

Pneuma

A Novel by

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PRÉCIS: *Pneuma* (the Fiery Cosmic Spirit in early Greek lore) is a fanciful retelling of the ancient legend of Nitocris, a Thracian hetaera named Doricha or Rhodopis (Zelea in our story) who confronts her slave status about the same time as her compatriot Aesop. The tale discloses the Olympian Gods' amusement with mortals — being so easily prey to infatuation, dread and astonishment. The Olympians knew early on that being mortal and peculiar was a fail-safe and highly entertaining drama. Why humans were so fascinating — uniquely credulous yet so easily injured and disappointed. A play of blithe treachery and sudden chaos in late turbulent Bronze Age Greece! See also *Musing the Maenad*, a graphic rendering of this tale.

Sample Pages follow. Download options at end of Sample Pages.

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PROLOGUE

At the first blush of 'rosy fingered dawn', a time when mists still shroud and the dew embalms, a slender form clad only in a light chlamys, a short combatant's cloak, stole along the edge of a

cliff high above starchy waves. A distant observer would have imagined another pretty boy hurrying home from his lover before daybreak. A nearby witness, a rare prospect at that bracing hour, would have been surprised to find the fleet figure female, a gamine sister or wife who ought to be indoors. Even Amazons nodded at that hour.

The path she knew, for her progress was constant and sure, though at times only a phantom's hair lay visible, the cloak a whisper of wing or aligning sail. She paused on a salient to savour not the heady breeze or keen seaward prospect but an inner debate that had reached a head. "And to this the mason left -- a daughter," she said aloud as the cresting sun bronzed the tawny wig. She quickened her pace, the growing register of land a belated help or untimely worry, when suddenly her nimble form slipped into a fall of granite, a natural chimney left by an ancient inland waterfall. From the echoing grotto on the shore she emerged a minute later and appeared to relax on seeing the creature standing in the shadowy murk of a boulder rubbing furred hands together and hopping alternately on brine-soaked feet. Grizzled horns framed a surprisingly human face while a shunting of hoary breath hinted at either animal lather or idle mist making. He froze at the sound of laced sandals scaling, dusting the rocks. So she had come, this impetuous 'lad' -- to stay the curious. He touched his horns as if to secure their tenure. "A fine faun," she said with mock forbearance just before entering the shadow of the rock and barely smiling.

"The pretty instrument of wrath," he said wistfully.

“Well I’m here. This instrument.” She dislodged a stone from an upturned sole, the chlamys’s fibula slipping off her shoulder.

Glimpsing the play of young flesh he said, “I’ve missed the poetry.”

“You’ve survived.”

He thought of the meagerness of survival. “A lean meal that.” She didn’t answer. More than ever he felt the weight of his unseemly instructions. Dryly he said, “Our Sainted Regent, bless her, is restive, again. Impulsive and wanton. Downright Maenadic at times. She’s discovered a special mushroom. Food for the gods apparently. Balo, bless him, believes the Epopt’s castings may be less favoured than they were.”

“If you mean she’s not overjoyed with her horologist you’re right — she’s not a complete fool.”

“Alas.”

“For pity sake spell it out, Fen. What do Balo and the others expect me to do?”

“Quite a lot.”

She could barely make out the dark clouded face, belying two brotherly eyes. Yet she was impatient. “Fen, it’s nearly light.”

“Some of it tedious I imagine.”

“So.”

“We must not discount her infatuation with you. Even the cagey Epopt has taken note. It would — the Stalwarts are convinced, if accomplished — put her in a fine daze for the

duration. Blind her to the plans for her removal.”

“‘Accomplished’ I take to mean joining in her precious revels. Musing the Maenad.”

He smiled at the nimble expression yet quickly nodded, expecting another curt rebuke; the suggestion had been made before and swiftly dismissed. He adopted a stoic quiet.

“And Balo agrees...” she said with a trace of sarcasm.

“He agrees it’s a timely ruse. She imagines herself a renascent Potnia now, the Lady of the Labyrinth. She’s even quarantined the young King and charged his tutor with treason. And now with her sacred mushroom — her ‘food for the gods’ — she’s often a bit dreamy, abstracted, delirious I dare say. And careless. Canaeus said so himself. He’s picked up on the idea. There is some horn collecting and horse trading. There will be rumors. Which she can overlook when she’s beguiled. Spellbound. You are the much needed Muse.”

He was further relieved to find her thinking beyond the deed.”

“And what happens to the cuckoo if the plan succeeds?”

He couldn’t resist the tease — “the Maenad or the Epopt?”

She wryly smiled.

“Well Balo or Canaeus will deal with the pickled Maenad no doubt. See she finds Elysium. As for the Epopt, well, he’ll be kept around a while I suppose. To tell some tales. Some less loopy than others. Before he’s banished. A disappearance will addle the wary Luvians and Egyptians, unlike an execution.”

Looking at the clearing horizon she said, “It’s late.”

“You’ll try then...laughter at the right moment over the wine...a darling tear breasting the pretty cheek?”

But he was soon back nervously blowing on his hands, the damp fur no comfort at all, for she had turned without comment and briskly lit out toward the grotto. There she briefly paused and fondly called back, “That you may seemly suppose, goat.”

The relief he felt was genuine; he didn’t like the thought of communicating another sour note to the stern and implacable Balo. The veteran warrior, their hoplite Commander, said he would clean Fen’s earwax with a horn if he came back without her consent -- ‘unrequited’, as he put it. And the former Pankratic brawler, whom they nicknamed Briareus — the Hundred-Handed One — was ever impatient. Must be some kind of Daemon after all. The wonder of it! Who was he to cavil at a moment like that.