

opening extract from

the fire thief

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One

Greece – the dawn of time

This is where my story starts. I wasn't there myself in Ancient Greece, but one of the actors in this terrible tale told me the story and I believe him. Let me tell you his story as if I were a writer – I've always wanted to be a writer. Who am I? Wait and see. Let's start at the dawn of time…[1]

The bird soared and wheeled in the cloudless sky over the silent earth. Beneath it lay valleys of rich green and white-topped mountains. A crystal-blue sea shone in the distance. A deep forest loomed beneath

1 Yes, all right, maybe not the very dawn. Not the first hour of the first day. But one million years ago when humans were little more than very clever apes. Some of them still are. But now we call them police officers. Heh! Heh!

the monstrous bird and from the heart of the darkness a smudge of wood-smoke rose into the clean air.

"Ahh!" the bird growled. "Fire." It scented the sooty air and climbed away from it. Then it turned and arrowed towards a distant mountain. "Breakfast," it hissed, and swooped. Rabbits froze, terrified as the bird's death-shadow passed over them. The bird ignored them and let the warm air lift it up the mountainside.

As it climbed the shimmering grass below gave way to grey, wind-scrubbed shrubs and then bare rocks, too bleak for even the moss to grow.

The bird lifted its hooked beak and half-closed its curved wings till it dropped towards one massive boulder. On the boulder lay a man. Wind-burned and sun-baked, he lay there as the bird's claws clattered against his rock and it skidded to a halt. "Oooops!" the bird croaked. "After all this time I'm still not good at landing."

Fine chains were sunk into the rocks and they lapped around the man's wrists and ankles. Fine links – but unbreakable.

The bird shook its gold-brown feathers and its black eyes burned. "Good morning, Prometheus.

I hope you slept well," the bird hissed.

The man smiled. His face was handsome as a god. "I slept very well."[2]

The bird blinked. "You seem cheerful," it snapped suspiciously.

"I slept well," the man cried, "and had such wonderful dreams! I dreamed of freedom."

"You don't deserve it," the bird snarled. "You stole fire from the gods and you gave it to those crawling creatures they call humans. You sneaked it away, hidden inside a reed – you are no better than some robber on the road." The bird had begun to screech and ruffle its feathers. "The humans will burn our world and choke us all with smoke. You deserve worse than death... Fire Thief."

Prometheus smiled again. "And I have a punishment worse than death, don't I? My cousin Zeus chained me here in sun and snow, in wind and hail, always to suffer but never to die."

A great grey tongue rolled from the side of the

2 Our characters spoke in Ancient Greek, you understand. But you would not understand it, so I have changed it into our language. I am being very kind to you so stop whingeing about the realism and get on with the story. Trust me, I am a liar.

bird's cruel beak. "And worse, Prometheus, and worse. You have me. The Fury. The great Avenger of the gods." The bird began to pant. "What am I going to do, Prometheus?"

Prometheus opened his eyes wide as a baby. "Ooh! I don't know! What have you done every day for the last two hundred years, Fury? You have used your little beak to peck into my side and pull out my liver. You have killed me every morning for a hundred years. And every night I return to life to suffer again the next dawn."

"I don't peck," the bird snarled. "I *tear*."

"Feels like a peck to me," Prometheus said with a sad shake of the head.

The Fury was furious. "I don't pull your liver – I *rip* and *rive* it from your body."

"Feels like a little tug to me," the man shrugged and the chains rattled against the rock.

The bird's claws clattered as it stamped angrily. "I wish Zeus would let me tear out your lying tongue and your laughing eyes," it screeched.

"Sorry, just my little old liver," the man sighed. "Come closer, Fury."

The bird froze. "What?"

"I want to tell you my dream."

"Why would I want to hear your dream? You'll be dreaming the dreams of the dead in a moment when I *tear* and *rip* your body."

"Ah, it was such a dream though. The sort of a dream you have once in two hundred years," the man murmured.

The bird edged closer. It wiped its beak against the cold rock to sharpen the tip. "Lift your head, Prometheus," the bird screeched. "Look at the valley. That smoke down there choked me this morning. Smoke from the fires that YOU gave to those pitiful human animals. Your liver will taste all the better this morning."

The bird lunged at the man's side. The hand of Prometheus slipped free of the chain and grasped it by the neck. The bird gave a startled squawk. Its black eyes bulged and its body struggled. But the more its body writhed the more its neck ached.

"I haven't finished telling you about my dream," the man said, and his voice was as soft as his hand was hard. "In my dream my friend Heracles came up the mountain. He is the strongest creature in the world. Stronger than me," Prometheus sighed and squeezed the feathered neck a little harder. "Stronger than you.

And Heracles snapped my chains like they were made of grass. Just as I am going to snap your neck now."

The bird writhed and croaked. "You said it was a dream."

"I lied," Prometheus said with a laugh. "I still have friends." He squeezed again.

"Strong friends, like Hercules. Good friends who think that I was unfairly treated. Friends who sent Hercules to set me free last night."

"A dream, you said!"

"A dream come true."

"Zeus will never let you escape, no matter where you try to hide on this earth he will find you."

Prometheus shrugged and shook off the broken chains. "Maybe I won't hide in this world," he murmured. He squeezed. There was a crunch of broken bone, a small sigh and the monstrous bird hung limp in the man's hands. He flung it away from him in disgust. Its cruel beak and curved claws clattered on the cool rock.[3]

3 Look, please don't cry or sigh for this monstrous bird. And do not write letters of complaint about cruelty to animals. Firstly, this was an avenging devil – you wouldn't want to meet one of those in the bath, believe me. It was only taking the shape of a bird. And anyway, you don't know what happened next – wait and see.

Prometheus rose and stretched. The world lay beneath him. He set off down the mountainside, his legs stiff from two hundred years of chains.

He felt he was being watched. He stopped and looked back. The eyes of the monstrous bird were dull and dead.

He squinted up into the morning sun and saw a shadow cross it. The shadow of a long-necked bird. A swan.

The young man closed his eyes for a moment and groaned. "Zeus," he hissed. "Zeus." He looked for somewhere to hide. But on the bleak bare mountain there was nowhere at all.