



December 2017

Ariadne

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Recommended Citation

Cance, Andrew (2017) "Ariadne," *The Hilltop Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/hilltopreview/vol10/iss1/13>

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ARIADNE

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It's hard to pay attention to where you're going when you're trying not to walk into the road. Nicole texted me a party invite during class. I walked from campus because I can't see well enough to drive. Construction obstructed my normal route, so she sent different directions. I turned left when I should've gone right. I reversed and corrected my mistake.

I reach a house vaguely resembling Nicole's. Classical music lilts as I approach. Nicole is into techno.

I knock, then enter the foyer. I shiver as the door closes. Mold stings my throat. A beaded curtain covers the archway into the kitchen.

I pass into warmth. The scent of meat roasting fills my lungs. Everyone resembles fogged glass. They appear to be dressed in costume. A thin gold bracelet with twelve onyx shards on a young woman's wrist catches my eye. She snaps into focus in a room of blurs and shadow. A bearded Russian man leans close, "She is lonely."

I turn to him, "Why is that?" "Each shard represents a dead suitor." His beard is unkempt. His hands feel like cold glass. "She built a place outside of time, and was trapped inside." Here he comes into the room.

On the counter, a punch bowl sits next to a stack of Styrofoam cups. A soft

hand rests on my back: Nicole's? I turn, no. The woman radiates sorrow. Her white dress covers her ankles and wrists. Her hair is the black of a closed crypt.

Her smile glows. Her voice is the wind through the trees of an endless forest. "Won't you ask me to dance? The musicians are playing, and we are both without dates."

I glance down, "I'm sorry. I stumbled into your party."

A door clicks; cobwebs and moss tickle my nostrils. Her smile flickers, "Won't you escort me?"

"I wasn't invited. I don't know where I am. I should call my friends," I mentally retrace my route and touch my phone. Nicole will worry if I don't arrive soon.

Her smile rekindles. "Be my guest; join me tonight." She glides close, her body warms my skin. "Stay with me." She pulls my hand, leading me around the table and between chairs.

Candelabras illuminate the chambers. Each candle like a boney finger, flames hovering above the tip. Smoke threads from each, crisscrossing to form labyrinths in the air. The floorboards moan as I follow through columns of icy air. "Who are you?"

She presses her index finger to my lips, "Shh."

The quartet strikes up another song. “Dusk fades into night. We must dance before the gloom crawls through the windows.” Long passages lead into a large room. Heat radiates from a fireplace recessed into the wall. The fire leaps and whirls rhythmically to the music. A haze reflects the glow of the flames. Shadows dance without regard for the bodies that cast them. The smoke blurs the revelers. In the far corner, four specters play instruments. Between songs, one or another musician sips from a wine glass on a table next to the stage.

A slowly spinning ceiling fan puffs my hair as we start to dance. Her dress is spider’s silk. Closer, I can tell her eyes are midnight blue. Moonstone earrings float beneath her ears. A ruby pendant pools like a drop of blood at the base of her neck. Nicole’s shampoo is apple scented. My companion smells like a wilted rose. “I’d like to get some fresh air,” I try pulling away.

She holds me, “We’ll have an eternity for that soon.” She guides me deeper into the haze; through a forest of white pillars. More people enter the room. But, we never collide with another couple. We dance, weaving between the columns.

I struggle to pay attention while we dance. I brush a pillar; cold pierces my arm. Nobody else seems concerned.

The Russian speaks, “One more shard for your bracelet Ariadne?” My companion missteps. Then she leads me back to the kitchen. Ignoring the Styrofoam cups, she hands me a chalice of gold liquid. We sit on folding chairs and eat at a card table in a small pantry off the kitchen.

“I worked on the Codex Justinianus.” She sips her drink. “I was surprised Tribonian asked for me. Maybe he saw my interest. Later I

contributed to the *Juris Civilis*. I never thought I’d be so involved.” She swirled her cup, “I studied alchemy, enchanting, and magic.”

Tribonian is from Greece; he’s a history professor, I think... She must be his graduate student.

“Nicole studies the Court of Justinian and the Eastern Roman Empire. Do you know her? She’s a history postdoc.” My companion stands then leaves.

She returns, cup refilled. The fluid sparkles as her finger traces along the rim. She sips then passes me the glass, “One final drink.”

Later, she introduces me to the other guests. One was a physician in the court of a Chinese emperor; another was an architect for Ivan the Terrible.