Circe Has Her Problems

Roger Zelazny

The fact that this place could not possibly exist should be the tipoff. It should be a craggy, barren hunk of rock, drifting through sunless space without a redeeming feature on its wrinkled vizard. Instead, it is a delicious island in the void, with a breathable atmosphere (breathable by anyone I want to breathe it!), fresh fruits, glittering fountains, an amazing variety of animal life, and me⁠—which would have made men suspect the big bit in the old days. But no, when men get to the point where they start hopping between stars, their minds are always too well-conditioned to the superstition of scientific causality...

I am a very lovely broad (I believe that is the current term), and I am as enticing as all hell (literally)⁠—but I digress (I will get back to me in a moment): my island is about fifty miles in diameter, if you can use that term for non-spherical objects (I am not strong on science), and it’s sort of rectangular⁠—even though you can walk on any of its surfaces (or inside it, for that matter); its skies twinkle a perpetual twilight, which is very romantic⁠—and it abounds in chattering, hissing, singing, croaking, growling, and muttering beasts.

Which brings us nearer the heart of the matter, namely me.

Having been spawned in a far more libertine culture than the present cold, puritanical state of human civilization, I recently cut out for blacker pastures and set up shop here⁠—where I stand out like a dwarf star on radar screens⁠—which always makes for primate curiosity and an eventual landing, which always makes for men who have been away from the present cold, puritanical state of human civilization long enough to appreciate a luscious doll like me.

Which brings us directly to the heart of the matter. Namely, my problem.

I am a sorceress by trade, not a goddess, but I happen to have a lot of Nymph blood in me (which can be either bad or good, if you look at things that way very often⁠—I don’t). Anyhow, I had enjoyed my obvious attributes for a long while, until a cat-souled she-dog from the isle of Lesbos, in a fit of perverse jealousy (or jealous perversity⁠—slice it either way), laid this curse bit on me, which was very bad indeed (I do look at things that way in this matter!).

Like I dig men: big men, little men, fat, thin, coarse, refined, brilliant, and et cetera men⁠—the whole lovin’ race of ’em! But my present unfortunate condition affects approximately ninety-nine percent of them.

Like, when I kiss them, they have a tendency to assume other forms⁠—chattering, hissing, singing, croaking, growling, muttering forms⁠—all of them quite unsatisfactory⁠—which explains my woes, as well as the background noises.

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Now then, once in a lopsided crescent moon, the right guy comes along⁠—some lug with a genetic resistance to Sappho’s abracadabra pocus⁠—and I am always extremely nice to him. Unfortunately, men like that are far between, and they have a tendency to wear out quite soon. Hence, I have been extremely troubled for the past several centuries.

This latest crew is one such heartbreaking instance. None of the clean-shaven, broad-shouldered, Space Academy products could bear more than a mild peck on the cheek before howling away on all fours with their tails between their legs. Change them back? Sure, I can do that⁠—but whyfor? Like, there is no percentage in kissing animals human if, as soon as you kiss them a second time, they become animals again. So I let them practice Darwin there in the trees while I look enticing and sigh for Mister Right.

(I kissed a navigator an hour ago⁠—he’s the one peeling the banana with his feet...)

“Pardon me, Miss.”

Like wow!

“I am Captain Denton and I am looking for my crew,” he smiles. “I hope you understand English.”

“Like hope no more, Daddy,” say I. “Loud and clear.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I understand you, you living Hermes by Praxiteles with a crewcut, you.”

“Do you live here?”

“Indeed, and well.” I move nearer and breathe upon him.

“Have you seen my men anywhere about? When I found that the atmosphere was breathable I permitted them to leave the ship, for recreational purposes. That was three days ago⁠—”

“Oh, they’re around.” I toy with the gold medallions on his blue jacket. “What did you get all these lovely medals for?”

“Oh, this one is the Star of Valor, this is the Cross of Venus, that is the Lunar Crescent, and this is an Exemplary Conduct Medallion,” he recounts.

“Tsk, tsk,” I touch the latter. “Do you always behave in an exemplary manner?”

“I try, Miss.”

I throw my arms about his neck.

“I’m so happy to see an Earthman, after all these years!”

“Really, Miss, I⁠—”

I kiss him a good solid one on the mouth. Why beat about the bush, torturing myself? I might as well find out right away.

And nothing happens! Not a bit of fur! Nary horn nor tail!

And nothing else, either, for that matter...

He unclasps my arms gently, but with a firm grip of immense strength. He is so⁠—so masterful. Like one of the Argive chieftains, or the Myrmidon warriors...

“I appreciate your enthusiasm at meeting another person if, as you say, you have been alone upon this worldlet very long. I assure you that I shall give you passage to a civilized planet, as soon as I can locate my crew.”

“Pooh!” say I. “I don’t want your civilized planets. I’m happy here. But you, Big Man, you have unsuspected talents⁠—and great potential! Like, we shall play a wild harpsichord together!”

“ ‘Duty Before All,’ Miss, is the motto of the Corps. I must locate my crew before I indulge in any musical pasttimes.”

\* \* \*

Like, I don’t dig geometry, but I know a square when I see one. Still, Science is only one of the paths man need follow...

“Step into my parlor,” say I whistling for the palace, which comes running and settles out of sight on the other side of the hill. “I shall refresh you and give you assistance in your search.”

“This is very kind of you,” he replies. (Grandmother Circe! those shoulders!) “I shall accept your invitation. Is it far?”

“We’re almost there already, Captain.” I take his arm.

I feed him a roast pig, which had seen happier days, and I proceed to douse his wine with every aphrodisiac I have in stock. I sit back and wait, looking alluring.

Nothing happens.

“Don’t you feel a little⁠—uncomfortable?” I finally ask, raising the temperature ten degrees. “Perhaps you’d like to take off your jacket.”

“Yes, I believe I shall. It is a trifle warm in here.”

“Take off anything you like,” I suggest, whistling up a swimming pool. “Perhaps you would like to bathe?”

“I did not notice that pool before. This wine must be making me drowsy.”

I whistle for the perfumed bed, and it rolls in with a musical accompaniment.

“Well, a nice bath and a good bed will make you feel like a new man.”

“I really should be looking for my crew,” he protests, weakly.

“Nonsense, nothing in this world could hurt a fly.” I dampen out the background howls and snarls to prove my point. “They will be all right for a few more hours, and you could use the rest.”

“True,” he finally acknowledges. “They are probably bivouacked beside some gentle waterfall, or engaged in a boyish game of touch football. I shall bathe.”

And he undresses and I whistle, which, unfortunately, causes the icebox to move into the room and stop at the edge of the pool.

“Amazingly sophisticated servomechanisms you have,” he observes, splashing back to the edge and proceeding to raid the icebox.

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An hour later he is still eating! He is one of those big, hearty types with his mind in his stomach⁠—but still, what a magnificent animal! Great bulging muscles, skin smooth and perfect as marble, deeply tanned, a warrior’s dark eyes...

I find I am getting a first-class crush on this jerk!

Finally, he finishes eating and steps from the pool, like Neptune rising from the Aegean⁠—a dripping god of youth and power. I know that he must be thinking by now what I have been thinking all along. It is a simple matter of physiology, according to Science⁠—also, them green flies from Spain are pretty effective.

He towers above me, and I look coy, timid, and, at the same time, inviting.

“It is still bothering me,” he observes. “I had better go look for my crew before I take my rest.”

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That does it! Suddenly I see red, also the rest of the rainbow. I snap my fingers and everything vanishes but the bed, into which we are immediately projected.

“Wha-what happened?” he asks.

“Captain Denton,” say I, “you have in every way flaunted my obvious charms, and insulted my person by failing to recognize it. I am extremely lovely, and sadly, miserably,” I whisper it, “passionate!”

“Oh my!” says he. “Is that so?”

“Indeed. I weep for the strong arms of a man, the dart of Cupid hath pierced my heart, I am not prone to argue...”

“I see,” he clears his throat. “And you have lured me here for this specific reason?”

“Yes,” I reply, softly.

“And you did something to my crew.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Kiss me and I’ll tell you.”

“All right.”

He does. Aphrodite! What a fine feeling after all those centuries!

“What did you do with them?”

“I kissed them,” say I, “and they were metamorphosed into animals.”

“Goodness!” he exclaims, quickly surveying his person. “And you are such a lovely creature!”

“Now you’re getting with it,” I agree. “You are one of those rare brutes my kiss does not affect with tails, tusks, hooves, horns, or suchlike impedimenta.”

“Can you change my men back?”

“I might, if you ask me⁠—very nicely.”

“You⁠—you’re a sorceress!” he suddenly realizes. “I had always presumed they were but the fabrications of the unlearned. Can you work other magic?”

“You bet. Want some moonlight?”

I snap my fingers and the roof disappears. A gentle, inspiring moon hovers above us.

“Amazing! Oh my! Oh my! It is almost too much to ask⁠—”

“What, dearest?” I nestle up against him. “Ask away, and Big Mama will make with the conjure.”

A long, loud silence.

Finally, voice shaking, he asks it.

“Can you make me a man?”

“Wha?”

“A man,” he repeats. “I am an android, as are all the captains of deep space cruisers these days. This is because we are more stable, single-minded, and less emotional than our human brothers.”

“Brother!” exclaim I, getting to my feet and reaching for my robe. “Oh brother!

“Sorry, Jack,” I finally pronounce, “I am just a sorceress. It would take a goddess to make you⁠—anything.”

“Oh,” says he, sadly, “I suppose that it was too much to hope for. I have always wondered how people feel. It would have been so stimulating...”

\* \* \*

I stalk away through the night. With some coaching he might make the vegetable kingdom next avatar. Stimulating!

Rounding up his scurvy crew, I⁠—ugh!⁠—kiss them all back into human form. I have to! He needs them to man the ship, and I can’t have him slew-footing around looking virile, and at the same time as useful as a pinup in a monastery. Stimulating!

Someday my prince will come.

A Word from Zelazny

“Circe came to me halfway through reading [Harlan Ellison’s] Gentleman Junkie, as I decided to try something flip, fast, and brash myself. It took about an hour and a half to write and required almost no corrections. Probably the easiest bit I’ve ever done.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Notes

Circe is the Greek nymph or sorceress who turned Odysseus’ men into pigs after they came upon her island. Her spells had no effect on Odysseus, who bore an herb from Hermes to resist her power. Circe realized she was powerless over him, lifted the spell, and welcomed Odysseus and his crew into her home. Lesbos is the island in the Aegean Sea where the female poet Sappho was born; because her poems have homosexual overtones, the words lesbian and sapphic have derived to mean love between two women. Hermes by Praxiteles is a marble statue of nude Hermes; the statue dates to 343 BC. Argive chieftains were involved in the mythical War of Seven Against Thebes, in which all but one of the chieftains perished; the Myrmidon warriors were the army that Achilles commanded. Green flies refers to Spanish fly, which is actually a green or emerald beetle from which an aphrodisiac has been derived. Neptune is the god of the sea; Cupid is the god of erotic love; Aphrodite is the goddess of love. An avatar is the embodiment of a deity, a god made visible in human form.

Even in this early work, Zelazny shows his tendency to pun in ways that can be bold or subtle, depending upon the reader’s perceptions. “I am not prone to argue” may be obvious or subtle, whereas the last line of the story is more bold.

1. Tightbeam #37, May 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)