollodoros would be walking.

His wedding was to take place the following day, and his mind was on another. It was a match made out of necessity, rather than love and agreed to by their parents when they were still children. He had no feelings for Atalanti, though she was beautiful and pure, and had a kind and generous nature.

He stared out over the water, contemplating throwing himself into the sea in hopes of finding his Sapphire and making his life with her; if only Poseidon would grant him his wish.

As Sapphire rose from the water, her hand over the stone in her heart, she made her wish and walked to him on two human legs, draped in a gown of blue, shimmering silk.

As Apollodoros watched Sapphire, now in human form, his heart rejoiced and then it shattered. He was betrothed to another, how could he betray his father and Atalanti?

He loved her too much and knew that Sapphire had given up even more to become human. "I will give up my home, my riches, even my life to be with you, Sapphire," Apollodoros vowed, as he held her in his arms. "We will take the next boat to Greece. We will make a home and a life somewhere my father will never find us."

The gem embedded in Sapphire's heart glowed as joy and love filled her. She confided in Apollodoros, warning him of her death should the stone be removed. As the azure light pulsed around them, he made a solemn oath to keep her safe, come what may.

That same night, as they lay wrapped in each other's arms, vowing their eternal love to each other, Apollodoros, caressed the stone embedded in Sapphire's heart. His words of love and happiness for the rest of their lives had barely left his lips when his father's men crashed into the room, seizing him and dragging him away from his new bride.

His father stepped in and ordered his son's captors to remove him to his ship and return him to their home on Atlantis. As Apollodoros struggled against the arms that held him, he heard Sapphire screaming for him as his father approached the bed.

Sapphire glared at the man before her as she held the thin coverlet across her breasts. "You are too late. We were wed this day and there is nothing you can do to stop us now, Dracus."

"Do not be so sure," Dracus said, reaching out his hand with lust in his eyes. "I can see why my son is so taken with you. You are quite lovely, my dear. But he will get over you, I promise. I will not have a whore destroy all that I have built."

As Sapphire pulled out of his grasp, the sheet slipped from her fingers and exposed the gem buried by the wrath of Zeus. Dracus' eyes grew large and the lust in them turned to greed.

Being a man of great stature and muscle, it was quite easy to overpower the slight young woman who had dared to defy him. As her screams of pain and rage echoed throughout the small village on the coast of Greece, Dracus dug the giant blue stone from Sapphire's heart, with the dagger strapped at his side.

Wiping the blood from the stone and his fingers upon the sheet where the lovers had lain, greed and madness shone from Dracus' eyes. He placed the gem into a leather pouch, hiding it in a secret place known only to himself. He would come back for it after his son was safely wed to the merchant's daughter and the pretty whore was long forgotten.

Apollodoros knew the moment Sapphire had drawn her last breath. He'd heard her whispering his name as it drifted to him on the wind. His father had killed her, his greed for power and wealth had blinded Dracus to all else.

In his despair at the loss of his true love at his father's hands, Apollodoros flung himself off the ship that was carrying him back to Atlantis.

As he sank into the cold depths of the roiling waters, wanting nothing more than to drown his sorrow, he was saved by a man that was not a man. He had been sent by King Ortheos to check on his daughter and her beloved. When the guard saw the depths of Apollodoros' anguish, he hurried back to give the king the devastating news.

At the outpouring of grief that engulfed all who lived in the sea, Poseidon went to the king and they made their plans for retribution. Aiming his trident at Atlantis, the god of the sea destroyed the island and all of its inhabitants. Those who tried to escape by boat, were immediately set upon by the mer-people. No man, woman, or child would survive the sinking of Atlantis.

Zeus' curse on the woman who spurned him had come to pass. Atalanti was the last to see her beloved home and people as the island disappeared beneath the churning waters of Poseidon's domain. The Mermaid's Heart was lost that day. Legend has it that the stone was locked in a

chest that could only be opened with three magical keys entrusted to Dracus' brothers, somewhere in Athens, before he was killed.