

So the night came. I picked her up from her house in a cab, and we went to a special venue in the Swan Valley. I'd made a booking for seven people, as we'd invited her parents, her sister, and two of her closest friends, one of them from work. Most of them were quite late, but her sister was already there when we arrived. We ended up being eight, but that was a surprise.

Her sister, Biancha, was waiting outside. At the entry, an usher gave us an envelope that contained ten character cards. It was an Ancient Greek theme night, and guests had to pick a card to determine who they were. Biancha got Athena, Felicity got Helen, and I got Odysseus. We were then directed to some kind of a cloakroom, where we exchanged our card for a costume. This was all included in the price. Actually, we had to pay a deposit, which would be fully refunded once we returned the outfits. Each outfit had a tag with its equivalent character name, so people were easily identified.

Felicity was extremely nervous, as this was 'the day'. We ordered drinks, and she started to relax more, or so I thought. When her two other friends arrived, she became very talkative and assertive, but her assertiveness seemed directed at me only.

At a certain point, I was invited to sing a song with the band. That had been arranged by me, as I was friends with the bass player. As I stood in front of the microphone, I said, 'Good evening, everyone. My name's Clarissa Torres, and I'd like to sing a song to a very special lady. You know who you are. Happy birthday!' So I sang 'True Colours' by Cindy Lauper.

The crowd seemed to like it, and they sang along when we got to the chorus. When I finished the song, I thanked the band, the audience, and I went back to our table. Her parents had arrived. I greeted them and was informed they had brought along someone called Tom, who seemed over-friendly with Felicity. I had to try to find an empty chair and drag it to our table as Tom had taken my seat. I ended up sitting next to him.

'Hi. I'm Tom. You're the neighbour, right?'

'Pardon?'

'They told me while you were singing. I used to be her neighbour too when we were in high school.'

'Oh, so you're the ex then.', I said smiling. He looked puzzled.

'What?'

'You're the ex-neighbour. And I'm the current one.'

'Right.'

He turned his head to look at her, and they both laughed. Then Tom stretched his hand to shake mine. I wanted to crush it, but I'm not that strong.

He said, 'It's really nice to meet you, Clarissa.'

'Actually, tonight I'm Odysseus. Who are you tonight?'

Felicity laughed and licked her upper lip, something I noticed she did when she was nervous. She grabbed the envelope and asked Tom to pick a card. He looked at the three last cards: one was Paris, one was Elpenor, and one was Patroclus.

‘Well, I’d love to be Paris for the night if I get to steal you, Helen!’

Everyone laughed but me. I said, ‘Watch your back. Agamemnon could be lurking somewhere.’ But my comment was followed by blank faces, so I just took a large sip of my drink.

Felicity’s parents made a nice comment about my singing. The word ‘neighbour’ kept echoing inside my head. Fli kept avoiding my gaze, and her sister tried to make polite conversation. Tom excused himself to go to the restroom. As he stood up, he asked if anyone wanted another drink. We all declined, and when he returned, now as Paris, he had a margarita for him and one for Fli.

‘A special drink for the birthday girl.’

‘Well, thank you!’

At eight o’clock, everyone went into the huge dance floor, and instead of a band, there was an event leader, giving us instructions. Each person had to find their match. Odysseus had to find Penelope, Achilles had to find either Briseis or Patroclus, and so on and so forth. However, the rule was that you could not simply go and find your match. Each person had the name of the possible matches on the reverse of their tag, which also showed whether they belonged to Sparta or Troy. All participants started dancing with anyone and had to change dancing partner every time the song stopped until they got their match. The trick was that some characters had a secret weapon. This weapon could only be used against a character that, according to the legend, had been killed by that particular character. For example, Hector could kill Patroclus, and Achilles could kill Hector, whereas only dear Paris could kill Achilles. I felt really angry that I did not have Agamemnon’s card.

Another twist was that some people had monster characters, like the Cyclops and Medusa. Those characters could kill anyone. Then some people had a god or goddess. These were allowed to pick whoever they wanted for a match.

The dance floor was divided into three parts, two parallel cordon-like ropes acting like the boundary lines. The section at one end was called Sparta. The middle section was a common ground, where all participants started looking for their match. It was also where the dead ones stayed. The other side was Troy.

If a person requested to dance with someone who was already matched, they were sent to whichever dance floor they did not belong to as a slave. For instance, if Paris was with Helen, and a third character requested to dance with either of them, that person was the one who’d become a slave, unless they were a monster or a god. Only monsters and gods could split a matched couple. It was a cool game, and I did my best to enjoy it, even if simply for the sake of a tribute to Homer, whom I admire as a writer.

I found my Penelope quite early, and I thought I’d stay with her for the rest of the game, but Athena, who was Biancha, intervened and separated us. I spent almost the rest of the night with her, even after the game ended.

Felicity’s parents went home after the game, and the rest of us stayed on the dance floor. At some point, they started playing a mixture of some slow dance music and some old dance music, and I saw how Paris was enjoying his cheek-to-cheek moment with Helen. Biancha, still as Athena, saw it too and looked at me, disconcerted. Then she spoke.

‘She’s had a bit to drink.’

‘Sounds like that’s what I should do too. Want some?’

‘Dance this song with me. Then we’ll get a drink.’

‘Sure!’

I already suspected that Biancha knew about Felicity and me. At that moment, I felt certain. I held her right hand with my left and danced what was left of ‘Great Pretender’ and the beginning of ‘Be My Baby’. Biancha tried to cheer me up as if she could fix things, just like gods do. She cleverly manoeuvred us towards Felicity and Tom, then she separated their hands, and somehow the four of us were holding hands in a line. Biancha placed herself right in front of Tom. ‘I deserve some of your attention too!’ And they slowly—too slow for my liking—moved further from Felicity and me. I was unsure whether I was Odysseus or Clarissa. I was unsure if I was awake or dreaming. I was unsure if Felicity was my girlfriend or my ex. She was in front of me. Happiness was escaping me. We remained holding hands, and the song ‘Classic’ by Adrian Gurvitz started. I was looking right into her eyes. She looked tipsy but cheerful.

‘I’m just teasing him. You know I don’t like him, right?’

‘Are you sure it’s not me you’re teasing?’

‘C’mon!’

‘I thought tonight was about the truth, not teasing anyone.’

‘Well, tonight’s about me!’

‘And who are you, by the way? I can’t recognise you.’

‘Look, I know we had an agreement, and you have expectations. But ... do you have any idea of how awkward it would be to do it tonight? I mean, Tom wasn’t even invited, but my parents brought him, and he’s probably thinking we’re still in high school.’

‘Then wake him up from his dream and show him this isn’t high school.’

‘It would be awkward for him. Put himself in his place.’

‘Don’t you mean put *myself* in his place? Anyway, I don’t really care about him, to be honest. The question is, can you put yourself in my place?’

In a fit of anger, she pulled away, but somehow her necklace got caught in my dress, and as she moved, the necklace broke. The pendant, which was a pair of gold wings I’d given her the year before, fell off. The necklace was still attached to my clothes, in front of my bosom. As she snatched the chain, it ripped part of my toga.

She left impetuously. I picked up my wings, which had been abandoned by their guardian but returned to their owner.

I went into the restroom, and it was only when I was in front of the mirror that I noticed how bad the damage to the toga was. That meant I would not be able to return it and get my refund. I thought of my best friend, Dominique, and her business. I wished I was home so I could ring her.

*First Aid Seamstress, good morning. Triage, intensive care, IVF or transplant unit?*

Dominique runs a mobile sewing business. Very successful. She has a few people working for her at different shifts. Her busiest days are weekends, when most people dress up and go out. So I thought if anyone could help me at that moment, it had to be her. No one else.

I came back from the restroom. Felicity was by the bar so I joined her. Somehow Biancha was still dancing with Tom, but the song stopped and I noticed he turned around as if looking for someone. He spotted Felicity and started walking towards us. Another romantic song had just started. Biancha was following Tom. As he was about to reach Felicity, Biancha pulled him towards herself, placed her hand behind his neck and kissed him. I saw how, after a few seconds, he pulled away from her. He turned his head slightly and looked at Felicity, then me.

I smiled and joked, 'Come on, Paris. You can't contradict a goddess.'

So he obeyed.