Buying Trouble: The Sadness of the Moon

by Fox

Summary

Eleven of us wrote "bonus tracks" for Layna Andersen's Buying Trouble. This is mine.

Notes

I am not now, nor have I ever been, George Lucas.

See the end of the work for more notes

There are times when I think it might just have been easier if I'd been born a mortal. Mortals, faced with difficulty or injustice, can plead for divine intervention; but when you are a god, and things aren't going your way, you can only appeal to a higher god; and when your stepmother is the queen of the gods and she's the one behaving unfairly, there's really nothing for it.

Except to complain to your father.

"He won't listen," my brother says. "He never has, and he never will. You've been after him about this for five years. He takes her side. Can't you accept that and move on? You've lost acolytes before."

"I don't mind losing acolytes for good reason," I tell him. "I'm not jealous and unreasonable, like some gods I could mention. If Venus makes a girl prefer to marry than to serve me, I don't mind. But if she would have been better off with me -- yes, I want what's best for those I love. Mortals included." I pick up my quiver, and Apollo, smirking, hands me my helmet. "And Father never takes her side. You know that." His smirk turns into a grin as he waves and strides out into the sky. I sling my bow and quiver over my shoulder and stalk off to look for my father.
I should have an advantage coming in to this discussion, in spite of the fact that it has, as Apollo pointed out, been five years since I first raised the issue -- having a pretty much universal reputation as the Good Child never hurts. Minerva is such a smart-aleck -- Father always says she gives him a headache -- and after that thing with Venus and that net, Mars and Vulcan both sort of give Father a wide berth; we all like offerings from our acolytes now and then, but Bacchus never knows when to stop; Mercury is hardly ever around, but when he is, you can't keep up with his mood swings; and Proserpina is just depressing.

In that kind of company, Apollo and I look positively angelic. We're steady and dependable -- he holds up the sun and I hold up the moon, every day and every night, without complaint -- and we don't get into trouble, with other gods or with mortals. With that record, you'd think my father would give particular attention to something that was important to me -- but it's been five years since I first came to him with this problem, and I've hardly gotten anywhere.

Briefly, what happened was this: Juno, my stepmother, who's never really cared for any of us except Mars and Vulcan and Juventas, set her eye on Claudia, an acolyte of mine and a good one. Before I knew what was happening -- so I certainly didn't have time to visit the girl and warn her - - Juno had compelled Claudia's father to marry her to some cousin of hers, older than she was but no more interested in marriage. (Oh, my heart broke when I saw that wedding ... the child wept through the entire ceremony, and I made a tree to grow where she'd stood.) I complained to my father even then, now that I think about it, and he said that I had other acolytes and my Claudia would better serve all of us as a wife and mother.

How could I argue? I did have other acolytes, and I tried to put that stolen one from my mind, but of course I never forgot her; imagine my surprise when, ten years later, Mercury told me she'd died, childless, actually killed by her own child, growing as it was the wrong way in her womb. I wept that night; I saw Claudia's widowed husband, Quiaius, gaze up at me and smile sadly at the falling stars.

I don't often get angry, but I was furious then, and Juno and Venus and Cupid and Ceres heard me say so. My stepmother scoffed at me and glided away after only a few minutes, but all she'd done was make the girl marry, anyway. It was the others who were really at fault: Venus and that idiot son of hers for making Claudia love her husband, and Ceres for botching the pregnancy. She tried to get me to take some of the blame, but I wasn't having that -- there's a world of difference between childbirth and fertility, and she knew it. If my Claudia had survived to give her child birth, I said, you may be sure both she and the child would have lived long and happy lives -- instead, both are dead and her husband is alone. I wouldn't have cared so much about him, but my Claudia, my faithful girl, who never really stopped being mine, adored him, and it saddened her to think of him lonely and uncomforted.

I went to my father then, five years ago, and told him what had happened -- that Juno had stolen an acolyte from me, and that because of her, and Venus and Ceres, that acolyte's life had been cut short -- and I demanded restitution. He told me that I had plenty of acolytes, and that it would frankly be counterproductive for every mortal to serve me, and he turned himself into a swan and flew away. But I wouldn't let the subject drop, and I still haven't. My Claudia sits with Pluto and Proserpina and weeps silver tears for her living husband; I will not rest until some sort of justice is done.

I have reached my father's throne and begun to say as much when Mars storms in, angrier than I've seen him in a long time. "Lightning bolts, Father," he says.

"What?"

"I need lightning bolts."
"Can't you wait, Mars? I was speaking," I say.

"Pah, this'll be quick. Just twenty or --"

"No, excuse me, I'm tired of everything and everyone always standing aside for you."

"Oh, so we're all standing aside for you now, is that it?"

"I'm not asking anyone to stand aside -- I'm asking you to?"

"Children!" Father bellows. "I haven't the patience to listen to the two of you fight. You make me tired. I'm going to rest. Come and find me later." And he stomps away, shaking the heavens and the earth.

"Well done, brother," I snarl. "Now neither of us has accomplished anything."

"If you'd just let me get my lightning bolts and go--"

"He'd never have just given you lightning! You'd have had to convince him to come down and smite whoever it is himself, and that would have taken far longer than the time I needed to make my case."

Mars sits down heavily. "What's your case, anyway? Not that Claudia thing with Venus and Ceres?"

I feel my shoulders stiffen. "That girl was mine. Your mother took her from me, and because of Venus and Ceres she's dead. All I want is justice."

"Right, and what sort of justice did you have in mind?" He raises his eyebrow at me. "You can't undo what's been done. What would you have Father allow you to do -- or allow Venus and Ceres to do for you? to make up for your lost acolyte?" I hadn't considered that, to be honest. My thought was to get my father to admit that I was right, and that Venus and Ceres owed me, and think of what they owed me afterward. "Aha. See, Father's never going to hear your case until you can prove the whole thing to him -- from what precisely was done wrong to you, all the way through to what precisely you deserve to make it right. Abstract righteous indignation doesn't go over with him."

He has a very good point, which is remarkably frustrating. I fold my arms and glare at him. "So what should I demand?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. But that's why my case was more important than yours just now -- not more important, I suppose, but more likely to get results. I have soldiers who have been behaving dishonorably in my name, and I want lightning bolts so I can smite them. Simple as that." He makes three sharp gestures in the air with those last three words. "But you're probably right," he adds, stretching his arms over his head. "He'd insist on doing the smiting himself --" he yawns -- "so I should probably think of some other punishment."

"What did they do?" I drop to the floor next to him.

"It's these northern lands they're conquering. I'm all in favor of that, mind you, but there's a right way and a wrong way to fight a war, particularly with me as your patron, and they've been doing it wrong. I've just heard -- from Mercury, of course -- that there's a boy in Rome now from the north. A captive, you know. And that he was viciously, foully abused by my soldiers both there and here. He's apparently a good little fighter -- I ought to sponsor him -- but anyway, I don't take kindly to my soldiers, who carry my blessing, fighting dirty and killing children and raping women and youths just for fun. That's not the way to win a war." He pauses a moment, grinding
his teeth, then resumes, a little less angrily. "I heard this from Mercury, as I said -- he'd heard it because the kid's just been sold to a Roman citizen, who was upset enough at his condition to ask Minerva about it."

"Wait -- your soldiers take captives all the time. Children too."

"Of course they do, but they don't kill them. Look -- every barbarian child they kill now would have been a Roman citizen in fifteen years. It's a matter of winning over the people, not crushing them. So obviously capturing the women, and getting children on them, is a good thing. But raping them until they die, or kill themselves, or spending all the time and energy to beat and rape a boy -- it's stupid and wasteful and it discredits the Roman army and therefore my name. So the soldiers have to be punished. I'm sure this boy isn't the only one this has happened to." He pauses in his tirade, looking like a teacher making a point to a schoolboy. "Why am I telling you all this? Surely you know already about the --" Mars stops mid-sentence and slaps his forehead. "No, I suppose you don't, because it was nighttime when you would have heard. The owner, the citizen, is that Quiaius of yours."

For a moment I can feel that I am looking at my brother as if he were speaking a different language. "Quiaius?"

"Quiaius. I know he's not yours, he's Minerva's, don't bother pointing it out, but you know what I mean."

"Quiaius? Quiaius bought a slave and we didn't know?"

"Well, 'we', I mean, do you follow the comings and goings of every person in Rome?"

"Not every one," I say, standing and striding toward Father's throne, "but you know Quiaius is important. Or you wouldn't have mentioned it. Mercury!" I call, picking up a gold mallet and striking a bell with all my strength.

"Have I mentioned lately that I hate when you all bang that thing?" Mercury asks, probably rhetorically, as he arrives a moment later, sandals flapping behind him.

"I don't blame you. Listen, run and get me Claudia, will you? And where was the last place you saw Minerva?"

"Hmm ... Athens, I think, to be honest. She gets a charge out of those Greeks -- more temples to her over there than around here."

"Figures. Can you tell her I need her here first, and then go fetch Claudia?"

"Anything for you, sister." He grins impishly, kicks his leg once, and shoots away.

"He won't be long," Mars says, picking himself up, "so I think I'll leave you to meet them. I'll see if I can't find Father and change his mind about those lightning bolts."

"Thank you for the advice, brother," I say, embracing him. "Why don't you ask Vulcan to make you some lightning, if Father won't give you any?"

He winces. "Is Vulcan likely to do me any favors any time soon?" He shudders, then grins, and knocks on my helmet. "Good luck." He ambles away.

I am still chuckling about that when Minerva arrives, followed closely by Mercury and my Claudia. "Claudia," I say gently, "did you know that your Quiaius has bought a boy?"
Claudia raises big bright eyes to look at me, and then at my sister.

Minerva nods with a smile. "A Celt. Probably keep him company -- more than those cats, anyway. Someone he can actually talk to and expect an answer back."

"A child?" The woman's voice is hoarse but hopeful.

"Well -- a young man," Minerva says. "But, yes, someone he'll have to take care of, like a child."

"Can I see him?" she whispers.

Minerva glances at me over Claudia's head, and shrugs. I sigh. "Both of us have to come with you," I tell her, "so it has to be in daylight, or we have to wait two more weeks for my night off."

She nods. "And we can't stay long, whenever it is."

"I understand. Can't we go now?"

"Now? I -- well, I don't see why not, do you?" Minerva shakes her head. "Well, we can go now, but just for a minute -- and you remember the most important thing, don't you? You mustn't even try to speak to him." Claudia nods again. "Good. Birds?"

"Birds," Minerva agrees.

We change ourselves into birds and fly to Quiaius' house. Claudia leads us to a windowsill in the back of the house, and we all alight together and look into the room. We can see Quiaius, where he sits on the floor with a book. In the bed against the wall is the boy: quite a sweet-looking young man, sleeping soundly, lips slightly parted, dressed in a tunic far too big for him, skin shining warm gold in my brother's sunbeam. As we watch, Quiaius looks up from his book and glances at the sleeping youth, then rises up on his knees, arranging the tunic to cover more of the boy's body. His large hand lingers for a moment at the slender shoulder; then he draws back, and sits simply looking at the boy, and the boy stirs and turns to lie on his side, but does not wake.

I look at him again, and the surprise makes me start violently, and I hop off the windowsill and fly into the air, followed by my sister and my Claudia, until we get home and can turn back into women and Minerva can ask me what has happened.

I can hardly speak. "Did you see the band," I ask her, "the bracelet around his arm?" She nods. "That's my symbol. Well, not mine, but it's a symbol of Abnoba -- Abnoba. What the Gael call me."

"So you mean --"

"The boy is mine. Or was mine, before the soldiers took him. I swear, if Mars weren't already planning to smite them ..." I pause, taking a breath to control my anger. "I'm not having a good day when it comes to acolytes," I say with a rueful laugh. Claudia seems puzzled. "Mars told me I was going about avenging you all wrong," I explain, "and now I learn that his soldiers have robbed me of this boy as well. He'll punish them, of course, but that won't benefit the boy at all ..."

Mercury interrupts to tell us Claudia's time is up. "I like that boy," she whispers as she leaves. "He will bring my Quiaius comfort, I could tell. I hope he will be happy."

"I hope so, too," I murmur to her, just before Mercury takes her away.

"You could take a step or two in that direction," Minerva points out when they've gone.

"In what direction?"
"Toward making sure Quiaius' boy is happy in Rome. He can't serve you any more, of course, but he's alone in a strange place ... and doesn't Venus owe you a favor?"

I stare at her. "Father hasn't agreed that she does, but Mars says that's because my demands have been too abstract -- why is it you always come up with the good ideas?"

My sister grins at me. "Wisdom, remember?" she says with a wink, then spins away back toward Athens.

I watch her for a moment, then turn on my heel and run toward the throne room, crying "Father!" at the top of my voice.

My father finally listened to my argument, then summoned Venus to instruct her that, in return for my needlessly lost acolyte, she is to make things right for the boy living in Quiaius' house. Strictly speaking, of course, I should claim a devotee of hers to even the balance, but practically, that doesn't work out; my acolytes must be chaste, and hers, by her nature, never stay that way for long. (Strictly speaking, also, it was really Ceres who killed Claudia; Venus merely made that possible. Ceres and I settled that between ourselves, however, when she agreed to cajole Proserpina into releasing my Claudia almost whenever I ask for her.) So Venus is instructed that the boy, Eab, has known far too much war and pain, and that her debt to me is to make him know love. I will not have lost another acolyte in vain.

She drags her feet, that's for sure. Whole weeks go by and I never see Venus go near the place.

"What do you know about my work?" she asks, crossly, when I question her about it on my night off. "We have to pick exactly the right moment or the whole effort is wasted. What about your hunters? do you let them just run into the forest and shoot their arrows and think they might hit a deer? No. It takes patience, you know. It's all in the timing. Leave me alone."

I do leave her alone -- she always seems to be cranky on nights when I'm not working -- but I don't forget about it. There has to be a right moment sometime.

Then comes the day when we all think she's ruined it, ruined the whole thing. The boy leaves Quiaius' house, flees Rome, runs for a whole day and a whole night, and scrambles up a tree and prays. He prays to Abnoba, of course, but I am the one who answers him: I still love you, child, but I cannot take you back, I cannot. I weep and weep to see him, as we both so long for what we can never have, and he tips his head back and lets my tears wash over him, and by the time I am through weeping I think he understands. He climbs down out of the tree and goes back to Rome, and Minerva reaches down and guides him with her hand so he can find his way to Quiaius' house.

Claudia was very distressed when Eab ran from Quiaius; she begged to be allowed to stay with me longer than usual after that, to keep an eye on them both, and Proserpina reluctantly agreed. So Claudia is with me when Quiaius tells Eab about her; she smiles to hear him speak of her, but tears fill her eyes. "Poor Kais," we hear Eab say in his odd accent. "You miss her."

"Very badly, I'm afraid," Quiaius says. "Every day. I always thought we'd grow old together, and now I suppose I'm growing old alone."

"Not alone, Kais," Eab says. "Not now."

Beside me, Claudia beams through her tears. I know she is thinking that Eab is to Quiaius like the child she died carrying for him. I can tell she hasn't seen Venus' stupid son sneak into the house and shoot them both.
Even then, it was more weeks before I could notice that Venus was at work. Quiaius and Eab passed the days quietly, cooking, studying, resting. Eab played with Quiaius' cats and learned to speak Latin. In the night, the boy often had horrible dreams of his treatment at the hands of Mars' soldiers. Claudia dearly wanted to go to him and comfort him as any mother would, but of course we couldn't let her.

Finally, finally, one chilly night, Eab is so frightened by what he sees in his sleep that he wakes and tiptoes into Quiaius' room, slips into Quiaius' bed, and curls up in the curve of Quiaius' arm, for warmth and safety. In the morning, Quiaius wakes and realizes Eab is in his bed and runs away. Minerva follows him and sits behind his friend Macius, who gives him counsel; Venus hurries down to the house and whispers at Eab all morning.

It is when Quiaius returns home that things start to happen, both with us and with them.

Eab has made bread, and while they wait for it to bake he thoroughly combs and braids Quiaius' hair. Claudia gives a small, strangled cry -- the comb is one he has not used since she died, since he has no one to comb his hair and no one whose hair he can comb. And when Eab is through, and he takes a deep breath and leans forward and kisses Quiaius' lips, and when a moment later he does it again and Quiaius kisses him back, Claudia cries out loud and makes a move to go and stop them. It takes all three of us, Minerva and Venus and myself, to get her to Vulcan, who restrains her. I try to speak calmly to her, to settle her mind and her heart, but she is hysterical; finally I have Juventas bring her a drink and leave her, promising to return when the next morning comes.

The following day finds Minerva, like myself and Claudia, watching Quiaius and Eab to make sure Venus is holding up her end of the bargain.

"Marketplace," she says, when I bring a substantially quieter Claudia to stand at her side. "They've been together all morning, but it looks like -- oh. Oh, oh ..." We see immediately what Minerva has noticed. Eab has gone apart a bit from Quiaius, and is by himself in the marketplace, backing warily away from three Roman soldiers.

I stare for a horrified moment. "Mars!" I cry then, loud enough to wake my brother if he is asleep. "MARS!"

"What, what is it," he demands, rushing to where we stand. Seeing his soldiers advancing on the boy, my brother slams his fist into his hand.

"You see?" he roars. "Now you see! But Father hasn't given me any lightning, and Vulcan won't make me any. Nothing I can do here --" And he follows this by snarling an oath that I cannot bring myself to repeat.

"Cursing about it won't help," Minerva spits at him. "You're useless. I'll do it." She reaches down with her hand to nudge Quiaius in the direction of the place where Eab is cornered. He runs and grabs the soldier away from the boy and, with Minerva looking on proudly, lets the soldier have it in no uncertain terms. The crowd of idle spectators applauds when Quiaius is through yelling. As he and Eab walk back to the house, Minerva dusts off her hands and rounds on Mars.

"There are other ways to solve problems with mortals besides smiting them, you know," she says. "You might consider guiding them in the right directions in the first place."

"Well, I guess not all of us are as wise as you are, 'Nerva," he shoots back.

"I mean, don't you have a mortal agent? Honestly, you're the only god I know who tries to do it all
on his own."

"I do not! I have whole armies who --"

"Well, then, compel someone, dammit!"

They drift away, still bickering, while I turn my attention back to where Venus is very busy with Quiaius and Eab. The boy is quite shaken by his encounter with the soldiers, and Quiaius holds him and speaks quietly and soothingly to him, then takes him to purge the touch of my brother's men from his body.

Claudia trembles with the effort of suppressing her fury. "That's my bath," she sobs. "And that's my bed. That's my husband!"

"Claudia!" I scold, turning on her. "Did I teach you to be so selfish? When Juno took you from me, and Venus came to you and Quiaius, did I wail and howl and say 'That's my acolyte'?" She is looking at me with big, surprised eyes. I don't know that I've ever yelled at her before. "Only for a short time. And why? Because as much as I hated losing you, I saw that he made you happy. Do you understand me?" Claudia nods meekly. "And you never forgot me, did you?" She shakes her head. "Then don't you see that he hasn't forgotten you? He never will? he never can. He doesn't love you any less for loving Eab as well. It's the love he learned when you were with him that he's sharing with Eab now."

She nods again, not speaking. "And Eab deserves that love. He was mine, too, did you know that? He belonged to Abnoba, my Celtic otherself. I lost him the same way I lost you, only worse -- you were married away to one man who was gentle and learned to love you. He was snatched away by a dozen men who never stopped hurting him. I will not have that loss be in vain, as yours turned out to be. Is that clear?"

She nods once more. I can see that she is still frightened. We sometimes forget how unsettling it is for mortals to incur the wrath of a god -- that is, until someone does something to make Father angry. I soften my voice and smile at her. "Not a day goes by that Quiaius doesn't think about you," I say. "Ask Minerva if you want, but it's true."

She smiles back, and promises her heart is easier, and settles down to rest while I step away to hold up the moon. When I return the next morning, she comes to me with shining eyes, and points to Quiaius and Eab, and whispers, "That's my garden."

I laugh and ruffle her hair. "That's my girl." And we sit and watch Eab and Quiaius and Venus in the garden; and when Claudia has gone back to Proserpina and Quiaius has gone inside and Venus has come home, Eab makes a final farewell to the Abnoba he knew; and when I weep my tears are of gladness as they wash his past promise away.

End Notes

I was still quite new to fandom, and therefore very flattered to be asked, when Layna asked me to write a "bonus track" for the 'zine version of her epic Buying Trouble, which had been well in progress when I first arrived. I remember noticing points at which Layna assumed, even almost required, that the reader be paying careful enough attention to the story to remember details from earlier installments -- which, when a thing is posted serially with who-knows-what frequency, is by no means guaranteed. But that kind of faith in
one's readership is something I don't see as often as I'd like in fandom, and I've been pleased with Layna ever since for displaying it.

The "assignment" for the "bonus tracks" was to tell some part of the story of Quiaius and Eab from some other character's point of view -- in other words, it was right up my street. My POV character is (listen carefully, because this is the only place I know of where this is explicitly revealed) Diana, goddess of the moon, chastity, and hunting, and I had great fun working in random references to what I remembered of Roman and Greek mythology. The Celts didn't have quite the same pantheon as the Greeks and Romans, of course, but they did have a similar goddess called Abnoba; so my narrator treats the Celts' prayers to Abnoba as prayers to her, just as her sister Minerva accepts the devotions the Greeks made to Athena. A little mono-pantheism to get us totally turned around in circles. Heh.

Although this was written relatively early in my, uh, career, I've always been very pleased with it.

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