The sun rose over the mountainous horizon of Quickagon, bathing the pastures in a warm glow. People were awakening to a beautiful day, and the narrow, cobbled streets were beginning to fill with a cacophony of voices and laughter. These joyous sounds carried through the air, dancing their way down to the creek.

At the water's edge, slumped a disheveled shadow of a man, who was staring unseeingly at the movement of the fish. The man, named Demetrius, had once been the local fisherman, and his stall at the market was always surrounded by happy customers. The customers did not come purely for the delicious fish or Demetrius' wit; they came for the chance to spend time with Robessia. Robessia was as near as you could get to an angel in human form. She possessed a very unique power, and people flocked from across the land to be healed by her. When Robessia touched a human's hand, any pain that afflicted their soul was lifted. She had been the light of Demetrius' life, but now she was gone, leaving Demetrius' world dark.

His dark, long hair, once wavy and shiny, was now dull and greasy, hanging across his face like a curtain. The welcoming glimmer in his blue eyes had been replaced by a squinting look of annoyance whenever anyone approached him. Once, Robessia had ensured any tears in his robe were darned and fixed; now, the material hung tattered and dirty. One year had passed since Demetrius had last seen Robessia’s face, and he remained as desolate as the day she had left him. Demetrius scowled to himself as he picked up a small, grey pebble from beside his foot. He turned the pebble over in his hand, before throwing it angrily in the river. Ripples spread across the water as the fish fled.

These ripples, whilst only fleeting, sent a shockwave of energy down into the depths of the Underworld. The burst of energy roared across the River Styx, before eventually slamming into a woman who was sat calmly by the inky water. She leant forward, and gently trailed her hand through the dark water. Her own reflection gazed back at her through worried eyes, before slowly dissolving and showing her Demetrius sitting by the creek in the human realm. Robessia’s heart ached as she realised his once handsome face was even thinner and paler than when she saw him yesterday. She had waited a year for the grief and agony to leave his face, but Demetrius was growing weaker as time went on, not stronger. A tear slid down Robessia’s face as she decided she needed to help him. She needed to escape the Underworld.

Robessia had always been a determined woman, and her mouth set in a stubborn line as she stared at the water. She grimaced to herself, for she knew it would not be an easy task; Hades, God of the Underworld, had strict procedures in place to prevent people from crossing back into the mortal realm. Hades had a heart so contorted by cruelty and malice that it could not understand the concept of love, meaning it would be pointless for Robessia to beg to be released. As she stood, a brief flicker of apprehension danced in her stomach, but her memory of Demetrius’ frail face caused it to immediately melt away.

The quickest way for Robessia to escape the Underworld would be to swim down the River Styx. She eyed the black water nervously; it was so dark that it was impossible to see what horrors potentially lurked in its depths. She gathered the material of her skirt in her hands and gently dipped her foot into the water. Robessia paused, half expecting a wizened hand to grab her and drag her in. Nothing happened. Emboldened by this, she slid her entire foot into the water, and her toes sunk into the sandy riverbed. She did the same with the other foot, and she stood briefly feeling the lap of the water at her ankles. A deep breath in, and she began to wade forward, her robe billowing out into the water around her. Eventually, she was submerged in the water up to her neck, and she kicked off with her feet and started to swim.

She swam for what felt like hours, until her legs began to ache and burn. She could barely see ahead of her, as steam had begun to rise from the surface of the water. Robessia could just make out black bars protruding from the river. As she got closer, she realised it was a towering fence made of iron, with spikes jutting viciously out at all angles. At the banks of the river, the bars were welded into the rock of the immense wall of stone which encircled the Underworld. The only way out was through those bars. She spluttered in the water, as she began to panic. She did not know how to get past this. Robessia tried desperately to tread water whilst she reached out her hand, carefully avoiding the spikes, to touch one of the iron bars. The metal was weirdly hot in her hand, but she had no time to think about that, as her touch had caused hell to suddenly break loose.

Robessia was suddenly dragged under the water, ripping her hand away from the bar and over one of the spikes. A cloud of red filled the water as her hand began to bleed. Robessia thrashed her legs around, kicking with all her might to try and free herself from whatever had its hold on her. The water grew murky as her struggle stirred up the silty riverbed. Her heart stilled as she saw the flash of red eyes swam past her. She was suddenly struck by something long, scaly and pointed, which caused her to somersault in the water. Her lungs were burning; if she had still been in the mortal realm she certainly would have died again. She remembered her grandmother telling her a story about a group of sirens Hades had enslaved to guard the River Styx. Robessia reached out blindly, until eventually a hand closed around a tiny wrist.

Robessia’s power burst through her fingertips, giving her a sudden connection to the heart of the siren. The creature stilled as Robessia saw inside, saw the hurt and pain. The siren didn’t want to be Hades’ slave; she wanted to be free to explore the sea.

“I understand your pain,” said Robessia mentally, knowing the siren would hear it echoed in her own head. “I promise you, if you let me go, I will help you escape.”

Robessia allowed her own pain to travel through her fingertips. The siren squirmed.

“I hurt, as you do,” Robessia explained. “I have to help the man I love. I promise, I will help you.”

Red, glowing eyes opened wide in front of Robessia, and the delicate face of the siren nodded. Suddenly, she released Robessia, and disappeared into the darkness of the water. Robessia floated up to the surface, her heart filled with sorrow for the siren. She had meant every word of her promise; she would ensure the siren regained her freedom.

She swam tiredly to the bank of the river, her limbs screaming at her through their exhaustion. Robessia dragged her body up onto the muddy ground, and flopped onto her back, panting. She didn’t know what to do. Her mind was foggy from the underwater panic, but she tried to fight through it and come up with a plan.

Slowly at first, and then quickly, the water began to lap aggressively at the banks of the river. Robessia sat up to see a long boat meandering down the river towards her. She froze, as still as a statue, as she decided what to do next. She could see the ornate carving of Cerberus at the front of the boat, and realised it was the main ferry of the Underworld, tasked with bringing the new souls down every day. Robessia squinted and she could make out the shape of Charon, the Styx ferryman, at the helm.

The water by Robessia’s feet rippled, and a smooth, green head with red eyes popped out. The siren, beautiful in a monstrous way, smiled softly at Robessia, and reached out a silver coin. For a moment, Robessia stared at it, before realising the siren’s plan. She could pay her way out of the Underworld!

“Thank you,” breathed Robessia as she took the coin from the scaly hand, “Stay close; I have a plan.”

The siren smiled more broadly and dipped under the water.

Robessia scrambled to her feet, waving her hands. “Charon! Stop!” she called.

The boat began to slow, eventually stopping in front of her. Robessia stood, trying to look confident. She jutted her chin up and threw her hair back.

A pair of kind eyes peered over the edge of the boat. “Yes?”

“I request passage out of the Underworld,” said Robessia. “I can pay!” she added hastily as she saw the eyes narrow.

“People do not have money in the Underworld,” came the reply.

“I do! Please, help me.”

The boat suddenly began to sink in the water, lowering the sides so Charon could see Robessia more clearly. The ferryman was tall - taller than any man Robessia had ever seen in her life. He had incredibly long arms, tipped with skeletal fingers. His back was hunched, as if he was constantly stooping under the weight of a boulder. Charon’s thin body was swathed in a floor-length robe, which had a hood. Charon’s grey eyes were staring at Robessia in confusion.

Robessia held out the silver coin so Charon could see it. She could see the ferryman having an internal battle with himself, until he eventually said, “Anyone who has the fare money must be given a boat ride.”

Without any sound, a ladder materialised in front of Robessia. She climbed aboard the boat, smiling gratefully at Charon. She placed the coin in the ferryman’s outstretched hand. He pocketed the coin and returned to the helm, and the boat began to drift onwards again.

Robessia sunk to her knees and reached her arm over the side of the boat, until her fingers broke through the surface of the water. She prayed the siren would understand her plan. A tense few seconds passed, and a soft hand gripped tightly onto Robessia’s hand, causing relief to flow through her. The siren had worked it out!

The boat was approaching the iron bars; Robessia started to panic, for the boat was not slowing down. They were going to hit the iron bars! She screwed her eyes up tight, bracing for the impact.

But none came.

Robessia opened her right eye, and realised they had travelled *through* the iron bars seamlessly. They were through! She could still feel the siren clutching her hand, and she was glad to realise that whatever magic had enchanted the boat had also applied to the creature as she was connected to Robessia.

After an hour or so, the River Styx began to turn a lighter shade of blue as they approached the human realm. Robessia’s stomach danced happily as she realised she would be reunited with Demetrius soon.

At the river’s mouth, the boat slowed to a stop. Robessia mentally conveyed to the siren that they were at the human sea, and she could go. The creature squeezed Robessia’s hand in thanks, and Robessia felt the joy in the siren’s heart briefly before the hand slipped from hers. She could vaguely make out the shape of the long tail swimming away happily.

Charon announced that they had reached the human realm, and that Robessia could disembark the boat. She did, and was delighted to realise that she was not too far from her old town. She raced back home, her legs going as fast as they possibly could. Her heart pounded a fierce rhythm against her ribcage, but she didn’t care.

As she drew closer to the town, she could see the people silently lining the streets. Robessia slowed to a walk, confused by what she could see. All of the people had their heads down – all but one. One man was staring at Robessia with a smirk on his face.

Robessia stopped dead. The man’s smirk grew into a wicked smile as he watched the horror flooding her face. He moved, breaking away from the line of people, walking so elegantly, it was like he was gliding. He reached her, and his coal-black eyes danced with glee.

“Such a sad occasion, a funeral,” the man whispered, his voice dangerously low.

Robessia looked up the narrow street, seeing a wooden coffin heading towards them slowly, resting on the shoulders of crying men. She turned her gaze to the man, too horrified to speak.

“Did you think I would just let you waltz out of the Underworld without any punishment?” the man said, calmly. “I do not tolerate being made a fool of, Robessia.”

Robessia stared at the god in front of her. “Hades, please…” she started to beg.

“I have used my powers to … *relocate* Demetrius to the Underworld.”

Robessia’s heart shattered. Hades had killed her beloved, all because of her.

 “He belongs to me now,” Hades said, reaching out and taking her limp hand in his.

A sudden heat radiated out from Hades’ hand, flooding Robessia’s entire body. She jerked her hand out of his grasp and took a step back, trying to put some distance between herself and the furious god.

“Did you feel it?” Hades questioned, his voice cruel. “I have just granted you immortality. You will never die; you will never return to the Underworld. You will never see your husband again.”

Robessia fell to her knees, as a gaping pit of grief opened up in her heart. It had all gone so wrong. She could hear an awful sound, like the guttural scream of an animal. Robessia realised it was coming from her.

It was over. The wrath of Hades would follow her forevermore. She and Demetrius would be apart for eternity, doomed to live a hollow, desolate life.