Eros and Psyche

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived three princesses. Psyche, the youngest, was very kind. She was also very beautiful. She was so beautiful, in fact, that the powerful goddess of love, Aphrodite, became jealous of Psyche.

In fear of what the great goddess might do to them if they paid attention to Psyche, all the young men in the kingdom avoided Psyche whenever possible, and none offered to marry her. Her two sisters married finally. But Psyche stayed at home with her father.

Psyche could not remain at home forever. In those days, girls had to marry someone. Her father consulted Apollo's oracle at Delphi for guidance. You know oracles! Who knows what the oracle actually said. What the king heard was that his beloved daughter should prepare for her death. Sadly, the king took Psyche to the edge of a cliff and left her there.

In despair, Psyche might have leaped to her death. Before she could, she felt herself lifted into the air. Zephyrus, the gentle west wind, had taken pity on the girl, and gently carried her to a faraway palace, to the home of his good friend, Eros, the lonely god of Love.

Eros was a handsome young man, but he had a pair of very big wings. He did not wish to scare Psyche. He made himself invisible and warned Psyche if she valued his love, not to try to catch a glimpse of him.

Psyche was treated with great gentleness and good company and much laughter and soon fell in love with her invisible host. For some time, they were blissfully happy. But Psyche longed to see her family. Eros finally agreed to allow her to invite her two sisters to his palace.

Filled with envy at the sight of the palace and the riches it contained, her two sisters maliciously convinced Psyche that she was being fooled, that her husband was a fearsome monster, and that she had to escape!

"But he's so kind, so gentle," she argued. "He cannot be a monster. I would know!"

"He's fooling you, Psyche. Trust us." They returned home, dissatisfied with their own lives, and jealous of Psyche's.

Psyche cried and cried, but one night, she took a lamp in one hand and a dagger in the other, and crept into her host's bedroom. Instead of the monster she expected to find, she saw Eros, a handsome young man, with two white wings. She was not frightened at all.

A drop of oil from the lamp she held fell on the sleeping god. He woke instantly. He saw his Psyche, leaning over him with a dagger in her hand. With great sorrow, he spread his wings and flew away.

Psyche crumbled to the floor. How foolish she had been to listen to her sisters. She ran outside, to the river. She threw herself into the water. She expected to drown. But Pan, the god of shepherds, pulled her safely from the water.

"Aphrodite is the goddess of love. Ask for her help," Pan advised her.

Psyche prayed to Aphrodite for help. Aphrodite was still jealous. She pretended to help her, because she was, after all, the goddess of love, but gave Psyche tasks to prove her love for Eros that no mortal could possibly accomplish. Yet, Psyche accomplished task after task. Although she did not know it, Psyche was helped by invisible beings, sent by Eros, who loved her still, and watched over her.

At last, Aphrodite told Psyche her final task was to retrieve a box from the underworld, a very special box filled with magical beauty supplies. With these, she could make herself so beautiful that Eros would fall hopelessly in love with her.

You might think Psyche would be excited - her last task! - but Psyche knew she had to die to enter the land of shades. It was hopeless.

Suddenly, she heard a voice speaking softly in her ear. It warned her of dangers ahead and what she had to do to retrieve the box without dying.

The voice was very clear. Here is what she had to do:

1. Have a coin ready for the toll to the underworld

2. Bring three pieces of sweetbread to give to Cerberus, the three headed dog

3. DO NOT EAT ANYTHING, not even a seed

4. Once you find it, bring the box to Aphrodite without looking inside.

Psyche did everything she was told. She arrived back in the land of light safely. Waiting for Aphrodite to show up, she became nervous. What if it was the wrong box? Psyche opened the box just a crack to peek inside. A foul smelling cloud poured out. Psyche dropped to the ground as if dead.

To save her life, Eros returned to his visible form, and prodded her with the point of a golden arrow. She awoke immediately.

"Psyche, what am I going to do with you? Will you never learn?"

"I *have* learned," Psyche said softly. "I've learned that I love you."

Eros gathered her into his arms and flew them back to his palace.

It took a while, but Eros finally convinced his mother, Aphrodite, to accept Psyche as his wife. With Aphrodite's help, he convinced the great Zeus to admit Psyche to the ranks of the immortal gods.

In celebration, Psyche and Eros threw a party at the palace. Apollo played his lyre. Dionysus brought the wine. And all the gods rejoiced. As for Eros and Psyche, they lived happily ever after.