

# PNEUMIA

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a dark, form-fitting dress, stands in a dimly lit, ancient Egyptian tomb. To her left is a large, seated stone statue of a pharaoh. To her right is a smaller, standing statue of a sphinx. The tomb's walls are covered in hieroglyphs and have a rough, textured appearance. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

WILLARD THURSTON





# Pneuma

## 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 Epop't's castings maybe 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 Epopot 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 we think. 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 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, “What 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 Pankration 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.

He watched until she vanished into the mastic and flowering judases fringing the cliff then, ever looking over his shoulder, drew the small dugout into the then idling sea. One visitation left before the final transformation! He could almost imagine Hekate smiling, looking on -- at this guilt-laden goat. Or some Wedjet eye; very observant your timeless Egyptian.

If he was not a believer in the Great Mythic Past, this peculiar close-haul speck in the ointment of the Great Green Sea, his remaining doubt was eclipsed that morning by a creature he'd not reckoned with — a creature that only a pristine belief in the Coming of the Immortals and their Daemons might have countenanced. He felt the tug and tuck just as he was underway, the air alive swooshing with wings, the heady reverberating honk and splash -- him dunked to his horns, bobbing as a fishing lure, puffing like a mating frog. The creature neatly bowled him over! He lay bobbing in the light swell, dazed and smitten anew, fantastically alive, his humble dugout submerged yet perfectly buoyant.

The pirate who called himself Typhon — after Zeus's old rival! — also glimpsed the mighty soaring bird as he hefted a laden chest from the hideaway cave near the grotto. One day he was going to bag the honker. Put a stop to all the nonsense. Each time the swish wings swept by he could taste the delicious thigh meat simmered in oil, lemon, garlic and oregano. Only dreamers imagined some kind of airborne enormity.

Then another apparition rushed by nearly tripping him up. Had he been alerted he might have caught the careening lad. No, by Ares, a

young rib — dressed as a lad! He whistled then scowled. How he loathed interlopers and spies. She too had been startled and stumbled. Very pretty skin — worth a princely ransom at the market in Abydos. He swore. He was tempted to overtake her but feared for the treasure. She could be a lure. Another wily Circe. Their luck had been too good to last. In robbing the robbers of an Egyptian Necropolis — the fleeing rowers so exhausted they offered no resistance -- they gained a prodigious dynastic treasure! He watched ‘till the ‘lad’ disappeared up the chimney, pretty legs flashing in the sun dappled stoma. They’d have to find another cave. Fortunately there was a plethora of them on that side of the island. Poseda, Typhon’s old bravo and compeer, sullenly surveyed the escarpment. “Strange, using a girl.” That thought kept buffeting Typhon’s reason; peculiarities were not supposed to haunt the dawn. For good measure Poseda added, “I’d say she had a pretty good look.” Typhon fumed — “So we find another cave and wait a bit.” In their haste to bribe the Potnian Oracle with some trophies -- to stay some unwanted readings -- Poseda worried lest his leader get his head caught in the jaws of an Egyptian crocodile — this one not stuffed like the last, the smiling croc they found amidst the treasure into whose maw Typhon blithely inserted his head only to collapse the stays that kept the huge jaws wide apart. He still had marks on his chin, the Acacia thorn scrapes of a child. Said Poseda as he headed down toward the beached penteconter, eyes alert to the escarpment, “It’s about time.” Minutes later they could see the slight figure atop the cliff performing a showy dance step — in the manner of the Regent’s



crested dancers, the revamped Corybants, her chlamys fluttering in the breeze. Neither man was amused.

As she kicked up her heels the young woman dressed as a lad said aloud, “Dearest Athena, I promise you the fattest goat money can buy.”

The Regent, who thought of herself these days as a resurgent Potnia, the timeless Earth Mother, sat on the rooftop terrace that overlooked the neat garden just beyond the palace wall. Once again the seat by the yew tree was vacant. Even Cerbes, the Epopot, loitering on the breezeway sensed the change. The adventurous young widow whose villa they overlooked was up to something. The smart sole-surviving heiress whom he suspected of trying to revive the backers of the young King. The fury he felt even Nemesis must acquit. The smitten Regent he knew would not soon forget the vision of the pretty observant woman and her flame-haired maid standing about in the sun-flecked garden after the unprecedented storm, their chitons drying on a trestle. In the Yew tree a royal python stalked an owl. The laden memory was broken then by faint chatter — the widow had returned, dressed in a chlamys. Her hair pasted back -- from wearing a wig -- in the rosy-fingered dawn!

The Regent and her horologist doggedly watched while the inimitable lady washed her feet in the fountain runoff. Thera, the adoring womanly servant, joined her mistress in the fluent water.

\* \* \* \*



All in all a good beginning thought Sheira, the storyteller, though the Prince was in a sportive mood that night and she sensed the intimidation. She had to keep her wits about her. His gamey curiosity about the seraglio could be a ploy to manufacture yet another conspiracy to terrorize a suspected trouble maker. Yet he seemed this night predisposed to dally.

“For all the passion in your stories, I never learn much about the carnal detail. You imply that women live out a juggernaut. The suffering of an Ariadne or Pasiphaea. Yet your impetuous characters seem to exist as sprites. You must not think because I was in my youth the pupil of a great Magi that I think — at times like these -- only of the Almighty Sky, letting the Awesome Spirt of the Pneuma, the fiery celestial spirit, bother with what women get up to behind Our back. How they soothe one another. Have I astonished you? Surely not. I doubt Potnia, or is it Britomartis, would blush at the curiosity of a stranger. A poor barbarian at that. I do not fear being blinded by an Olympian. Nor do I believe the things said about the Harpies and Erinnyes, Sirens and Maenads. All these wild women you Greeks invent. You occasionally describe the Regent in your story as a Maenad, yet she is not roaming the countryside killing animals and shepherds. I think some of your Greek writers bare a telling grudge. Tearing children apart...? I cannot help but think that you, who must know better, are leaving something out. Something your poor Greek Lotharios can stomach only as madness.

She knew it would be a long night: he had time on his hands these days with the wait and see game of the Luvians and Surdas. And the tale he

wanted her to retell, the adventure of Zelea and the Potnians from The Pythia and the Pirate, was a favorite. She feared her very affection for its central character had over the years subverted her vigilance. He suspected they had been lovers and wanted to know more of this love, what a witness might see by ‘the lamp of the key bearer’. If nothing else, the better to assess the growing influence of the Potnian priestesses she presumed. His father would have scoffed at such a prurient narrative. Had a poet flogged for entertaining it. But the son was a jaded impious loafer — and, lest she forget, a cruel trickster and pretender who teased as often as he inwardly fumed. Moreover, the powers at work in the women’s quarter he could not ignore and would survive only by outmaneuvering its elite matrons and the priests and eunuchs who abetted them, most of whom she liked -- some of whom she could betray by a candid telling of the story her Lord and Master now waited impatiently and alertly for, especially the part played by Nemanio, the politic priest and faux eunuch. Still, she knew she could not go on as she had — she might fare much worse under a new satrap. She had her work cut out for her.

“Whenever you are ready my pretty nimble doe.”

## ONE

Balo could hardly believe it. Days before, the light coming from the star in the cluster Centarus had been spectacular but now paled into a sloughy aura that made him squirm. On that night of nights. The coincidence was perverse. Given how the upstart Regent’s horologist, the vile Epopt



Cerbes, had predicted the star's sudden demise -- a total disaster. Regent indeed! Another Maenad, a devotee of Dionysus Bacchius while presenting herself as a revived Potnia, Hera's Proxy, the Lady of the Labyrinth, now also the 'guardian' of their sickly young King -- whose birth sign was the constellation Centarus! Now with a black eye! He winced at the guile and resolution of the faction that installed the Regent after the old King or Wanax, as he was called then, died. That alone was shame enough. But then to rejoice in the star's fading, seeing in it the demise of the sickly King and his talk of Egyptian evil spirits, afreets and the like — on the assurance of a corrupt if not demented astrologer! All will be well the Eopt divined, peace and prosperity for everyone...no doubt squelching his laughter as he said so. Balo was not a suspicious man but at that awful moment pronounced the mischievous Chaldean craft infernal. This was no time to smugly presume, believe in transcendent favor and sanction, as the Regent so unctuously had. He knew of Typhon's booty, not where he'd stashed it, but believed an Egyptian expeditionary force must come to retrieve it. Though why such a force would be drawn up one might well ask. To avenge the theft of a few regal trophies? Even now he could scarcely believe. Such spoils must be very very special. The apprehension of his lead scout was palpable though; there was no doubting the ships closing on Corinth. Then to have the wily Cerbes pronounce the heavens favourably disposed, the fading star a portent of an end to 'Kingly' belligerence, of a new Potnian accord unfettered by swank combativeness and militancy. A benefice ordained by the Fates! Brazenly foretelling even the

day of the event seemed uncanny. The Eopt must have been desperate, certainly fearless. He too must have been recruited by the Egyptians — to insure the Regent didn't put her ships to sea. To imagine one's lot yoked to a buggerish astrology made Balo lash out at the chariot horses. No one might shy away this night. Somehow he must act, regardless — his ostracism for the moment shucked, sloughed off, shed like the very aura of the dying star, the very dust tailing his chariot. Zelea must get word to Canaeus tonight. The old Navarch must be warned, persuaded. Zelea he might just listen to. And the seamen to Canaeus. The fleet must get away. If fate left the old logroller liable to Cerbes' blather then by guile they must prevail. Zelea would think of something. The afterglow of the strange light was then a faint glimmering. By the time he reached the palace it registered as a dark smear.

The complexity of his task was confirmed by the presence of the gory Cerbes at the Sanctuary Gate, whose smile on seeing the dusty Balo was luminous. True to form the Eopt's words were soused in bile.

"The Boetian has returned. Doubtless he saw the wonderful omen and imagined a pardon — even meeting the beaky hen in her bower."

Mustering considerable self-control, Balo bypassed the inky wraith and smell of blood-matted hair. The Eopt called after him, savoring a chuckle. "You'll be put away, numbskull!"

But the whimsy didn't last. Seeing the determination in Balo's stride and honor-bound deference shown the former Commander by the gate keeper, the gaunt priest stole into a side corridor and motioned to a shad-



owy figure waiting by a stairwell who in turn fled to a waiting steed. By the time Balo reached the courtyard of the royal apartments a throng of Cerbes' acolytes greeted him in their ghoulish regalia. It was then he lost his temper, for perhaps the second or third time in his full arduous life. The blow on the most forward of the sentinels landed so swiftly and surely the others backed off, alert with wonder that a soldier had actually struck a member of the holy order, who now lay in a confused heap, astonished the blood streaming from his nose was actually his own. On seeing this bizarre novelty the doubtful few backed off and Balo covered the remaining paces to the first of the magnificent doors unimpeded.

There he briefly paused. The beauty of the palace once divined for him a kind of talisman. The memory was fleeting. The incense wafting through the stile seemed then obscene: their island kingdom was at risk of invasion by a gritty Nubian barbarian at the behest of a seething Pharaoh who wanted his treasure back, and the jaded Regent had commissioned a Thyiad festival! The Thyiads being one of her Maenadic cults. The two soldiers assigned the door, believing like the celebrants in the royal entourage that they were inviolate, in keeping with Cerbes' reading of the Centaurus star's ebb, knelt inside ogling the scene and were too flummoxed on seeing the intruder to act decisively or in concert. One stumbled to his feet only to suffer the fate of the Epopot's sentinel. The other hesitated then slumped back, more annoyed it seemed than intimidated. What's the fuss he seemed to say. Flinty caution — on a night like this — when even

the Regent's own Corybants, the crested dancers, entirely female then, let loose? You can't be serious.

But the speed with which the intruder disappeared perplexed this second guard, especially when he determined his partner was undeniably — unconscious. If his resentment lingered -- being uprooted from an extraordinary entertainment — he nonetheless plucked at his armor and vehemently swore...as did Balo when he realized he'd underestimated the density of the celebrants, the size of the Royal Circus, and the difficulty of telling who was who at a masquerade. The frankness of his unmasked face served mainly to entertain the players he queried or pique those guests whose vision he obstructed. It also took him a good minute to realize his attire, as unknown and unexpected in that venue as himself, suggested but another costume and he a fine spoiler for pretending to be in earnest. No one seemed sufficiently knowledgeable or authoritative to be taken aside and pumped. Zelea's name produced shrugs or insinuations. It seemed she had slipped from favor because the Queen chose to be slighted. Or maybe she hadn't. Said one needy lush, taking his arm, "Oh but I think, all things considered, she's back in. One cannot deny the sweet unfolding." Balo had no idea what was meant. She was nowhere to be seen. For the briefest moment he sensed an alien visitation — dismay -- which was soon eclipsed by his gathering wrath.

With great care he avoided the prickly Lictor. But the greedy, slummy Steward he seized and dragged under a shaded pergola. At mention of Zelea's name the giddy man affected panic. "Oh my dear Lothario — too



late,” he exclaimed, then cutely snickered. The more he regarded Balo’s artless uncomprehending face the more he triumphed, an amusement that peaked when the curious gathered, all masks in place. “Press me Priam,” sued one of the partiers. Another clutched Balo’s bum — “Oh for a basket!” “No flies at all!” remarked a third. “A regular Herm,” a fourth — jibes that ignited conniptions of giggling. All the while the Steward slowly moved away, gesturing to an outside pavilion where the lascivious activity seemed less robust until Balo realized it had just assumed a deliberative quality, an absurdly unctuous diligence. Even the water pipes sat unoccupied. He nearly shunned the chamber, sensing a futility that comes with age and a shopworn sense of humour. Lascivious craft he was not match for. Nor the latest mushroom ambrosia. Even now his manly eye could not eschew the many suggestive forms, many nude, so conspicuous below the ornately masked faces.

An animated crowd had gathered about a coterie of acolytes in a wide lustral basin. He kept to the margin yet could see that a few were engaged in some kind or rite, the stagey anointing of a young girl, half her face painted white, her eyes covered in the sect’s moon discs. She sat on a plinth in the centre, many hands upon her. The Regent sat nearby lightly stroking the neck and shoulder of the initiate. An elegant woman in the crowd said for the benefit of another, “The Regent’s about to encircle the White Thorn, the seat of pleasure. The chosen acolytes will sing an ode to the Goddess when she does so.” Balo could see little below chest height but noted a tension in the girl as the Regent proceeded, assisted then by a

priestess. Someone uttered an oath to general protracted amusement. In a bewildered state Balo watched as the Regent held up a hand with a pale sheen on the fingers which prompted a celebratory paeon from the acolytes who crowed about the initiate, one wiping tears from her face it seemed as others poured basins of water over her shoulders and chest. When two of the acolytes bent to fill their basins he could see that the girl was then nude, her legs drawn apart as in a berthing position, a goatskin aegis with a Thyiad crest covering her privates. She looked stupefied he thought. Large sea sponges were being used to wash the body. The scents of apple, quince and barley groats filled the air.

On seeing for the first time the touted Royal Revels literally ‘in the flesh’ — too antic and prodigious to believed second hand — he sensed the forbidding Pharaoh and his Nubian winning on all fronts. And then to give the Court Diviner, the monstrous lunatic Cerbes, a dramatically failed star, a heaven gross with transfiguration! What stories he must have fashioned for an impetuous, excuse-ready Regent, so prone to rapt indulgence and suave expedience — beneath a sky now purple and carmine! One of Balo’s Navarchs — the able expressive Bagais — once summed up the precious insinuations: gamy Tyrian lust, by a warm red sea! A rich fascination for the comfortable voyeur, the kind of idler yawning at the ethereal grace of the creature they named the Swan, acrobatic juggler and illusionist, a peri who performed just outside the pavilion, perhaps the lone entertainer not engaged in the intimate address of another. As he was drawn to the many splendid forms, to the ecstatic possibilities, the Swan put down



her golden balls and, to his awed surprise, approached and quietly but firmly pulled him past the scene by the lustral pool. “Only the Eunuchs are allowed near the pavilion,” the peri said. He explained that he was not a guest and had an urgent private message for the Lady Zelea. He assured her he would not be long or cause a fuss; a former aid suggested Zelea would be in the palace. “We needn’t rush,” suggested the barely perceptible creature at his side. When they reached the umbered porch that led back to the Circus, she pulled a simple masque from her schenti and urged him to put it on. “We must pass through the West Court if you wish to meet with Zelea; please act accordingly.” That said — a comment he barely assimilated — she put a shapely arm about his considerable girth and intimated a binding infatuation. The torch bright West Court, a busy thoroughfare, was filled with sauntering couples, selectively eating from long, bountifully laden tables, smiles lax, bemused, drug laden. His accomplice advised, “There, just beyond the deer mosaic is an empty room; carry me and I can better hide your mug.” As he did so two young pomaded breasts smelling of balsam grazed and prodded his chest. Her eyes lidded in anticipation before the few alert observers.

He put his resilient burden down in a dark cellar that reeked of wine stale. A momentary hesitation. She briefly listened for sounds of followers then said, “Please wait here. You shouldn’t be disturbed. Zelea will come...when she can.” That said she amiably slipped away, sandals glinting on a further brighter staircase, leaving him quite alone, eye’s widening to the comparative dark, his incredulity every bit as consuming. Eventu-

ally he found an amphora to sit on, his memory stalking the pavilion scene — the steamy sunset spectacle that would haunt him ever after. Slowly but invincibly the reckoning came, the disquieting recognition. How stolid and unobservant he had been. Was Zelea's not the compliant form he'd chanced upon, her young flesh being quined, soothed, livened, virginal torso glistening, eyes covered with the small moon discs, the sealstones of the troupe? The trusted she who would 'come when she can'? But he couldn't smile. They must have known of his presence for some time, sending the Swan to learn his reason for coming and get him out of the way. His plight, however, did not upstage the raw discovery. The stark, craven aspect of the scene galled him, pointing to a sly, possibly wanton nature he'd not imagined. He knew of the plan to distract the Regent, even urged it, but had little idea what it might involve. Fen did not spell it out. He could not conceive the remembered Zelea, the poised Lady Zelea, disposed to abide let alone feed such mania, permit such sly 'manhandling' -- oblige even a dissolute audience! He caught himself sighing aloud. A fine gull he was — still thinking he might wait her out, doubting that the Regent, their gamy Maenad, would arrest him during a Thyiad Festival. Though the guards he'd seen thus far would hardly be up to it. But what must he otherwise do -- carry on as commanded and be routed by Nubian's mercenary Shardana chargers? Perhaps captured and impaled? Along with the rest of his hand-picked Hoplites. He ransacked the options as the waiting became a curse.



And their beloved Polis — which he had resourcefully defended for a decade — would a trace of its lively art, games, fond manners and lenient rule remain after Nubian Medju's mercenaries drew their lots? Despite all, it was Zelea who attracted and helped convene the sturdy practical faction after old Asterius died, even hosting discreet meetings at her villa. Despite her youth and genial manner she was a peeress who embodied the nobility of the past and would make a worthy consort, this hitherto winsome, accomplished daughter of the celebrated mason and recent widow of the Navarch who well knew the strategic value of the borderless sea and their trig if dwindling fleet of biremes. Medju's mercurial obsessions were still their best hope if they acted now, this very night! And if they got away, abandoning the unkindly ships, to regroup in the North, in that maze of islands, inlets and covers, they would need an interim figurehead of charm, intelligence, and unquestionable legitimacy — legitimacy! How the word grated this night, the craven image so foreign to the remembered serenity and wit. Cerbes, he knew, was partly correct. Idealism could be a clod, a Boetian. A couple passed close by, their voices coming and fading though not before the Epop't's name pricked his ears, the seer who 'foretold the end of the Egyptian avenger, saw him bloodied in the very heavens!' — the breezy lad invoked the island's fabled lore of bedevilled marauders and invaders. The comfort of tireless fools. The heady ease he had helped sustain! He was becoming impatient. He had all but convinced himself he must act alone. The Kingdom of the High Shore would have to fend for itself. For a time. His sentence was ostracism from

the demos not obliteration. Surely no one in their right mind could imagine Medju anything but a disaster, whom the Regent now blithely ignored! On the bond of a demented Epopt. He crept up and knelt by the entrance.

Then a commotion in the adjacent courtyard delayed further recrimination: an official investigation was underway. A renegade officer had been seen stalking the palace. As adamant as the gavelled hooves on fieldstone courtyards were the short imperious commands — the Regent's voice at her most virulent. The conspirator must be found, the accomplice compelled to speak, otherwise the Royal beasts would be handsomely fed that week; she would not tolerate snideness or connivance this mistress of smart debauchery. How repellent it all was. He crouched behind one of the more bountiful banquet tables and waited, his heart strangely uneven as if a poison coursed his veins. He recalled the Maenad once sarcastically saying that in the more stolid arts — such as defensive warfare — he might be relied upon. To die in or near a spirit cellar during an orgy, nearly sick on the fumes alone, was not an end he'd will to posterity. He would out and take his chances. Resolved, he felt the buoyant calm return, the impassivity that attends intrepid skirmishes.

But no sooner was he free the elaborate table, surmising his chances from the shade of a pergola, than the nausea returned. The aggregated torches formed a blinding sea of fire, leaving him disoriented, squinting, wavering. A creature he thought he recognized was about to be questioned. The Regent was not to be toyed with, her thyrsus alive and fully



venomed. Two guards had just hustled in the suspect while a third released a fibula fastener and yanked off her schenti which the Regent inspected, as if some weapon might be concealed in the flimsy garment. It was obvious that being displayed so before such an audience was a new experience for the girl. In the face of the accusatory tirade and insulting prods, the luckless creature, an erstwhile lamp bearer someone sarcastically said, sat down on the courtyard field stones with a remarkable display of unconcern, her identity as the Swan who'd shown him the cellar, and who now astonishingly refused to reveal her secret, a fine twin goad. Not then the shill he suspected. The Queen was livid. Then a clear sad voice, too real to Balo's acute hearing, that of decent, durable Thera, Zelea's longtime servant, mentioned a mark, a tattoo that had been seen and duly noted. Yanked to her feet, inspected, paraded, and a satisfied audience beheld a small tattoo of a butterfly on one wrist. The Queen rose newly abrasive, the Captain swallowed his misgiving and gave the nod. Balo moved to the end of the pergola as one of Cerbes' burkers slowly readied the restraints and the thrall of the onlookers heightened. He was surely dreaming: Thera prompting at the torment of an entertainer? The girl, at last erect, lamely awaiting her fate -- her hair clasped by the large hand of the Captain — began quavering. To better seize her locks the man momentarily relaxed his grasp, just long enough for her to skip free and as if borne by wings spring onto the Regent's dais and into the vacated Royal Seat, a gilded synod chair of Egyptian design, where she sat back dimpled with carefree laughter — a finely insular or hysteric antic that all but ru-

ined the rigged solemnity of the moment. The Queen shrieked, the creature was tumbled from the dais and forced to a kneeling position. Balo, newly incensed and by then poised to skewer the burker, regardless, hesitated when a further commotion distracted and flagged the audience's attention. Sudden piercing screams issued from the gardens off the Circus's outer terrace, the shrillness of the cries dismaying, appalling, uncanny. The burker, newly perplexed, paused as if to reassess his task and the Captain's sanction. Once again the girl twisted free and took flight, this time running toward the terrible sounds the crowd shied away from, including the Palace Guard. No one pursued her. It seemed her oiled limbs and the jittery terror that filled the atrium combined to facilitate her release. The Queen, speechless, turned to the Captain. His calm witness of the growing tumult beyond the terrace seemed to mollify her until he abruptly turned and departed opposite the furor, promptly followed by the burker. Neither man looked back. To a man the Palace Guard followed suit. Sensing isolation and real danger the Queen appeared to gag. Seeing the furtive disappearance of even personal servants -- no one left to reprimand, importune — drew her into a frenzy. All at once people, mainly unattired, began streaming in from the gardens, some bloodied and halting, most hysterical with dread. By then Balo could make out the fire cloud beyond the outer stand of Eucalyptus and above the West Court torches. So had Medju come, in the reassuring twilight. What mockery — anticipating a siege over by nightfall. What treachery within Glaea itself! Suddenly he, Balo the 'ostracite', was redeemed, freed from further selfless obligation.



By abetting the Queen's cruelty, Thera had strained to breaking his plighted protection. The servant would not act independent of her mistress, who uncharacteristically abetted the Regent's orgy. Sadly, improvising, the brave or manic girl, his so unexpected accomplice, vanished into the breach as a moth to a flame, a fine derisive end to his intrepid resolve. It would be madness to pursue her. He must now, more than ever swear off the shame, the dismay, and strike out for the West and North, his select Navarchs and Hoplites in tow in the few secreted biremes — Medju would be too preoccupied to secure the Citadel and Palace to seek out and seriously interfere with secreted and stealthily fleeing ships. It was the move that fixed the options and galvanized action. The infant King he had long ago abandoned, knowing the court balefully divided over the succession. Rumour had it the babe was poisoned and another substituted by the Regent, whom he now left hoarsely raging at the cowardly fellows, her compatriots in affectation, luxury and cruelty. The sportive aspect of her Minoan-styled costume, which bared the chest, was the final retribution. To await Medju thus seemed to reflect Fortuna's dying purple light. She slumped in the synod seat, mutely waiting as a slave an auction or a stolid cleric the derision of a lively sophist.

But as he left, the fleeting image of another being, ethereal as the Queen Regent was mundane, seated mirage-like behind and above the dais, inescapably forlorn, despite the elegant shape, scared the heebie jeebies out of him. How many times had he inwardly scoffed at the lofty stories of their origin, at the fantastic creatures attending it, imagined himself

abused by sly fibbers and bemused halfwits -- and now, on this night of nights, so rawly alert to actually see, behold the image lucid as a shooting star, acute as any newly minted stater. It had been touted a herald of those early majestic forces, but now, in such repose intimated a terrible steeped disappointment. It was said that when the human form escaped the splendid bird, as was all too apparent, disaster and ruin and death were near. The image, their fabled Palladium, about to expose her Glaean child, stayed with him like an ocular burn all the rock-strewn way to the perimeter of the ancient theatre and the impatient grimace of Crino, his scowling Lieutenant.

## TWO

The shock on seeing the first of the howling chargers, so monstrous and unexpected, sent Scheira scurrying into a thicket of Laurel and Myrtle off the royal citrus orchard. The acrid sight of the coursing battle standards against the crimson horizon was as fearsome as the surging torches and approaching fire. The screams in the adjacent grove were soon razor edged, sometimes forcing her into a huddle, hands locked over her ears. Yet a life-long vigilance kept her alert and flight ready, though her fate seemed sealed, her fetus nakedness a mere footnote, a memento mori for some manic siege warrior. She tried rubbing earth on her pomaded skin and gained a certain umbrage but the consolation was short lived when she spied the creature sidling toward her, its size and ebony exoskeleton indeterminate in the fading light. The menace of the thing seemed beyond reckoning; her mind refused to believe. She'd never seen a scorpion as



large and there seemed a myriad of them approaching. The ground alive with them. She'd heard stories of siege excesses -- ingenious means to cause panic — but this she couldn't assimilate. Insanity surely. Under the duress of the last hour she'd finally flipped out. She discovered herself giggling again -- another indescribable royal shindig! Which she fled in the wrong direction. Nervously extending a hand as if to reassure herself the thing was illusionary the creature suddenly stopped, pincers sweeping, sifting for further vibrations. Her hand recoiled forcefully enough to leave a welt and for one terrible moment she imagined being stung. She hurled some earth at it. The pincers rose and spread. The tail seemed a forearm high. The fires beyond, mainly field houses she assumed, formed intermittent fire storms, the din about nearly deafening. She must run, nimbly as ever — in the mosaic hop-skip perfected as a child, never stepping on a major grout line — which the scorpions haltingly formed and unformed. A high stepper who represented in the fiery gloaming an agile mirage to Cerbes as he stood overlooking the gardens after opening the vault to yet another royal cache. The secret logging of the Regent's personal fortune had taken him over a year. Now he and Medju's Seneschal compared notes of Regent Hespere's trophy and armor stores. The Seneschal too saw the apparition and together they placed a bet, Cerbes that it would falter before reaching the maze evergreens, the Seneschal, thoroughly bored with Medju's dread African scorpions — which took days to collect the numbers needed -- that the fugitive would at least get that far. It was the alleged danger that worked, not the mobility or ferocity of the insect.

Only a fire propelled them onward, and the fires here were patchy. Moreover, their numbers were always exaggerated. Loosed among leisured bower birds like the current Glaean nobility, however, they might incite a satisfying panic.

“Well, well.” Cerbes was impressed. “I owe you a drachma.” For the Seneschal it had been a momentary distraction. “Five drachmas,” he interjected, adding, “Incidentally, you needn’t put the location of your own stores on the manifest. For the time being.” Cerbes hesitated before curtly bowing and again advising, “Zelea is the real prize.” Aloud, the thought unexpectedly chafed, begging as it did the question of his own usefulness and status. “So you’ve said.” The Seneschal’s voice was sufficiently removed for Cerbes to continue. “Many actually believe hers to be the sovereign line. They must not be underestimated.” But the methodical Seneschal took little note of the hovering Eopt, concerned that his own trunks were full before the official inventory began; he’d forgotten how a small sea-trading community might amass venerable treasure and instructed his store layer to fetch another wagon.

By then Medju’s wranglers worked just ahead of the fires, hefting their charges into cages while ransacking the bodies of mainly older persons, some still alive and numb with shock, who failed to make the palace. Gaudy remains of Glaean nobility littered the West Court, the stately processional route where Scheira, the Swan, had smirked as a key bearer to the Dolphin Princess and, during the Bull Promenade, turned many a fluent arabesque as her gilded balls cascaded above her. The initial wave of



Shardana chargers with their unusual foot anchors had swiftly passed through the orchard and cleared the low outer garden wall looking for armed resistance. Bellowing horsemen now cantered about the Bull Court making sport of the few remaining Royal Guard — the few that had stayed on. The first ranks of archers and spear bearers seemed then unimpeded, the remaining opposition in Scheira's reading of the intermittent screams, the women and children who resisted assault. The wranglers nearest her eschewed the chiseled corridors of the cedar maze, as she anticipated, practically concerned they might not get out in the gathering dusk. Any person hiding there could be smoke strangled in about a minute or two she estimated. That very week she had fled from a lusty Steward's servant into the cool scented interior.

When the party nearest her passed on toward the Bull Court she slipped out of the maze entrance but decided against the bright costume on a still, matronly form the wranglers had just plundered except for a stout hairpin which she swiftly seized and placed before rubbing more soil on her still pale arms and legs. All the while she kept an eye on the one straggler who was particularly keen to amass what he could on his progress to the palace. Following him into the peach grove she debated her chances. He was the last to enter. She waited till the voices of the others dimmed then struck with the long needle of the hairpin. The man made barely a sound, feeling his temple as if stung by a wasp. A second jab bloodied her hand; the man slowly fell, shocked by a sudden vertigo and incoherence, his booty rattling in his sack. Someone jeeringly called after

him to keep up. Within a minute she had on the stout linen tunica and sandals, emptied but held his sack as screen and darted through a rift in the flames to the scorched walls of the garden, the hair pin again in place.

Crouching atop the sooty railing she could make out several parties, torches pricking the enveloping night, most headed toward the Bull Court and Palace. She knew that being so close to the flames their vision would be marginally worse than hers and picked a course down the widest gap. The debris of bodies and smoking ruins afforded measured pauses as she coursed diagonally toward the sea. Every dwelling she passed, homes of the new nobility, had been torched, all remaining occupants slaughtered. It was the first time she sensed some benefit in being an abducted slave: she had no family on Glaea to worry about. If she anguished over the prospect of not stopping to help some menaced or wounded wretch the occasion never arose, the terrifying chargers had been remarkably thorough, and she reached the wind shrill cliffs without detection after one near mishap -- she almost stepped into a field well! With great caution she followed the rocky moon-etched facing Northward for an hour or two slowing only when dawn limned the waves below. The land about, a narrow plateau of ancient knurled Kermes oak and Lentisk that settled into the interior cloud forest, remained pristine and uninhabited. Her belated find was to discover herself alive and unscathed! The sudden relief was roisterous. She let out a whoop, loosened the coarse scratchy tunica, pausing once to perform a hell-and-toe in a hollow of soft fragrant Thymus. She might now fancy her own robust luck and future destination — getting to the island



of Thera half a league off in a day or two. Swimming if she had to. She smiled at such bracing optimism. There she would find some food and a fisherman to take her to Keftiu. She would seek out an entertainment troupe in Gortyna. Had she ever known such bracing luck? Or witnessed a more satisfying sunrise? At that moment her freedom and the steady breeze white capping the wide sea were entirely sufficient. Later she would try to link the bewildering chain of events in the palace, why and for whom she had been so gulled. But first the necessary respects and courtesies must be observed. Potnia must not be slighted. Quietly she asked for the Goddess's continuing favor as she knelt to bury the obligatory twist of hair -- before seeking out her eccentric faun in the cloud forest.

The star Fortuna was by then a wondrous remnant of individual memory — not unlike the Kingdom of the High Shore, or Glaea, as it was known in a Phoenician ordnance map, which placed it many leagues beyond dead reckoning — a day's sail North and East of what the Egyptians called Keftiu (modern Crete). A small island in the Great Green Sea, mountainous at the edges, raised from the ocean by an ancient caldera. A cloud forest in the indented centre concealed a narrow fertile plain and lake. Being out of the way of the main trading routes, the island had no strategic value and was regarded with occasional curiosity only by prodigious reports, invariably second hand, of the splendour of some of its inhabitants. On the island itself, legend told a band of Immortals a generation or two ago who settled there with select consorts from Knossos. The

Immortals departed leaving their human kind, physical nonesuch who reasserted their Minoan heritage — a kingship beholden to a religious priestess plutocracy imbued with fantastic lore and, for a time, an inimitable social and aesthetic graciousness. The main differences were: the economy, more pastoral now than commercial, and an elegant natural defense — precipitous shoreline cliffs that inhibited assault until a moderate earthquake lowered one natural rampart. In the breath of a poetry reading one seismic afternoon, Glaea was given a rocky expanse of beach that, once discovered, served as a bivouac for a handful of storm-tossed traders and travellers, the rare banished princeling or grafter, a prudent pirate or two, and the occasional adventurer who thought himself a mythic Hero. Being shrewd and resilient custodians, the human descendants of Immortals after all, the Glaeans repaired their homes and fetched the arms left by peerless ancestors. The few keen explorers and buccaneers who ventured beyond the shore were either killed, taken captive, or fled swearing they'd return only with Tethys or Poseidon leading the assault. Eventually the islanders extended their homes, added to their fishing fleet, and put together a small but resourceful navy and shore army over which Balo proved an exceptional and dedicated Commander, his fortunes souring only during the late Regency. For a generation they lived without incursion or dissent until the present era when the death of the King left a sickly infant son and fractious hedonistic Court. The leading clique convened a Council headed by a wanton and ambitious priestess, who inveigled her way into the palace by exploiting the rumour of being descended from a beautiful creature car-



ried off by Poseidon and secreted in a giant conch shell that washed onto a Glaean shore! The tale had always teased Scheira's lovelorn, escapist nature. The elderly hermit she sought out the night of Medju's assault, her one reliable friend then, was also her mentor on Glaea's early history. He was alarmed if not surprised to find her so distraught when she arrived so early that day. "I saw last night's fires from the edge of the forest." He added after a shrug, "He's come. then, this Medju." His usual buoyant demeanor had temporarily abandoned him. Gratefully she accepted a bowl of fish soup which she downed in silence but for several grateful gestures. Afterward they sat before a rekindled fire swaddled in old himations. Attars of durable firewood sweetened the air.

She first discovered the remote lean-to a year ago and wondered ever after at the aloofness of its lone occupant who seemed to come and vanish at will, though he invariably materialized when she came. She knew he was called Fen, though he always talked of 'Fen' as some other being, a mythical creature perhaps, one of their many shared secrets. It was this ageless figure who first detailed Glaea's legendary beginnings for her — in part by being so improbable himself. Now, to better understand late gruesome events, she asked him to go over parts of the story again. "I do need some thoughtful words right now." With a ready smile the hermit began.

"The frescos in the Propylaeum and relief sculptures in the Sanctuary attest to the astonishing beginning. Our ethereal coming," he wryly said to the newly kindled fire. "Some of which the Regent appropriated and vulgarized with her own face and form."

Scheira faintly laughed. The hermit too smiled, knowing his visitor had stood in for her in an atelier. With conviction he stated, “She picked a very fine eidolon!” Diffidently Scheira added, “She really likes boys.”

He smiled. “Well, let’s say — the newly come Artemis.”

“Except Artemis was never the hunted one. Sorry.”

With that she rose and ventured outside the lean-to to reassure herself that the morning mist was sufficient to conceal the smoke from a shoreline scout. She knew very few people ventured to this side of the island, and doubted Medju would bother until he had secured the harbour, Citadel and the major shrines. So far the lower expanse of shoreline was deserted. She returned to the hermit to take up his fond narrative. “You’ve seen the frescos and relief sculptures then. You get about.”

“They’ve been there forever. At one time...” He never finished the sentence, returning as he often did to a silent reverie.

“You think our good fortune may have run out.”

“Oh I rarely think. Always trouble thinking.”

“You wouldn’t survive out here without some planning and foresight. That’s thinking.”

He smiled. “You’re an arresting entertainer. Very good.”

Scheira laughed. “Not last night.” She was about to say more but the bitter recollections elided explanation. Instead she calmly stated, “Our life may be over. You and I. As it was.”

The hermit faintly nodded, her words an elegy.



For a time only the crackling fire rent the silence. Schiera too was lost in trying to treat her scorched memory. She knew right away Balo was out of place, but surely not so thick as to think he might actually meet Zelea — on that night of nights! Some things bring a fog. Thus, in her beset frame of mind, she returned to an old query. “You tend to avoid the question — why you left the polis. I know you’ve said ‘she’s quite a beast’ often enough.”

He sighed and was, she feared, about to leave to fetch more wood or utter some further abstruse fiction when he impassively stated, “It was when the King died and the Regent chose to rule through surrogates, the first being a religious maniac who wanted to revive the early sacrifices, the old Minotaur bunk — to which I would likely have been liable, being one of the few mainlanders. He even wanted the Council to refurbish parts of the old Labyrinth.

“Not Cerbes?”

“No — his predecessor. But Cerbes learned well the craft of astrological intimidation. The pall of witless believers.” The phrase seemed to please him. “Though in devising favourable omens for her adventures, which became more ‘labyrinthine’ with age, Cerbes required no tutor.”

Schiera lightly snickered. She wanted to shrug off the Regent’s gamy obsession and her witness of it. But the hermit was eager to distract, to waylay her anxiety.

“Now the rogue Typhon had been one of the first visitors to explore the island, see its superb natural catchments and hardwoods in the cloud

forest. He was also the first outsider to behold the Regent's investiture proclamation: 'We, Lerna Hespere Cressida, Queen Regent of Glaea, Tyrant of the Seas, Chief Archon and Blessed Imperator, Immortal Benefactor of all true Arete, Venerable and Loving Corybant, Timeless Maenad, at the behest of Majestic Hera, Queen of Heaven, do hereby grant a week of games to Honor the Eternal Genetrix, et cetera, et cetera.'"

Scheira just managed to quell a snicker. "Games." But the hermit was on a roll.

"Now Typhon, who had an indigent scribe translate the words of the Proclamation — Typhon's Phonecian by the way — thought the scribe a smart ass and boxed his ears. However the scribe had not embellished the text -- as we diviners know. The game's 'clutch of greasy kores', which the scribe promptly mentioned, whetted Typhon's interest. The scribe was an astute judge of uncouth character."

"How could you possibly know all that?"

"Exactly what Typhon wondered. 'So what of these greasy games you corn fed roach? All this Genetrix rot?'"

"Does he really sound like that — that thick voice?"

"Oh yes. He speaks with a forked tongue. Caught it in a Persian chastity device apparently."

Scheira was at first astonished then threw a burnt end of Holm oak branch at her raffish mentor, who ducked and resumed speaking more debonairly than ever.



“Answered the scribe to the question of the Genetrix, ‘It is bibble-babble that can make your hair stand on end and perhaps a part of you more accustomed to upright behaviour.’ He received a second cuffing for this jibe but was ready and deflected the sterner blows.”

Scheira looked on with growing wry bemusement as the hermit sought to personify cheek: “Said the scribe, ‘I’m told your entire crew from the Wamax looked on with much blithe whispering, worshipful Member. Four of your Noble Crew it is rumored joined the queue of greasy baboons but were not admitted and had to be restrained. With so many distinguished couturiers before them the Genetrix was quite submersed.’” This produced a rough guffaw and assurance that she, Scheira, didn’t believe a word. The hermit was delighted and feigned earnestness, “The scribe swore by Hephaestus’s favorite goat and his uncle’s fattest goose.”

“The man must be believed,” said tented Scheira with amiable sarcasm adding, not to flag her interlocutor, “So what else did you hear from the ‘corn-fed roach’?”

“Only what the ignorant folk in the agora know to be scandalous and usually true.”

“And what pray was that?”

“Just the question Typhon put to the scribe.”

“I’ll bet.”

“We are listening, patiently” — so said the canny pirate — to which the scribe replied, “You are doubtless a skilled sophist.”

Scheira, thinking of some court ‘sophists’ — the ones Cerbes intimidated — some of whom had propositioned her, looked away. When calmed she noted the tale was getting better. The hermit continued affably as ever.

“And with that Typhon gave to tag tail Fen, one of his trusted scouts, a devout lecher and much practiced Faun, the job of getting about the island in disguise to affirm that many of the citizens of Glaea had swallowed whole the legend of their beginnings, replete with the fantastic creatures that attend the mating of stolid men and stagy Immortals. It was the day he spied Zelea catnapping in the Royal Gardens that the decline in Glaean fortunes began. For you see, he hadn’t seen the superstitious Regent spying him. On seeing one of their Fauns she believed the Immortals had returned. And from that moment was fearful as well as smitten -- by Zelea, not the Faun you understand. By recruiting Zelea into her circle of Maenads she hoped to appease the Immortals.”

“You do get around.” Then, to the hermit’s surprise Scheira ditched her doubt, saying, “It does fit quite well, especially the bit about Zelea ending as a kind of obsession.” Noting his attentive stare she wanly added, “It was pretty obvious.”

Said the hermit with resonance, “The poetry of Lesbos!” Then, noting her derisive smile — “You turn away.” Which she had indeed, to hide her sudden despondency, the reoccurring thought that mauled — the ineluctable loss of her former being and gracious homeland, where all seemly



poetry had thrived. “Just the smoke,” she said knowing he didn’t believe her. With some caution he took up the thread.

“The Regent, in her perplexity, decided she was lost if delectable Zelea remained at large -- she might become an Immortal consort. Tagtails like Fen can be notorious panders. Zelea she feared could be courted, entertained, listened to -- by a presiding Immortal. The Regency might be slighted, reviled — impugned! There was always the ambiguity of her coming. Which Zelea would know as well as anyone. Poseidon Himself might be consulted! There was no other way — she had to subvert the beautiful charmer, turn her into a humble craven creature. A mere plaything. Good for a swift ravishment — Immortals rather loathe lax dilatory creatures. It was a Divine Test you see — she or Zelea — which she believed implicitly. But then she fell in love. Went berserk over the woman. The Fates had spoken.”

“How you know all that is a wonder. You smile.”

“The forest creatures have many ears.”

“I know some Stalwarts planned to use Zelea as a foil. To keep the Maenad occupied while they sought to remove her and the Epopot and rally the Island’s forces, put them on alert -- to bargain with if not deter the Egyptians. Something I belatedly learned. It was suggested I help out...” Her pause was sudden and reflective, then, “I guess it’s possible they used someone like this ‘Fen’ to approach Zelea.”

“Poor Balo,” he said just before placing another twist of faggots on the fire.

“Was he aware of any of this I wonder.”

“Who knows. Do continue.”

“The ever so facile Hespere was eager to reassert, reaffirm her place in the Temple’s Pantheon, the Eternal Sea giving back one of its Own. Hence her Eidolon. Her one accomplishment. A work of unassailable beauty.”

“From a closet connoisseur. Who does get around. I know — the many ears.”

“She was bereft of course when the minor quake broke the flattering statue before delivery. Hera, or was it feral Potnia, had spoken. No image would vie with that of the celebrated Zelea, whose unadulterated likeness on the Acropolis as timeless woman and child, a work commissioned by her perceptive husband, remained upright, without crack or scallop.”

“She never had a child though. Her husband commissioned the work? I didn’t know that.”

“Terrible, immutable retribution. Lust and desperation, a most unhappy couple. Far worse than boredom.” Again he fondly eyed her, though he sensed his tale was losing its hold.

“I’m listening.”

“Oh there is more. There is always more. This unlikely Fen, for instance, had in the meantime encountered a Gigante.”

“A Gigante.”

“Yes. A fantastic specter from the East, greater even than the finest Phrygian conjurer -- a tale for discriminating ears. Many were agog.”

“Somehow this ‘Fen’ is the more interesting.”

“You don’t want to hear about the Gigante? Or the magnificent bird that is said to haunt the inner forest -- the creature that captured the soul of an Immortal who now struggles to join her, to die even as a mortal?...”

His spendthrift enthusiasm lapsed somewhat at her pert rejoinder — “Oh I know — and won’t let her go till they return, the stone heads. It’s an old symposium tale, usually told toward the last when everyone is swacked, puling in their wine...I’d rather know what happened to Fen. Yes, I have attended a symposium.” This last assertion produced a smirk. And a look of being reprimanded in the hermit. Ready confessions he never approved of.

“Oh he’s about, somewhere.”

“Did he and old Typhon break up, possibly?”

It took a moment or two for the forlorn look, his old kithless demeanor, of somehow being defrauded, to return and foil her late inquisitiveness. He plaintively shrugged. His tale had run its course she sensed. Was of little help. “Nap time,” she murmured as the fire crackled in hoary silence. She didn’t persist. His sudden introduction of the Gigante and precious invocation of the tell-tale bird, reputed to be a Swan, she believed a screen -- his narrative had touched a forgotten nerve, his grief over misplaced Glaean threads perhaps as acute as hers, his humor a sorry diversion. Each in their own reverie they stared at the fire, observing the hush of the forest, she occasionally glancing at the inscrutable face, the face that seemed a mask of itself.



An inaugural face.

The following morning he watched her flit down the steep trail to the jagged shoreline. They had inspected the shore from a cliff edge and found it deserted — no sign of Medju's scouts. Minutes later she swam out toward Thera, a winged mite heading to a purple smudge on the horizon. A sadly impossible trip it seemed. Solus in the Great Green Sea. An Egyptian occupation had no appeal, that he knew. And the life of a fugitive held no purchase. He doubted he would ever see her again, the one person who had visited, listened. He would have to make due with the restless mists. And the hoarded memories.

### THREE

The Eopt had been busy on the eve of the assault. Last minute tasks require a clear head, empty bladder and iron nerves. By and large his cohorts had got the necessary things done: reconnoitre the outlying older pre-temple buildings and set the signal; purge the bay of wary fishermen; pick the nearest cliff chimneys for each beached cohort; provision the advance field quarters for the Viceroy; station the key bearers to the main entrances to the palace; alert the collaborators who invited his intervention. The routine stuff. All accomplished.

Other matters continued to stew. Who, for instance, gave the accurate list of the Regent's stores to the bloody Seneschal? How else did he know? He still did not know who actually dispatched the Regent. Less important. Someone he could easily impugn later, if necessary. Many candidates

would be liable. Much more dire: his spies did not know when Balo took flight, how many companies he took with him, or where they went. How would he explain that lapse to the Viceroy? To his amazement the pretty eel, the so supple Lady Zelea, bless her, had done her part splendidly, the fervent Regent oblivious for a fortnight. The Stalwart ruse played beautifully into his hands. One of his plants even told the Lady he would warn her on the eve of the siege. Ha! Such stilted toffs. Urbanity he could not abide. Well, no coup avoids casualties, communications do get fouled up don't they? Not the least of his current chores was what bireme to secrete for himself -- in case. It was a complex and dicey situation. Thus the assured words of the cheeky actor before him, his chief court spy, continued to amuse if not entirely calm. Such a reliable gasbag. Almost diarrhetic. The obscenity a fine versatile balm.

“You cannot imagine. Poor dear Hespere sat their like a pigeon, dumb as the earth. A Maenad without a sausage. Hadn't the foggiest.”

Cerbes snorted, almost sorry he hadn't been there. “They didn't mutilate the body?” He was concerned the unstinting funeral they planned for the Regent -- to display the Nubian's ‘magnanimity’ -- might be crimped.

“Pretty as a potshard without a scratch. Took the poison the one Elder offered her easy as a lush on wash day.”

But Cerbes remained concerned. The actor, flecks of light blue-grey grease paint still clinging to his beard, shrugged. “Well the good celebrants had to fill in the time, didn't they? Dedicated biscuit rollers resent going back to the farm. A distraught Maenad puling into her wine was I

imagine a sight for very sore eyes. And buzzing ears. Suspected she might be the dupe who let the banshees in — didn't they. So, feeling a twinge of flatulence, they decided to exercise a modicum of unstinting charity and send her to Elysium. Or thereabouts. People do not fancy themselves as colossal asses."

Cerbes sighed but appreciated the man's wile. The tongue had a poison pressed creatures appreciate. "So. Poison. And?"

"So, a handful of nobles who can be relied upon to indulge themselves — feed the peacock to the pouch rat — took turns. With a little encouragement from the skirmishers. Naturally, we, gracious artists that we are, left at once." Then he got patronizing. "Oh don't look so peeved you yeasty old fart. A dear old gyp did all the prompting. All approved by Medju's forward brigade. A nice delivery I suppose if you like mummers. But if you are an old slobbering windbag you need help, don't you. Two sweet dear faggots — the butt of many of her jokes — got to do the rowing. Help the gummers find the clam. Even for what's his name the cripple. That was thoughtful. A regular tidal launch after that. Not your style at all."

Cerbes, still not satisfied, scowled, wagged a finger, but the actor was getting bored. "I told you I left. They probably went at her with sea shells, I don't know. You're the expert."

Cerbes bridled at this. "I'll have have your uvula if I find you've left anything out."

"I'm sure you will."



“What color was the hair?”

“Vanished in the mists of night. Such rapt visionaries we have.”

“On her head, roach.”

“Oh a fall of color, a rainbow absolutely. You know what these Maenads, especially the Thyiads, are like.” Then, sensing the Epopot’s limited patience — “Well there you are. Wrong girl entirely. Must have been the pithy Oracle.”

“And nothing of the fine Lady Zelea?”

Here the actor dropped his voice. “I told you — the last I saw sweet dear Nemanos, bless him, carted her off. Like some precious rug. Trust him to know the value of a nappy young Charity.”

Cerbes concluded the offhand comment about artists leaving early on was probably correct. The wise man would have fled, but a performer like this actor spy daren’t give satisfaction. He did mention the poison, the desecration mayhem that followed, and the intervention of Nemanos. He decided against a rebuke; he would need an eloquent shill in the forthcoming weeks. Whether the Glaean fur ball, as he thought of the fastidious Zelea, survived was the crucial question. It was for his own satisfaction he wanted the cat neutered, obliterated. She knew too much. Without her the Stalwarts would come around in time. As for the few surviving nobles who had tarried with or fawned over the Regent, they would be inconsolable. He had suggested Medju give them a day or two to stew in their simmering terror before finishing them off. Some would likely drown themselves or jump from the higher cliffs. The assault groups had surrounded

but not immediately entered the Palace grounds until the Imperial Guard lugged what loot they could from the royal apartments, where he understood they were slaughtered to a man -- in the Bull Court. Efficient that. Letting the natives find the select spoils. The Regent's sycophants left in the palace, mainly her Maenadic Thyiads — the Stalwarts did not attend such fêtes — were by then surrounded, frantic and insanely credulous. Sensing a possible reprieve they attempted to purge themselves. This reaction he'd seen before. The menaced toady is a serviceable scold, reviler and assassin. He rid himself of several old nuisances that day and kept his hands clean. The actor's comment about sea shells was not fanciful. On another island he'd seen a young sky caster carved to bits by an incensed mob. Of course the terrible residual guilt when the new day dawned would be another plus. The quislings, those who had given odds on the Egyptians, could be relied on the speak in the agora pliant as lambs: 'We did the best for the people; better the constricted life than a slave; a few dignified coffins than anonymous graves or scattered vulture strewn remains; rather a Tyrant than chaos, a sacrifice than ruin.' And what beautiful ruins Glaea would make.

Here Cerbes scowled. His enthusiasm sometimes overshot itself. The Nubian, he must never forget, was transfixed by the beauty of Glaean marble and state buildings and wanted to know who designed them. Therefore he, Cerbes the Epopt, the custodian of the ancient Minotaur ethos, must see to it the smart young mason's daughter perished and with her all bright young comers. She would ever be a thorn in his side if the Egyp-

tian learned of the existence of the daughter who closely assisted the celebrated builder! He hadn't banked on quiet circumspect Nemanos, of all people, making off with her. Nemanos would have friends on Thera. But as far as he knew he never got off the island. His beakles were diligently looking. He knew Zelea's charismatic reputation could again seduce if she lived. An esteemed widow, even beyond the court — who believed his awesome Minotaur a figment of crazed nitwits! Her very words. The Stalwarts had plainly recruited her to distract the Regent. They might have prevailed if the Egyptians hadn't come when they did. It was apparent, given the timing of the assault, she hadn't been warned. The actor would not have been so debonair describing her demise. Or would he? Cerbes scowled again. The anxiety would not let up. Having Nemanos, an Upper Hall Priest, on her side was a big disappointment. A likelihood he hadn't seen at all. She must be found before she or someone who would vouch for her got to the Viceroy. 'Flesh is flesh,' she was overheard saying to the minx they called the Swan. He would fit the wheel of necessity to any yoke of her choosing! He had provided the Viceroy some service and must strike before that acknowledgement waned.

## FOUR

Two days later the Egyptian-Nubian Viceroy Medju stood on the sun-baked roof of the palace with a score of squinting attendants, many languishing beneath their own pukah. The high entrance to the Citadel had yet to be breached. He was told a few Stalwarts had not left the old fort



and would fight to the death. His smoldering anger had suddenly changed to fearsome intent. If the miners could make no better headway, he would resort to strapping some of the remaining children on the imbricated shields used as protective roof covers by the sappers. Another wagon of the wounded snaked down the distant path, dust trailing like a shroud. “Where is that Seneschal?” he bellowed again. His Adjutant, a flinty Shar-dana, said again, “The man may well be searching for more wagons for the miners.”

“Well find him. We want a second attack before the sun clears the rampart.” He meant before the sun would be directly in their eyes.

It had been a costly siege, an entire company pinned to the acropolis slopes, the battering rams delayed by daring combatants who swung down from the walls and set the roof covers alight. The Viceroy had rarely seen such skill. Someone trained them well. He’d heard stories that Glaea might be taken only by returning Immortals and feared the fleet banshees — the supposed descendants of Titans — could fight forever! But he had always been impetuous, peppery, given to temper. By noon the second contingent of miners collapsed the spar holding the outer granary and the height was taken. The worst was over, though the plethora of wounded was unanticipated and too few surgeons lacked too many supplies. Something had happened to their wagons too! The Nubian was in an impaling mood. What was planned to take a few hours had taken nearly a week.

Then came news the Seneschal had pulled a bunk — stolen away on an opportune wind with much of the Regent’s treasure. Someone — a

very incensed Cerbes — had a report of a heavily laden penteconter sailing West in a dawn mist. The Viceroy centred his anger on the old conservative faction, the Stalwarts, who failed to deliver the North West entrance to the acropolis. The faction divided at the last minute -- wanting and willing to fight for the young King in lieu of the proposed Viceroyship after the Egyptian Pharaoh, the Grand Poobah, got his loot back. The companies of Hoplites who were expected to leave with Balo, be surrounded and disarmed at sea — the fleet of 30 biremes — stayed and fought instead ‘like Heroes’, a quip from his impassive Adjutant the superstitious Viceroy found ominous, especially if Balo wasn’t found and managed to get away with a few ships -- a late prospect for the main force had been anchored when they came. A belated tally posited six missing ships.

The Viceroy was awash too in the tempest of his own nervous diviners: the sea spawned mysterious putrid geysers in a shore grotto, the sun seemed some days to shy off its zenith, the early stars were indistinct, helm coursers got confused, the augers had never seen more ugly spleens. One harried priest suggested it was wise to withdraw after some of the dead lain out in a large stupa resurrected themselves, leaving only their bloody clothes, while more bodies vanished from a mass grave. A perimeter guard told one diviner of seeing a Satyr — with horn’s — and a cyclops. Meaning the presence of Daemons! Though when interrogated the guard admitted to seeing only a chap who looked like a Faun and a giant — but the Faun definitely had horns. The Viceroy was on the verge of having the man testify under torture when the upper spar fell and the Citadel fell

— to reveal only a handful of slain bodies. Where indeed had the rest gone? The Viceroy was, no question, in an impaling mood. By then Cerbes cowered behind various altars and in shrine Adytons fearing the latest summons his last. And to think the Seneschal had hornswaggled him even out of the pentaconter. He had anticipated none of this. A goose on a spit had more premonition. If the engineers and miners were finally successful, some believed it was not so much their tunnels that collapsed the upper ramparts but a series of small timely quakes! Acts of Hephaestus or Poseidon which even the skirmishers sensed! Small comfort. Such wanton meddling had an Olympian stamp. And what Egyptian would be at the mercy of a capricious Olympian? The Viceroy extolled the ingenuity of the sappers. To stay healthy one agreed. One must never underestimate a Greek's capacity for hypocrisy he told the Adjutant. Particularly a Greek god.

Whereas Zelea, as Thera would tell an Egyptian Chancellor much later, was nearly well and making sacrifices to Potnia, Glaea's original Magna Mater. (The sacrifice was actually to the latter-day Pallas Athena, but Thera knew the Chancellor's distrust of all upstart Olympians!) The Potnian Shrine priest Nemanos saw Zelea's painted tumbled form — she'd been knocked down by a gaggle of the Regent's fleeing Maenads — and hefted her over his shoulder, prompting Cerbes's actor spy to raise a brow. So! Even old trick null nuts (many of the older Potnian priests were or had served as Eunuchs) was going to snatch a valuable trophy or two before the shrine closed. But unlike the court's ranking sycophants — the



newly panicked looters and kill crazies — Nemanó knew the back stairs of the palace as well as the worth of an illustrious widow. The fact that he liked the woman, barely conscious when he found her, helped. Expediency and emotion readily meld. At this stage he trusted no one and made directly for the old Labyrinth. Medju's warriors could not block all entrances, only an old herald or store layer might manage that. He could think of no safer more accommodating place on the island at that time. He even smiled as he lumbered through the smoke laden gardens thinking the barricades about the main entrances would prevent them being disturbed in his own secret and well provisioned crypt, one of scores of tiny skewed rooms built long ago with swift joyful abandon...a shrine for one and all, a goddess or animus for the asking, an idyll of civic accord that eventually cost them all.

A reminder that his charge was alive, seamless and slippery was the jouncing cough through the smoke hazed gardens. For a time he worried she might not revive. Nemanó rarely acted impulsively, but had that night. Perhaps he instinctively knew he would be less an oddity if he too was seen making off with a choice spoil or two. Only now he seemed to recognize the wider import of the form over his shoulder. Clutching to steady the newly coughing figure caused him to eye a still, bloodied form whose unstained cape lay nearby. He did not recognize the man. He stopped briefly and cautiously twice more to gather what he thought appropriate — his charge was naked when he found her but for the stylized gilding — the last a sororal tunica and sandals, the luckless owner nowhere in sight.

By then his charge was conscious and wanted to stand up. She was still dazed and he quickly settled her over his shoulder again. “Best till we reach the wall,” he said to the bewildered face. “Believe me.” She seemed stupefied by his words and the surrounding chaos. “Best not to look up.” Even when they reached the wide porch of the garden wall she grimaced at his reassurance that it was indeed Medju and not some natural disaster. Only a distant line of skirmishers, seen as she sat on the railing, prompted a return to a sober wakefulness. “The bastard!” she said, just before smartly taking over his act of lacing the dangling sandals. He had the distinct feeling her sudden anger was meant for someone other than Medju.

Shunning further assistance she slipped to the stoney soil below the railing with an agility he found encouraging. She had scaled such walls before. In no time they slipped through the cedar maze to the fire dotted plain and reconnoitered the ancient looming ruins. She was by then reconciled to a discrete hideaway. “I won’t forget this, Nemanos.” Only when it was dark did they decide to broach the early vine covered entrance. He had decided to use the further and last cave mouth and was pleased to find that Medju’s marshals had neglected or dismissed the air wells as impractical passageways. But no sooner had they entered the endless close dark of the older workshop stalls then she strove to hold back, to return. She would never find her way out she said. He was impatient but knew the panic that gripped some people, especially at night when only the ancient guides knew their way through the skewed stone facings that seemed to fall in on one. Even during the day you relied on your priestess and lamp

bearer to bring you out. But with sufficient opium or ambrosial mushroom transporting the senses you didn't really care. His assurance now made little difference. He could hear her shuffling back toward the spiny of moonlight that remained at the entrance. She seemed resolved until a scream reached down into the tunnel as a coursing tentacle, followed by several more and the the scraping sounds of a tussle. The screams abruptly ended as multiple footsteps resonated on the floor above. Torches briefly livened the patina of an air well. This was folly she said. They would be discovered in no time. Nemanio was on the point of letting her go when he decisively grasped her wrist with one hand, gagged her with the other and stole deeper into the charcoal maze. Despite the richly oiled skin and frantic limbs he managed to proceed, prattling on as much to himself how in a pinch one might shimmy up one of the rabbit notched air wells. Several times she nearly slipped free only to bump her head on a beam or collide with an angled wall. After one dazed recovery she submitted to being led like a sorry child. Several times she swore aloud with a bitterness that didn't match the languid hand he held.

He stopped at last, she running into him, in a place where the air was sweeter, a fact he noted with tortured relief as her labored breathing continued and the redolence of the perfumed emollients vexed the senses. Pavilion images of the pretty ribs rising and falling briefly flared in his mind. He suggested in a sedate whisper that shrill sounds could find a way in and out even if pursuers could not. He begged her to trust him on this point. The network of adjoining cave tunnels was vast, bizarrely complex and in-



timidating. Many he had helped channel and reinforce himself. As long as you were quiet you could distance a pursuer. And finding a cache of stored food and drink in the sacked landscape would be a problem. He didn't tell her the vault they stood in aligned to a bypass that prevented someone smoking them out, or that in designing the corridor network he had made allowance for collapsing parts of the narrower channels — or that they skirted the reputed lair of the Minotaur to get where they were! He did tell her a falcon's nest sat by the nearest vent and sometimes the smell of carrion wafted in, but that he had ample food and drink, which he had augmented when rumors of Medju's commission reached the Upper Hall — gritty information that impregnated the silence. The following day they might venture outside to assay the disorder. He feared the most for those caught in or around the palace, and many likely were. He assured her he was as much concerned for her safety and well being as his own, that he believed she still had an indispensable role to play on Glaea despite the almost certain ruin of her household. He doubted any of her servants would have survived. He regretted he had nothing to offer her for the bruise on her head left by the frantic herding Maenads, an offer she acquitted with a token sigh. That was the least of her concerns she softly stated.

She appeared resigned to the crushing loss of her home and property and longtime servants. That Thera was a likely casualty she didn't pursue. The thought alone was a blow on a bruise. She did ask after Scheira, the Swan. She was aware Thera had stolen into the Corybant pavilion and be-

came so incensed by the goings on that she was willing to finger the unlucky Swan — who had apparently cosseted a skirmisher. “She must have misread Scheira’s actions and not recognized Balo,” Zelea quietly said to the attentive Nemanu. “Canaeus did ask Scheira to keep any stray Stalwart away. ‘Do what you can,’ I remember him saying. I think he still thought they might prevail.”

“You know she was being questioned when the first of Medju’s chargers reached the wall of the royal gardens.”

“Yes. I did see her run off -- just before the Maenads ran into me. I had left the Pavilion as had others to see what was going on.”

Her resumed silence Nemanu stoically accepted. The continued periodic and faintly audible shivering he presumed extraneous to the relative cool. The tunica was well made and extended to the knees. He had been with such people before. Enclosed, immured they shrivelled, some became palsied even, mute with misgiving. He knew how like a tomb the room must feel. Particularly one who’d been inside a tumulus or pyramid vault for an extended period. He asked her if she’d ever been to Luxor, his birthplace. She didn’t answer at first, then mentioned a Temple at Medinet Habu visited as a child with her father. She didn’t elaborate. His piquant recollection of warm oceanic sand and vast bracing sky he interrupted by saying he was tired and needed sleep. Wistfully she pronounced, “Sleep.”

The one matted bench he gave up to her, only to readily accede to her later plea to come and keep them both warm. Backing herself to his front

she sought crannies for cold feet in his heavy legs which prompted him to suggest he slept with a goddess because only ichor could be so frigid. The shivering abated a moment in a sullen laugh, his arm sensitive to her live waist. “You have absolutely no bloody idea,” she declared in a whisper hiss. He assumed she referred to her tryst with the Regent. “Not as marvellous as claimed then,” he couldn’t resist adding. She wryly laughed. “The claws of a feral cat may be easier to endure. Have a good night.”

Slowly they succumbed to sleep, she wondering what eventually happened to Scheira, Thera, the shrine’s alter children, some of the Potnians, thinking also of learning the way out, of what reward he might anticipate for his pains and how long she might wait before approaching the new Viceroy whose Epopst stooge would impugn her, and may have impeded the Potnian sent to warn her. She had met the stately Medju in Egypt with her father and remembered how enthralled he was by Glaean structural design and the mural stones and gems Glaean artists, one in particular, worked into pristine Glaean motifs. She believed she would get a sympathetic hearing. But the Viceroy would have to see to his voracious mercenaries first. She tended to agree with her self-assured rescuer: if she ventured out too soon she could find herself the inadvertent property of a Kush slaver or worse.

The canny Nemanio in turn thought of the heady slippery camphors she exuded and whether he could maintain his insular status. Ten years ago it would have been a problem. His pretense of celibacy served to acquaint him with the Eunuchs who managed the sensitive assignments —



the necessity of adroitly serving in all chambers of the realm. His reputation for discretion and prudence served him well over time. He had rescued unfortunates before, and went to sleep musing how disgust — in his case the deeds of the Regent's infatuates — sustained decency. In his exhaustion and desperation he could only wonder at this exploit — the impulse not to leave her behind. His dismay perhaps at witnessing her protracted ordeal goaded him not to lay her aside. After hefting her flaccid form over his shoulder, an instinct for survival and escape led him to use her as a screen — just another busy thief, no one to fear or doubt — until free the palace rampage. She in turn, hoarding his warmth, realized she'd never prayed so to Potnia before and wondered if they lay in one of her shrines. There was more. Rarely did she not have several plans co-active in her mind. As she reappraised his reserve, tenacity, and his late act of errantry — he would be safer and freer here alone — one idea kept evolving to a completion that both teased and satisfied. Yes, she thought, in her wakeful edgy state, it might be fortuitous after all. She suspected all along he was not quite what he seemed. In wanting to know the disposition and habits of the powerful at court she had spent many minutes observing him, a couple of times on the sly, and concluded he was an occasional Valerina user, a fact he took pains to conceal. He sometimes mixed it with an extract from the Amanita toadstool. She knew Valerina had a calming effect on the imbiber, and suspected the toadstool ingredient augmented its potency. The red topped toadstool was a regular intoxicant in the Regent's sequestered adoration rituals. And he wrestled — a sport no

Eunuch she knew bothered with. Particularly one as old as he was reputed to be. Another conundrum about him — his knowledge of past events, even those involving beings not generally accepted as mortal — gave him a timeless presence. She suspected it was an act he carefully researched and adroitly performed. He had always been solicitous around her and took a proprietary interest in warding off meddling and bumptious suitors, again not something your average gelding would take up without prompting. She remembered now seeing him feigning disinterest as he cautioned a particularly randy group of tricksters, one called the Herms, during an early civic fête. A look her husband seemed engraved with toward the last. Desire screened by care.

It was a surprisingly happy plan too, the more she considered it, with its adroit handling of Glaean custom, and Egyptian protocol for that matter, leaving her newly, expectantly at peace, rendering sleep possible after all. How odd. She remembered too that he had also been there, just outside the Tripartite Shrine's pillar crypt, when the Thyiads rehearsed in the long skirts. Her initial tryout with the sect. Had he not handed out the woollen remnants they daubed their arms and faces with? She wondered if he could sense her smiling now. He had taken the trouble this night when he would have fared better on his own, at least beyond the garden. How tempting it must have been to let her quit the Labyrinth. Such discrete handling — in extremis. She was halfway through the orchard before she realized she was not in danger of abduction. The thought amused her, given her new resolution and plan. Once more she sighed

and pulled his hand tighter about her. The timing was crucial, haste a necessity even. But his regular breathing defused the urgency. A night or two would make little difference, and he would surely welcome a calm, concordant explanation. So convinced she finally closed her eyes. Her final prayer was for her selfless servant and the canny avid Swan. The inference that Balo may have come to the palace was the special heartbreak. Had he learned that no one warned her? He was one Stalwart, a much decorated warrior, the Regent came to distrust and finally had ostracized. Coming as he did, if he did, was a great risk. It was the chief worry — lack of consensus among the Stalwarts. A few believed the Egyptian would come regardless and a settlement, however stern, was better than a rout — and that they were better positioned to deal with Medju than the dissolute Regent. Why some elected at the last minute to resist was the enigma. Perhaps they had listened to Canaeus after all -- the one Elder who believed Potnia would not abandon Glaea. He and Balo had hatched the idea of ‘the Lady Zelea musing the Maenad’ who was slowly defrauding and fragmenting the polis. Yet the final bloodletting seemed hardly the less. Her own plight paled by comparison. The former Glaean Commander General must be awash with grief and anger.

Indeed, Balo was not pleased to see the many offshore transports at anchor, meaning they were likely there to stay, and vexed he’d not recognized the mercenaries Medju used to take the Citadel and palace. Their armor was unusual, many helmets of boar tusks, leather leggings and



round shields of stout hides, exceptional foot anchors for the horsemen, and again the broader slashing style sword he had come to respect. The faces too were unusual — mainly Northerners, he presumed — Shardana from Sardinia, Lycia, Laconia. The darker skinned, Libyan and Nubian. A varied bunch. But fierce and well commanded. The presence of a few Egyptian Lictors perhaps explained the wanton use of fire, especially in the villages, and scorpions in the palace gardens — less a means of containment or threat than shrill insult — the enemy as infectious and insect-like. He too had read the prodigal stelae with their Execration Texts. Fires still smoldered in the Citadel and the narrow descending plain before it. They must have come with lavish stores to burn so much so soon. The terrible realization that most of his missing companies had stayed and fought heroically and tragically stewed like a canker in his bowels. A few of the Stalwarts must have collaborated...the first skirmishers knew of the wider chimney to the top, were not lacking for horses, meaning a major betrayal in the shore watch and hippodrome. He'd never seen such a force, all at the behest of a indignant Pharaoh. Making the value of the treasure Typhon stole truly exceptional. That it could incite such vengeance, galvanize such resource...he was not entertained. Funeral spoils launching an argosy!

His Lieutenant Crino underlined the stalemate: "We'd better move again. First thing. And we'll have to ferret out more food soon." They didn't talk about the two companies that failed to make the rendezvous nor the designated ships in the main fleet, none of which got away from

the island, though the crafty Seneschal assigned one or two penteconters for himself! Balo felt the pall as the dog days of Sirius. The Imperial Guard he rightly assumed was long in cahoots. Only to pay with the lives! But they were not real soldiers, rather a pack of tended vultures, so unlike the imperturbable denizens on the shore below.

“Big bastards, every one of them.” Crino had noted the size of the warriors before. Balo kept trying to identify some aberration of scale from his vantage but could find none. Beside the smaller bearers and traders the men were huge. A head taller at least. Yet the audible snatches of talk belied anxiety, the cadences buoyant, expectant, so unlike the spare quips between him and his Lieutenant. “Like cyclops with two eyes. And not a scratch.” “I didn’t know you’d seen a cyclops.” “They’re supposed to be big.”

What also disturbed was the absence of captives. Nowhere about the shore was there evidence of confinement, nor for that matter sign of real damage. They obviously arrived handily, expediently. The soldiers conversed with the few civilians openly, even it seemed amiably. The quislings Balo presumed. The whole scene a battle fleet at anchor for rest and replenishment of stores — were it not for the stinking casualties in and around the palace and Citadel. A stranger here might imagine a layover en route to a distant war.

“Seems we missed something.”

Balo was showing signs of fatigue. He recognized no Glaean in the jaunty throng.

“It’s as if we don’t exist.”

Balo remained silent, usually the prelude his Lieutenant knew to decisive orders. He also knew that the Commander was doing his damndest to think of something.

## FOUR

Cerbes was at first alarmed by the banging on the main entrance door. He had just lain down, just put his burning eyes and wrenched mind to rest. He had not slept for days. He glanced out the breezeway. Still black as pitch. Not a civil call then. The banging resumed and with it the terrible miasma. His spies would not report before noon. Those he might trust came through the garden. Or called through the breezeway. But called first! The banging continued. Cautiously he glanced down from the loggia to see a group of statues limned in the starlight — rather a handful of citizens, nobles, but no Shardana. Not from the Viceroy’s horde then. Another bang, louder this time. He opened a shutter and called out, “What do you want?” The voice below was strong but hoarse, the sound of a stiff broom. “It’s Nemanio. It’s important you come with us. I’m not at liberty to say why. You are in no danger. Bucolion and Canaeus are here. They believe it’s crucial you come.”

He was inclined to tell them all to go to hell. He didn’t much care for any of them. Stewpot Canaeus in particular got his goat with all this shrill talk of havoc. Still, the veteran Councilman had balked at the last minute, slighting the plans for the coup. Nemanio, the Potnian Upper Hall priest, a



wily old smoothie, seemed a key player in the transition. He was often if belatedly sought by both sides in a dispute. Perhaps he shouldn't be slighted. Though what was meant by 'danger' remained problematic. He slipped the himation he slept in over his shoulder, helped himself to a kylix of wine, and took a deep breath before descending the stairs.

The gritty torch-lit scene that greeted the group after a desultory hike -- in one of the ancient outdoor shrines that faced East and now a first blush of dawn -- had a comic aspect, despite the smell of charcoal, suppurating wounds, animal and human ordure that tested Cerbes' anemic sense of humour. Levity for him usually meant contributing to the insolvency of his critics. The centre of a ring of spearmen, two of them taking a leak, the Nubian sat on a weathered rump of dais as on a loo, his big teeth and eye whites sinister against the livid sky. Glaucus, the physician stood apart, warming himself by a tripod brazier. His assistant Selli, with the timeless limp, approached. "We need two of your medicines, Cerbes. Quite urgently. The ointment for foot splinters I think, and the tonic for the blood." Cerbes must have sniggered. The earnest man turned to the physician who remained aloof. Cerbes looked in vain for a clue. "A lame ox cannot wait till morning?"

"No ox," said Selli. "Please, I'll accompany you there and back."

The Nubian then rose and approached, palming the head of a broken statuette, a child's head. "Glaucus took a look and thinks it's bad." He motioned for Glaucus to come forward. He and Medju exchanged glances. Said Glaucus, "If I go it reveals our concern." Again he and

Medju briefly eyed one another. “It’s likely too early to know if we ought to — care. We’ve had casualties and are short of medicine. My, our team is swamped.” There was real bitterness in these words. Medju gruffly spoke up. “The companies you believed would follow Balo fled into the cloud forest.” He didn’t tell the Eopt they were much diminished in number and had sued for a truce with minimum guarantees. The pause that followed was electric. Another of the Eopt’s ready assurances had fallen short and sickened. Said a chary Cerbes, “Balo was not found then.”

Medju smoldered. “Balo ran like a singed pig. A captured helmsman said so. After a time. With a fraction of your estimate. I think you better go. I’m told she’s strong as a horse.” It was apparent what was going on within the ancient shrine ruins. A voice cried out, a voice under torture. The Viceroy returned to palming the marble head. The image brought a shudder to Cerbes: he had helped the Regent dispose of the young King. Whose head was about the size of the marble facsimile the Libyan dandled.

Still, it was all clear as mud. He could not imagine why the bullish Medju would want him attend a woman, a priestess perhaps. It seemed a plot, opening with a fine jest — sending a former cattleman to attend an injured woman. She must be important. But who? From all reports the Regent herself was dead. He was not about to ask; he had told the burker where she hid. If she were alive -- the thought itself nettled him — it meant what? She found some last minute nugget to pawn, some squirreled treasure the Viceroy coveted? Or she’d been in touch with her Luvi-

ans all along who were poised to strike. Perhaps the Viceroy had a change of heart and wanted her paraded in the agora? His mind was a maggot heap. Yet he could easily flee the lone escort — the small man with the limp. Was that a test as well? And where would he go? As Medju glowered Cerbes bowed and shuffled out behind the cripple who was anxious to leave, and who became more galling and unenlightening as he rattled on about the casualties they'd sustained — for no good reason. The Egyptians were not pleased he said. A royal cousin to a treasurer in Heliopolis had been killed. Fortunately the body was given the minimal rites and not allowed to rot like so many of the others.

When they had fetched the balm and tonic and entered the ruins of one stoa in the agora portico the sun peered over the horizon, a ghostly eye in the lingering veils of smoke. He was lead in a roundabout way past dour sentries to what may have been a baker's shop. Within the overhang of a rain cover lay a severely injured figure on a narrow couch — one of the campaign pieces if he was not mistaken. Stave torches still dipped and flared in the breeze. The stoa had been looted but was not as damaged as others in the portico. The image of a modest mosaic loomed behind. Nearest them a robust woman wrung out a stained rag near a tripod cauldron. Immediately Cerbes sense mischief, culpability and kept back. A dressing cloth covered the hips of the prone figure, more he imagined for propriety than necessity because at first, in his overloaded brain, he saw a handsome lad with a botched circumcision — the Regent had liked her Herms contoured and sweet smelling. After a caustic double take and fear



he was indeed losing his marbles, he noted the small incisive cuts, of similar manner and degree over much of the body — on the sinewy body of the Regent no less, not he suspected ‘strong as a horse’. He looked at Selli who had gone up to the attendant and said they might help. Cerbes, recognizing her as the magisterial Mistress of the Dance, an Amazon and the reigning Corybant whip, whistled under his breath. Her face and arms were also scored in the livid slashes. An ugly dressing covered one ear. Selli glanced at Cerbes. He too remembered that Medju had ordered his army skirt the palace, let the terrorized sycophants stew a bit. They had not been warned. It seemed fantastic this might be the result. Unlike Selli, Cerbes squinted to read the eerie scene. Did they rely on him to botch this job too, thus put the death of the woman on his head? Medju was a clever worm. The sullen Corybant looked him up and down. Selli too seemed puzzled by her humor and said, “We’ve brought some medicine. The best we can do. I’m certain Cerbes can help.” The Amazon wiped at straggled hair. “Such busy men,” she quipped to the Regent as she pathetically daubed the face, an act strangely insouciant, Selli thought, given the urgent tasks. He was not pleased. Cerbes snorted and grew suddenly belligerent. With derisive clipped speech he instructed Selli on the use of the medicine, placed the package on the floor by the door, turned and smartly left. How base, craven and unprincipled he seemed to say — adopting Selli’s demeanor. To imagine they might involve, implicate him, think him that anxious.

Selli went to the door, cursed and signalled a stone faced guard. He returned, stroked his beard, studied the strangely lacerated form, lamely said, "It must do something. The Viceroy instructed him." With growing diffidence he unpacked the first of the offerings, a smelly stone jar, more putrid when the lid was off. After a painful protracted moment he concluded, "I don't think this will do. I must go back to Glaucus."

But in studying the cuts he had not apprized breathing. Cerbes, he realized, had been too far back. Perhaps for good reason. He suddenly felt a great fool, and willing gull. The woman was dead, her once munificent chest at rest, languid as a forgotten slurry. He had to stop himself searching for a pulse. The Amazon, noting his dismay, spoke as if addressing a quorum. "She must be lain out in the agora for all to see. You can tell the Viceroy he will especially benefit from that -- seeing how vengeful her own followers were. We will see she's properly set out." Selli tried not to stare at the stained cloth that covered the loins. He could not fathom the mentality capable of such barbarism. It appeared deliberately done for effect. He even detected a pattern to the cuts. The frenzy of vengeance this precise, methodical? The more he looked the more incredible the cadaver became, the very covering a clever ruse. His mind raced and curdled. This was not the work of crazed fiends, incensed slashers. The repeated outline of a horn, the Double Sacral Horn, neatly incised in the flesh! He gasped. The symbol was the late icon of the male the new Corybants loathed -- the instrument that split the imagination they claimed, even metamorphosis itself -- the advent of the weaponed phallus, the immutable and mon-

strous defiler! The belligerent kingship! As a wimp he knew the jargon well. The idea came as a burn: the Corybants had done the hacking themselves, to serve their touted pain at the rise of kingly primacy — to salvage their eccentric but equanimous sect, make the populace grieve with them! He was suddenly furious and grabbed the woman's peplos, attempting to tear a piece away to see if a live person could suffer such a totality. But she was too strong and beat him back about the head with unexpectedly fierce blows. He found himself shouting, screaming for the guards who entered seconds later with Cerbes in tow. The woman spat at them, curled her lip and lashed out at the nearest guard, loosening his chin strap. The others raised their javelins but Selli managed to defuse the moment by selflessly upending their points. The woman, luminous now, spat again, then astonished, took their breath away by releasing her heavy girdle to flail at the guards who shied away speechless and in turn sardonic and suspicious. The beauty of such creatures was legendary but never before glimpsed so candidly by this gaggle of soreheads. The bandage over one ear proved false and readily came off. Unlike the Regent, the cuts on her arms and shoulders were painted on. The glimpsed skin beyond lay smooth and unblemished as a young olive, the muscles lean and firm as any fabled huntress. The guards stood mesmerized, snickering as she defiantly lashed out, stolidly deflecting the blows. Askant, Selli sensed pending catastrophe and ordered her covered and close confined. One guard drolly smiled. 'You first,' he seemed to say. The Amazon spat at each while dismissing their armour, testing their javelins, none able to keep them steady. Her deft blows



to ears and neck kept them off balance, flummoxed, barmy. The first helmet tumbled off after yet another nimble swipe. Cerbes smirked as Selli shied away and the Corybant approached. “The one impotent bull on Glaean,” she said to Cerbes, who started, caught himself. “Laughable,” he managed to blurt. Selli leaned against the wall holding his head. The guardsmen listed as craning dogs, mouths slack, groans plaintive as they sought a waiver, a breach. “The busy gods,” the Siren Corybant bandied. Selli tended to agree yet kept silent. It was then Cerbes turned and left. Eyeing the jumpy Epopt, the Corybant taunted, “You have no choice.” But Selli had figured it out: a mutilated Regent in the agora reviled the heady excuse for the coup; yet without a public accounting and funeral the loyal remnant of the Glaean army in the forest might think the Regent had escaped, was perhaps an Immortal as she claimed, and was recruiting vigilant Therans and Luvians, all of whom opposed Egypt -- and who would better suffer a Glaean army than an Egyptian. The fact the fearless woman chose not to voice the dilemma also taunted; she was derisively saving her breath.

When it looked she might force a stalemate one of the guards struck her with a stone. They were on her at once when she slipped on the sandy floor. It took a while. Finally they knocked her out, her limbs too turbulent to bind. Selli watched with disgust and fascination as the ‘Herms’ zealously took their turns -- strangely punctilious on who was next. He too in the end managed to thrust into her several times, lustily furious that such beauty and resource should exist so invincibly beside his affliction. His cra-

ven desire was so suddenly overwhelming he even overlooked the two who made free with the Regent's body, finding the sex whole and unmarked beneath the 'telltale' cloth. Was there not a ringing solace too in seeing the heartless and unruly Maenad dangled on the couch?...

Eventually he and the guards lay or listed against the walls as spent hurdlers, the Corybant coming round, holding her head, hissing. Selli was too perplexed to anticipate or prevent the finale. With ineffable reserve the Corybant rose to her knees, calmly drew an obsidian blade from a swath in her torn tunica untouched where it fell and, shrieking as a banshee, slit her breasts then her throat, having to make two passes before the voice strangled and blood spurted. He witnessed the awful act stupefied, pole-axed. A few townsfolk who'd been cowering nearby, on hearing the final searing cries, fled pell-mell, terrified. The word spread like a plague — the Viceroy's soldiers were sacrificing, vivisectioning the beautiful Corybants! By the time he resisted attempting to staunch the gushing blood an angry mob began pelting stones through the door and casement windows. All the guardsmen took hits. One missile pithed an eye. Seen perhaps as throttling the Amazon, Selli was knocked senseless by a club-wielding smithy. Miraculously he was spared the worst, his cripple status somehow tempering the outrage, else someone had intervened.

Blood lay everywhere in sodden puddles when he came to, the bodies of the Regent and her Mistress of the Dance long gone, the bodies of the guardsmen dismembered. Glaucus bent over him exercising a professional patience as he pushed a severed head with wild frozen eyes out of the way.

“All in good time old chap.” Selli made a death gurgle, brought up bloody phlegm. “There, there.” Almost as much to himself the physician continued talking, as though he too wanted to get it straight. “Seems you were quite brilliantly set up. Wonder you’re alive. One of the Corybants — one that survived — told me the Regent was here and needed assistance. We still don’t know how she died. The designated burker said he broke her neck — or thought he had. The body was mutilated. They have plans for their failed eidolon and her surviving troupe of inamouratas. They’re now centre stage in the agora. All hell to pay I can tell you. The Therans have demanded a full accounting of the protracted siege. Medju’s enraged. A crucial grain shipment may be withheld. Think you’d better make yourself scarce before the Viceroy hears the full story. His own mercenaries are bloody restless.”

Selli swallowed yet appeared to absorb the brisk narrative as Glaucus continued.

“They’ve been clever. I’ve just seen a similar case and heard of one more. All dead before the incisions were made. To get the stark edge to the patterned cuts. Two fine ruses I think. A ‘popular’ ruler defiled by the vengeful Stalwarts. The Egyptians urged to seek out said defilers and show no mercy. How to foil, perplex your enemy.

At last the patient managed to sit up, almost as a slicked calf. Nothing seemed to work.

“Come on son, I’ve found you a wagon. Now that was miraculous.”



As Glaucus intimated in his spare monologue, the remaining Corybants were triumphant, enjoying a widespread sympathy they craved in vain while the Regent lived. The Egyptians had not protected her — the condition for her honoring their hegemony! It was the first order of news Nemano communicated to Zelea in their hideaway, to the flickering smile of anticipation he knew by then well. Overnight the Viceroy agreed to the building of a stately tumulus, to the Regent being laid out in a richly aproned skirt and vest with beautiful gold discs fashioned into a halter, her Mistress of the Dance beside her in brilliantly banded and checkered tunica, the Dead March longer and more lavish than ever. The Viceroy's deputy walked in the procession with the sect's Archon. Said talkative Glaucus to Selli a fortnight later while inspecting a shoulder dressing. "The troupe of Corybants are stronger now than ever. The Regent's few remaining Maenads are now all Corybants — who are now all female. Even the Potnians seem bent on reconciliation. And the Viceroy knows it and needs all the popular support he can muster to run the place. A bunch of shrewd nervos the lot, I'd say, ostraca at the ready for the carpers. And it looks as if the Lady Zelea, yes the same, now heads the younger Potnians. A few Stalwarts escaped with their lives — those who managed to get her to intercede on their behalf." Like many arch physicians, whimsy for Glaucus was a professional emollient. "An optimist might think we got off lightly — with so many scattered cadavers and Cerbes none the wiser. A mock threnody you might say. Most of Cerbes acolytes were skewered in parts of the Old Labyrinth. They panicked appar-

ently and provoked the mercenaries, who someone said were paid extra by the Corybants. The remaining nobles cower mainly on the islands but will return, tame as ever. An impromptu mystery initiation, no?”

And so it was: the new Council confirmed Viceroy Medju as Tyrant who, sufficiently enamored of Glaean harbour and seafaring smarts, elegance of palace, Kuretes Theatre and the Potnian Shrine — what remained of it — and some outlying public buildings, Zelea’s villa included, which was damaged but not devastated. He decreed a truce with all citizens not related to the Stalwarts that fought in the Citadel, the remaining goods and chattels of these citizens infrangible according to the old law. “Much of the Acropolis,” Glaucus continued, “will have to be rebuilt of course, and the Nubian maven, so help me, seems eager to get at it. The marble and gypsum facings seduced an Egyptian builder a decade earlier on a trading mission apparently. Medju was the adjutant in his security detail. The Pharaoh at the time was impressed with the builder’s ‘inspired’ designs and awarded him accordingly. Ambitious, toadyish and unctuous Medju took note on one means to flatter potentates.” He helped a grimacing Selli reposition a new sling. “I should add that the burial treasure Cerberes was to retrieve has not been recovered -- but for a few insignificant pieces. Some not even from the original cache apparently. Medju is not happy with Cerberes. Rumor has it that Typhon secreted the lion share elsewhere. That’s better I should think.” Selli wryly smiled. “Mind you, the new — new! — Seneschal believes Medju is over his impaling mood, not that anyone...incidentally, he’s found that Upper Hall chap, forgot his

name, useful as an emissary to all camps apparently. The man does have a certain presence. Nemanio — that's the chap. I doubt he's the real thing but no one's asking the daunting question right now. I think the late Regent, peace be upon her soul, was surprised at the trust he engendered — which heaven knows she craved for herself when she wasn't salivating over some rib." He stood to appraise his handiwork while tucking in a fold. "Well, whenever you feel up to it." Oddly, Selli looked preoccupied and Glaucus was getting impatient. Said the heedful assistant, "I still haven't heard what happened to Cerbes. Did you leave him out on purpose."

Glaucus beamed. "Oh yes, old disc toes. Actually, Cerbes is the one surviving pariah. The Viceroy needs him for a few nasties. The man is a veritable pisspot unto himself. And heavens know pisspots are necessary. They say he's always constipated. Those mysterious jars he had in his reliquary have disappeared. The ones reputed to be full of human organ meat. Thereby hangs a tail." Selli stood at last and while clenching his teeth flexed his arm. He seemed surprised it moved at all and duly smiled. "So. Not a total cripple after all." Looking at the satisfied Glaucus he added, "The Viceroy stuck me as very superstitious. Cerbes better find Typhon. And good luck to the Lady Zelea. She seems our main hope."

Glaucus hummed. He'd been one of the disappointed suitors. "You too, eh? Well, not to worry. There's a rumor she got knocked up during the siege. A Shardana Satyr didn't discriminate against 'boys'."

With this news Selli sat down again. "She's not a boy."



\*

\*

\*

\*

Zelea took in Nemanos's optimistic news without comment. A cagey customer he decided. Hardly surprising given the speculative nature of her new life. She was grateful Thera found shelter with an older priestess in the Adyton of the Heraion. She now worked as a fuller at the Potnian market stalls. Zelea got word to her that she too had survived, but would be a while working out a time to meet. 'I know you can be patient,' she said in her note. The watching, waiting, listening, considering, reckoning, judging the new regime would take a while. Within a day or two she knew the layout of their section of the Labyrinth like a bat. He'd never known one so quick — or so wary, circumspect. Her lust for anonymity he mused was unladylike. She retorted, "Slinking about all day, hiding in abandoned farm sheds, sticking a fish under your girdle — protective 'myrrh and frankincense' in one. Yes, unladylike." Placidly he said, "My father was a fisherman. We rarely went wanting. It's a smell you get used to, even appreciate." She regarded him as she would a quipster.

Shunning the two remaining fountain houses she washed herself and her clothes only in the ocean — at night. "I feel like a stray animal at day's end." He came along as a lookout, held a dry tunica and sandals, some overcast nights joining in. She believed it still too dicey to resume appearing herself in the port's resurrected portico let alone the agora. Her reason was succinct: "Cerbes is still at large."

"The Viceroy asks after you. He seems concerned you may have per-

ished — won't be around to fill in for your father, point to the singularities.”

After a protracted silence she asked if the Viceroy had warmed to Cerbes' notion of resurrecting the old Minotaur sacrifice.

“Please be assured, the Viceroy's adjutant has a team hunting down Cerbes former acolytes -- the ones Cerbes used for the grisly assignments. They remain a maniacal, unpredictable sect. Cerbes could barely control them in the end; indeed, he may be slyly pointing them out — in hopes of saving his own skin. He's quite unprincipled, and hardly in a position to threaten anyone. As for his Minotaur obsession, Medju's only interest is in seeing some vintage bull grappling and acrobatics. I think only you might assure him those feats only exist mainly on the murals he's so fascinated with.”

“Not a task I want to undertake, at least not yet.”

“I wouldn't wait too long before resurrecting yourself. He does ask after you and has instructed his adjutant to keep an eye out.”

She did listen carefully to his own minute appraisal of life in the new court, especially the manner of dress and deportment which, he knew, revealed much about the political maneuvering. She knew how to keep the folds of a chiton portentously extravagant or insularly discreet, the braids of a coiffeur laced with intent. By then he had taken up his own order's cares as well as an advisory role in the palace. His reputation as impassive and trusted sage seemed sturdy as ever. As such, he finally convinced Zelea to pay the Viceroy an unofficial visit. After the second of these, she re-

turned to her villa, her fortunes newly auspicious, for it was soon acknowledged the Viceroy had discovered a 'wellhead of Glaean beauty, charm and sophistication' -- so her newly reinstated servant Thera bruited among gossips on the porch of the lower fountain house. What was meant of course was that Medju could spell some of his cares by concentrating on Glaean esthetics -- its pictorial motifs and architectural structures, reasserting his fond self-image as a quintessential 'fine arts' pontiff, one gifted with empyrean perception and impeccable taste. One way a former small town policeman crafted his stature among the self-centered elite here and in Egypt. He even sent to Egypt, to the Chancellor himself, for an upgrade in refurbishment expenses. Nemanio was heartened if also saddened. The silvery minnow he had come to cherish was robust enough to leave the grotto. Their lovemaking had become for him an idyll only poets broached. Which began the second week in the Labyrinth — the week she first ventured out on her own. Her face, lit by the lamp on the wall hob, framed the placid smile just inside the low threshold when she came. Confident she was vigilant, he nevertheless insisted they maintain a protocol for their coming and going. One or the other would signal from the entrance outcrop an all clear in the morning; a stone left near the base of a particular pine tree meant a safe return.

Once safely ensconced in their 'crypt' their customary banter usually fleshed out the habits of the Viceroy. His mood, direction and wondrous superstitions. One night she sought counsel and assistance for a plan of her own. She had just witnessed a Potnian reunion in the shrine's olive or-



chard. She had one or two doubters there but the Elders expected and welcomed her back. They were unusually influential then as they paced the remaining orders of priestesses for the Viceroy. Said she, “One should not underestimate his awe. We Glaeans might be a line of numinous Egyptian cats or frogs! The main problem is we haven’t many toothsome ‘kerers’ left. They’ve all ‘croaked’ you might say. Sorry. Smiling at her own wording and his unfeigned amusement she sat by him on the lone bench, which had been more comfortably settled with added bedding and, taking up one of his heavy hands, stated that she hoped they might begin where her father left off by adding a treasure centred thesauros to the Acropolis and a new larger megaron to the palace. She waited for this to sink in then added that the Viceroy was himself eager to begin restoring the Glaean polis. This she had first learned from a Potnian priestess. She anticipated returning to her villa within a fortnight. In the new Court she would need as much patronage as he could find among the Viceroy’s entourage and especially the Potnians at the newer Heraion Shrines. Their elders would bend the ears of the remaining Stalwarts and the Regent’s remaining shills and snufflers. She paused in her narrative a couple of times, given to the absorption he had begun to appreciate, as if within the oil flame itself the future played handsomely before her. Her forthcoming words did not let him down.

“The incontrovertible fact, and you are the only one who will know, is that I can’t stand the lout. The overweening Medju. But he’s part of the fabric, scratchy but there it is. I doubt anyone can wear him out. The solu-

tion, therefore, is quite simple. It came to me the first night we huddled together. I do think it will serve all round. I've even put out a rumor to that effect. Yes." She smiled, mainly to herself he thought, before continuing. "If, after you hear me out you want no part of it, I will do my best to understand." Again she paused, lacing her fingers in his hand. "Oh my. This is difficult as I imagined. And as necessary. So. To the point. If I were to conceive a child now, this very night say, it would seem to be a result of the pillage and I would be free of the Viceroy, who doesn't like his consorts 'fragrant' before hand, and the many suitors who believe women may be assaulted but never impregnated without their consent — once carelessly pregnant you are ever overlooked by the holdouts. More or less. Yet being ravaged in a siege gives one a serviceable excuse. Damaged goods but not a harlot. My early -- but not I trust — unfounded rumor." At the slight shake of his head, again in acknowledgement not demurral, she took her cue. "It seems the poor suitors are too often the sweetest, the well off ones always rather cross. But neither welcome a bastard up front. At least until their rivals declare themselves. And that takes — blessed be the Fates -- time! Before you interrupt me I must tell you I don't want to marry. Just so. I've been a wife and it can be pleasant enough but you simply disappear. And don't look so earnest — you of all people know very well what I mean. My goodness, sheltered life can be a pain. You become a weaver, a waiter, a wailer and I won't belabor what else." She took his watchful silence as a signal of interest if not approval. "Ask any of the Potnians. They'll tell you I was never any good as a weaver. My noble late

husband had the patience of Nemesis. And the gall.” She put down his hand and stood, the flickering light caressing her as she walked slowly back and forth before him. “Thera told me years ago you had a daughter. With a priestess. Both, she thought, died when the woman went into labor. So if I don’t conceive we’ll know who’s likely to blame.” He was still quietly attentive and suavely amused, a posture she easily ignored. “With a child I’ll get some sympathy, enough to buy some time, and little incapacitating adulation -- I kid you not. You are, I trust, as potent as any man I respect, and you have the added charm of being my favorite human right now, Thera being a close second — and what’s crucial, given your asceticism and temperance — an improbable father. In so many words.” She smiled and glanced his way, satisfied with his faintly shaking head. “The important thing — I must conceive the child soon, else the pregnancy looks post pillage. And that would be, well, unforgivable — to a durable reputation.” She stood before him then toying with a fold of the himation. “I propose to meet you here as many nights a week as possible until Glaucus confirms my condition. An orchard or meadow would be nice but it is certainly safer here. While our luck holds. Perhaps tomorrow you can get an extra fur or two. And after, if you like, I’ll be your secret hetaera for as long as you want. It would be a perfectly happy arrangement with me.”

But his silence and distinct hand stroking his chin began to wear.

“Oh dear. Have I misread the signs? Has the late Regent’s gaze been a curse after all? A recruited shill ever after a shill?”



After a further brief delay he responded without engaging her eyes. “A modest enough demand. Highly flattering also.” He looked up as she silently calmly waited. “The child could be teased. That can be trying. Would Thera help care for such an orphan?”

Her reply was prompt. “Of course.”

“Will she share your secret?”

“Much later perhaps. A Councilman’s widow told Thera the night of the attack she saw her lady carried off by one of the raiders. They were together in the Adyton. I’ve told Thera the ‘raider’ tripped looking back at the fire and I whacked him with a field stone, then hid in the forest. I doubt she believes the whole story, and may not be surprised finding me pregnant. The widow is very fearful and now lives in the Potnian alms house. She looked on Thera as a daughter I think.” She stood before him then, hands neatly folded beneath her chin. “I am indebted to you and I know the perils. Though I think you can trust me to make them mine not yours.”

Almost at once she regretted the prim remark, his stoic shrug a measure of his resignation.

“Oh dear. It’s a long time since I thought with any certitude of, well, a deferential male. My late husband was essentially a buccaneer. Which I ought to know by now you are not.”

It was apparent his studious apprehension she hadn’t anticipated. That he might vent a concern for the three of them took her by surprise. If she considered the likelihood, it had been too easily dismissed. Now she was

beginning to wonder if there were more to being an Upper Hall priest than he would readily acknowledge — the care of an orphan for instance. And she was more than a little miffed she had so misjudged the reception of her quite clever and, as he drolly said, modestly demanding plan. Surely he could see the benefit of having an independent lobbyist and patronized authority at Court for months, if not years to come. Moreover, she would feel a fool if she spelled it all out only to rouse his interest! He then did a quite wonderful thing -- he reached up and took her hands, handsomely smiling the while, then kissed her palms. “Will I have a say in naming the child?”

She all but stammered. “ — Of course. Heavens.”

“I see some advantages, but I think it may be wise to discuss the possible mishaps. Before. And at length.”

This too came as a surprise. She had already, with a lush coy gesture, backed the himation on the lone chair, leaving the chiton for him to manage. He seemed to appreciate her growing impatience. “Surely a calm hour or two won’t spoil the bacchanal. I have after all vicariously enjoyed you many times — of late. This I must admit.”

It was the comment that set the tone for the rest of that strangely earnest, comic, provocative and finally dilatory evening. While listing the feasible calamities he cast off his simple cloak and loin cloth though the chiton she appropriated that night was layered and he took his time. Most of the regalia costumes had been seized or derisively rent in the attack. As he worked on the side stays several ‘what ifs’ were disposed of.

Would the newly influential Potnians sense betrayal if rumors of her rape somehow insinuated guile instead? She exhibited no telltale stigmata after all — no convincing lesions she might accidentally reveal in a fountain house. If she were ravished when knocked unconscious by the guards who sought pretty Scheira, before Nemanó's intervention, she would have no living witnesses. None of the guards survived the siege of the palace. The elderly widow in the alms house was nearly blind. It was finally agreed he would have to let slip a remark about fending off a murderous raider only to lose sight of her whereabouts -- and she not fully compos at the time. They spent several minutes honing this credible story. It seemed every woman left stranded in or about the palace, who lived to tell about it, had been assaulted at least once.

What if they had to get a message to one another promptly? A warning say, that the Viceroy retained a new Marshall or Seneschal, jealous or suspicious of a precious arts maven. This problem was, they agreed, just manageable: a dead letter drop, to be changed each week, at least until the Viceroy was committed to the reconstruction of the Acropolis.

Could Thera, the daily keeper of the villa, be relied on? Absolutely. He nodded, adding that Thera must be a remarkable servant. Loyal yes, not remarkable, said Zelea, prompting mutual smiles. It was decided Thera would not be told of their pact; her anxious state about a baby could be a bonus even.

But their optimism again tarried.



If she failed to conceive, would she marry? Only under duress. If she did conceive and he, Nemanio, were to suffer disfavor, would she attempt to intercede on his behalf? Of course. Would he if her fortunes soured? Of course — either way. The dilemma they both sensed a need to shelve was this: if the child were rumored to be his, might she not be driven to distance herself? He would at the very least embarrass his college, lose his stature as a trusted traveler, be denied access to the ‘sensitive realm’...not a player to remain close to.

Her first answer was nearly as craven as the imagined plight. “What if you suddenly felt imperiled by such a rumor? Acted rashly. I may not have a choice. Disgruntled paramour — oof!”

“I would never be as well off. You maybe. I not.”

“It won’t happen.”

“But if — you became ambitious. Sense a betrayal. Or lapse of heed, caution.”

It was the one pregnant pause she reminded him a day later as they sat side by side on the newly comfortable bench, their clothes draped on the lone chair. Said she, “You have a way of making me into a creature I doubt I have the resource to play, let alone the will. So it comes down to who may have the slight advantage -- if you insist on drawing this out. Which you sensibly do.” ‘Sensibly’ was not pronounced amicably. “There is no verification. Only trust.”

Then she changed tack.

“Have you thought about the fact my mother died giving me birth? Well, she got sick and died a few days later. My difficult birth was the likely cause.”

He felt obliged to answer. “And you think I’m capable of entertaining or engineering a travesty -- a matricide? To free up, uncomplicate my life?”

“No, but the earlier circumstance might pose a question or two. If in making discreet inquiries you chanced to learn the child, the ‘lucky bean’, was not the husband’s?”

The surprise on his face was immediate. It was indeed a confession to a bondsman or curate — that she might not be the legitimate daughter, her reputation and position bogus and her wealth escheat to the polis. She eyed him with a candid squint, her face and young chest carnelian in the lamp light. “So you have a double triumph this night I think. And I a possible benefice from the Wheel of Necessity. From grandmotherly Ananke.”

If it took him a while to get on with the business at hand, given the war-rant in her remarks, she contained her impatience — but not a further belated request. Briefly she touched his hair, stayed his caressing hand. “I don’t want to belabor this but it is important. If I fall asleep after, please keep my knees up a while. Suppose to help.” The pause that followed seemed momentarily delinquent. “If I sound like a nag, a Xanthippe, you are invited to get even.” She hitched her nipples then as a scribe might point a brush, languorously stretched and squelched a sudden yawn.

“Sorry. I do feel guilty coming to you sleepy as I am. The Potnians treasure their midnight vigils. It’s the planners who have the upper hand now. Prim as any lender.” Noting his wry smile she added, “They do take note of durable curios...even the novitiates get to rub a few noses...gawd I yammer when I’m tired.” He engaged her lidded amiable eyes, saying, “So. A nubile relic.” She seemed pleased he’d followed her squib. He would not forget how soft yet resilient she felt as he removed her humble loin cloth. “I did have Thera look for a schenti. I had some beautiful ones — from Tyre. The colour of Narcissae.” Again they eyed one another. “I’m here till morning.”

The injunction to enjoy himself he had no trouble obeying. For a time she stood before him as he traced the smooth seamless form. The stateliness of marble revealed in the flesh, the flue of navel dimpling to his touch. The entire figure smelled of a sweet emollient, this upright Palladium, as if before a Lawagetis. How would such a child know of his wariness before deferential pleading. The plea that could maim, professionally, physically. She sensed the hesitation. Waited. “Our silk thread,” he remarked touching her short wavy hair -- to which she laughed and, quaintly eyeing him, teased her nipples again, pulling and pointing as the Regent had during the initiation, knowing he must remember. Replacing her hands he said a babe would be blind to such loveliness, thinking only of food, to which she chuckled. “That bother — me?” But his lingering resignation said it all. “Well who knows?”



The bench being too low and narrow, he propped her finally against the wall, padding it with her chiton, and for a finite infinity fondled and kissed the sensitive but complaisant torso with its oddly honed sex, eliciting the occasional flash of wonder -- she hadn't it seemed expected a rapt preamble — her eyes fluently upon him, giving him every exquisite and unexpected moment that passed across her face, her ankles, what she called her 'Briseis tendons', lolling on his wide shoulders and upper arms. "What poor Achilles missed out on," she said palming his heavy sex, her spare, nearly plaintive murmur the urgency that censored and inspired. He was touched by the soft rushed words — a voice he had not heard before. A pretty fledgling partisan. Easily filling her at last, he duly set to work, her hands gently if coyly keeping track — details he alone would remember, she nearly oblivious, her pledged form aptly responding, her mind dispersed with visions of impluvia, blossomed pergola and delicate mosaics, serene friendly porches and shaded colonnades, warm scrolls and smooth tablets, a prized gallery greening the Propylaeum to the Acropolis. When the thrusts became seismic, their hands to the wall, she could smell the blossoms of the lemon trees and the dewy clean of slaked marble.

Yet he believed he also gave her pleasure. And held her in his arms after, almost as a fetus. She called him Talos. With the terrible vein. After touching his salted cheek.

He dressed her in the predawn, fondly as any smitten Faun. He could barely conceive such softness and verve thriving in one. Words seemed lame as modesty itself. They meandered to the entrance together where

he watched her steal up and reconnoitre the first barricade where he imagined her old escorts might have waited, a chap who seemed to have sprouted horns and the tall Ethiope who might have been a brother or cousin to the Viceroy! The players to help route the Regent. But by then incredulity begged the question: everything she engaged in seemed phenomenal. Including her return to the Potnian diehards. “It’s an older wary troupe now. I may actually become an accomplished Priestess. The bequests are often quite complex now. A lot of fish to fry. Believe me.” He was mildly relieved the chap with the horns, whom she identified as Fen, did not have a serpent’s tail nor the scales of a Griffin. Otherwise they seemed an agreeable and apposite trio. It would be weeks later before he realized the Ethiope was in fact a Gigante. That chapter he would never have fully explained. He imagined a possessed Olympian nearby writing another dithyramb, planning another remorseless denouement. It was some time since a gadfly stung him. At times he seemed the only one without a disguise. Two months later she announced he was more than likely to be a father again. Assiduously he pretended to be convinced. A fortnight later her state was confirmed by Glaucus. They continued to meet as frequently as they dare, the hetaera and her paramour, her condition a boon to talk as much as lust. Which words, to his amazement, became their essential pact — words of planning, words of assessment and appraisal, words of implicit resolve — their more animate and resolute if not affectionate and intimate intercourse of all. He continued to be awed by the mastery she displayed of palace tensions and opportunities beyond

the topical stalemates. When she was away he found his thoughts dwelling on the softness of her vernal form, which yet seemed the merest molt of herself. During longer days in the palace he ached for the assured face beneath the low threshold.

## PART TWO

### SIX

At first Scheira was amused by the pert youngster dressed as an Egyptian scribe seated in the small gold-leaved shrine pavilion. Not so Rhene, the regnant priestess at the Potnian Shrine, one keeper of the sanctum the late Regent hadn't subverted or overwhelmed. She and Scheira peeked through the jeweled spray of a fountain in the royal quarry garden — the source of the marble that rebuilt the new council house, restored sections of the palace and agora portico, and refurbished the Citadel and select pantheons on the Acropolis. This older depleted section of the quarry had become a manicured arboretum. Rhene looked on with a novel twist of anger, Scheira a faint smile, the two forming a very odd couple, the priestess seraphic in fluted mantle of white, Scheira a spare tunica that covered a stylish hip girdle. Earlier that day she had been with a group of gymnasts in the Bull Court vaulting over select young men wearing the horns of a rare white bull with gem-like horns that legend said Europa rode from Tyre to Keftiu. A young live bull the Potnian field sisters had



raised almost as a pet followed the progress of the vaulters. It was garlanded with spring flowers and given sprigs of hay and maize. Before the coup, the vaulting had been an aristo pastime; afterward there was a paucity of athletes, especially women, who might perform the stunts for a nostalgic audience who plainly wanted the tradition continued. As did an enthusiastic Viceroy when he learned of it. When news of the Viceroy's keen endorsement reached fugitive Scheira, she returned to the polis and the aegis of the Potnians where Rhene gave her two new monikers, Phile and Eunike. Phile tended the shrine as a homebody; Eunike 'moonlighted' as an entertainer. As such she learned much that transpired in the new court, often timely information Rhene used to corroborate findings of her own. With the elaborate makeup entertainers used then, inspired by the Viceroy's Director of Festivals, a Greek hermaphrodite from the court of Amenhotep III, Eunike was able to pass as a newcomer, varying her act accordingly. She now felt a light jab in her ribs and covered her mouth. Said Rhene, "Typhon has been clever this time."

The spectacle before them presented a dual-edged complication. The small but glistening pavilion, which someone had placed the night before in the arboretum, implicated the Viceroy's Marshal, among others, because the recovered tomb trophies had been returned to Egypt — but for this beautiful and newly manifest artifact! The young child before them, seated inside, touted to be the surviving Glaean King, was in fact a changeling, indeed a young girl dressed as a boy, a substitution cooked up by the late Regent. The demise of the legitimate child King was only now being

sorted out. Those responsible were still covering their tracks. Two nursery servants and one of the Regent's funereal attendants had disappeared. Rhene and Scheira now wryly regarded the filched pavilion. Initially, the pirate Typhon through an intermediary had offered it as an adjunct shed and cover to the Potnian shrine's damaged back end, its opisthodomus, in hopes the Viceroy's recoverers would not notice it. The Shrine's housekeeper welcomed the 'generous' gift, not realizing it was a hot Egyptian tomb treasure. She had it moved to the arboretum when the shrine was repaired. Now, with the Viceroy installed as Tyrant, discovery of the pavilion would entail a confrontation with the keepers of the shrine — perhaps their summary disbandment. A further complication arose because the Viceroy had pretended a liking of the young 'King', to ingratiate himself to indigenous Glaeans. He had even sent for an Egyptian tutor — not yet aware that the boy was in fact a girl and likely an orphan. Hence the urgency to see the conspicuous 'playpen' destroyed or, as the shrewd and fuming Rhene deduced, planted elsewhere. Without it's 'issue'. "A very fluid situation," she remarked. The current Oracle, a half-sister to vigilant Rhene, had predicted propitious seas for some of her merchant petitioners, the traders who purchased Typhon's plunder on the sly! Some wag said the pirate he was tired of pillage and believed the treasure would buy him a retirement villa he coveted on Melos. "A cauldron to feed or scald," Rhene said aloud. Reluctant to leave the blind of the lavish fountain, Rhene began to hum, hoping to catch the child's eye. The further irony was the shrine pavilion had been built to honour a small, deceased Egyp-

tian noble, perhaps a child, given the size of the craters for the feet of the missing statue carved into the floor. Because the pavilion base was slightly damaged by the original tomb raiders, Typhon had sold the intact statue separately. If the Viceroy learned of the pavilion he would be as vengeful as the Egyptian god Seth whom he ever tried to placate. Thus Rhene was determined the object should be discovered near one of the caves where Typhon had stashed the original plunder. Coolly she said to her intent co-conspirator, "See if you can coax the minx over here." Phile sauntered over and bent down to wink at the young minion, sitting on the inner plinth like some miniature potentate on a royal potty. Softly she called her name. "Plataea, Plataea." The sickly King had been called Plataeus. The girl smiled but didn't move or acknowledge her visitor. Rhene called out, "Auntie has a beautiful honeyed fig for you," adding softly, as much to herself, "We don't want you ending as a vitalis cake do we." Cerbes's vitalis cakes, the sick joke on Glaea, were said to contain human organ meat. Plataea rose and sought the fig. Phile stood aside as the child took it. Said an alert Rhene, "That's right, we don't want that nasty girl having any, do we?" The child readily sucked and chewed the fig as Phile cautiously ventured out to scout the vicinity and signal an all clear. Rhene produced another fig then, hand in hand, led Plataea around the fountain to the path that skirted the arboretum and led to a fountain house where the sitter waited. Phile smiled with renewed wonder at Rhene's guile. Plataea would be henceforward dressed as a girl and given to Zelea's household. Zelea would duly explain the Regent's mordant ruse to Medju and her



anxiety for the orphan's safety. As anticipated the Viceroy much lamented the young Glaean King's murder, was pleased the girl would be cared for, and became incensed with the remnant of the Regent's sycophants -- the Potnian priestess orders remaining critics! It was presumed the Viceroy would get to the bottom of things, put a heavy price on Typhon's head and in due course execrate the sycophants. As she returned to the shrine, Scheira-Phile-Eunike prided herself on becoming a full-blown player in the illustrious order.

Later that day, in a shaded portico not far from the arboretum, the afternoon sun straying through trees of the Ash Altar, the Eopt Cerbes also ruminated over present misfortune — in his case the precariousness of his pariah status. Zelea's poise and equanimity, her condescension to him, had always chafed. But whereas she enjoyed a resurgence of respectability, his past positively festered. Since his repeated bungling during the coup, far too many scabrous rumors, most of them true and unembellished, had surfaced — inviting conviviality among the scorers! The Viceroy's publicly snubbing of him was plain to all. He might be charged to do something unsavoury at night, but during the day he was pitch. In response his hatred grew apace. The lucky serene Ladyship became the core of his hatred. Particularly the gatherings that convened about her presence. If not the animus of such assemblies, the indomitable She invariably featured among the principal court players. Her smile, particularly, with its intimation of inbred gentility and amused spectatorship,

galled him. Now she appeared invincible. So comely dressed, attended by several votaries and assorted servants including the often snippy Thera, her own retinue in fact, she could act without stint while he struggled to keep his few remaining acolytes away from Medju's inquisitors — he, an agent of barbarian's very coming! It was perverse. Even the changeling babe seemed to thrive in her presence. What a slippery creature she was. She was reputed to have told the Viceroy a second infanticide would not amend the first. Hence the Viceroy's 'affection' for the child. In suggesting the entente she helped appease the restive but guilty Corybants, inure them to Potnian hegemony. The consummate mastery of it all. Never had he ground his teeth so. Or been so starved of young striplings to appease the terrible Minotaur. He must know what the devil they spoke of, what ivory Zelea said to the ebony cockhead, ever flanked by two giant aids uncannily alike, their face masks intimating the Viceroy himself to mislead assassins. The size of the brutes was appalling. He felt like an ant. And was treated like a roach. Where once circumspection even alarm attended his approach, disgust now flared, fattened itself. His ritual not authentic! He could scream, but instead must bite his tongue. And console himself with the serum of clotting blood. His own tasting much as others.

Then as if on cue she came, passing through the colonnade about the palace. With, to his surprise that evening, a single attendant, the indefatigable Thera. Into the near fountain house. So, not homebound after all. Merely a refreshment, a respite before going back to beguile more toadies,

the natural schemer. With impudent calm he sauntered over to an upper casement window and, detecting no near witnesses, stood on a weathered rock to peer inside, the most cool interior a balm and curiosity. The scene inside was immediately galvanizing. The minx stood leaning over the runoff letting the servant pour water over her shoulders and arms. Silvery handfuls she drew to her face and neck as the servant splashed her back and legs, slicking them down with her hands. Cerbes let out a snort which the servant heard and Zelea ignored. Too intrigued was he to concern himself more with passersby. The woman appeared faintly cambered. About three months he imagined, recalling the night of the siege — three months almost to the day. As she straightened she all but made the camber disappear, smiling at the servant the while. Ah hah. The ablution finished the chiton was reinstated, the final folds hiding any incipient swell. He returned to his quarters a new man. He gave her another month. The Viceroy would be deliciously piqued — paying court to a bird already on the nest. He could hardly incriminate his new Seneschal or Adjutant. Had she not been in the palace, swacked as any lush, when the entrances were breached? A miracle she survived!

His elation, alas, faded all too soon...as he came to realize she had been absurdly open about her predicament. He could no longer shun the probability. A performance -- on his behalf! A child she was in fact grateful to carry. She even knew the hour of his foray for news, the time his few remaining cronies sought a quorum. Why she could stymie her suitors, caution if not impugn the Viceroy, to the extent his coming was responsible



for her condition, while retaining a measure of sympathy, even respectability. And defer the deposition of her wealth! Indefinitely perhaps, given her ascendance in the new court. The lamia! From the breezeway of the Necropolis he could see only the famous terrace of her villa. Too far off to read lips. The smooth house-proud She rarely spoke, and then with maddening succinctness. He must contrive to overhear such talk. Could a flamboyant Nubian really be that interested in, what was it again -- sea shells? In diminutive minikin sea shells — the assortment she reportedly had recently spread out on a tripod for him, the blackhead picking them over, cracking some like lice, examining the dust on his fingers after. Why you couldn't eviscerate a fingerling with such things. But all too sufficient and businesslike was the Viceroy's resolution in what he proposed — so claimed the much bribed doorkeeper — to the daughter of the master builder. He must get to her somehow. Through her minion perhaps. Though he had difficulty imagining a disgruntled servant or retainer in that household. He'd already chanced upon wary Thera — and copped a sermon! 'The mistress does not receive debbils. She does not traffic in giblets and worm stones. Good day.' What pomposity. At one with the modern toffy Apollonian side of man, as if the average luckless mortal could tell the difference. Even if you were built like a snake-tailed Gigante, like the Nubian cockatrice, you had to kill or be killed, abduct or be abducted, eat or be eaten. Assault and debauchery were the essential states of being alive. And what was the essence of debauchery but the rending of flesh! Did not Apollo know that as well as Dionysus? These

modern debates were the work of the Potnians, like hermit crabs had they taken over the Heraion, making man a castrate, the Eunuch the paragon. Giving to a spectre, a shadow like Nemanos, the thyrsus. The very rapture of lust dissipated, the erection turned back on itself like a fig. How the seed shriveled siring talkers, whiners, wiseacres. He would look the field over again. Perhaps not as high up this time. The lesser entertainers yes, one of those — meaning he or a colleague must wangle, cadge an invitation to one of Zelea's soirées. He thought again of Thera. She was silly enough to think such an invitation might improve his mind, soften his manners, perfume the stench. Guests dressed and washed before going to the villa. Yes, to Thera he must repair, when the sea shells exhausted the interest of their examiners. The shells represented, given the time devoted to them, either a paramount puzzle or one enormous red herring.

It would be an interminable evening of course, a marathon of tedium, jostled by: fat bankers, hammy merchants — he assumed they hadn't all fled or been killed — snuffling Egyptians, stiff Libyans, nosy Luvians, smug scribes, the odd physician, oily poets and dicy sophists from places like Keftiu, and smirking Melos and Mende brokers looking to market copper and tin, wood, papyrus and textiles. In the background a watchful Potnian Elder or two. No Corybants. He had been there before — before the roof came crashing in. But the roof had been repaired and the terrace extended. He'd left out only the hetaerae. The few roundheels whose sex was not in doubt. How smart. He recalled one such creature he'd taken the heart from then disemboweled as a precaution against adulterating the

vis vitalis cake, so full of piles she was, only to discover with great compensatory delight, a tiny fetal homunculus, a delicacy that might have ended in some fly-wick establishment. With a garland and final blush of pomegranate water he was ready. No matted hair ends to suck this night.

And tiresome it was. Heroic poetry delivered by that gussied up pimp Homer, pretending to be blind. Offering up some devious underworld charade. What nonsense. As macabre as the blackhead pretending to listen, even nod to the attentive hostess. He surely had no interest in her meagre form. Was he not interested in the hetaerae at the coastal hot springs, one womanly creature in particular? What then was he doing in the precious Lady's company listening to such drivel? Even the gymnastic folk who concluded the evening's entertainment would not have coaxed a Satyr from his lair. Such prim athleticism must bore any accomplished libertine. That was until Eunike performed, not unlike the one they had called the Swan. This night she performed as a juggler only and alone, her pretty loins discretely covered, keeping a game ball aloft with pretty feet as she hand walked through upright thysuses. No mushrooms, poppy tea or actors in dusty blue, nor panting 'rubbers'. Yet sarcastic Cerbes raised an eyebrow and began carding a neglected memory. Even the guards had been mesmerized by the uncanny Swan who had distracted many nobles from the scandalous pantomime inside the palace, including the initiation of the famous daughter and her metamorphosis into a Thyiad initiate with the second prettiest cheeks on the island. And now — a garland even — to crown the downcast eyes of the protean Eunike. The creature



knelt and glanced in Zelea's direction as the wreath was extended by Medju's Director of Festivals. The Viceroy broadly smiled while Zelea, wearing that halcyon expression that infuriated, nodded for the girl to accept. The usual titters broke into loud applause as the garlanded performer stood and executed a nimble summersault, the garland remaining in place. The Viceroy too applauded, generously, perhaps amorously. But it was Zelea's face that beguiled — so quaintly accepting of human duress and folly, which the distracted Regent on as many nights did not notice, her passion ablaze. More and more the detailed memories scrambled in. Yes, she, the performer receiving the garland, the gamine Eunike, so like Scheira, whom they called the Swan, after her long stately neck, who had been there, the very one, keeping the guards mesmerized with her virtuosic and captivating display. As fluent, feather light as a shawl, a phantom really, a few moulted pintails teasing the pavers. So like the Swan this court's lithe newcomer. As before, such talent could indeed mask, screen a momentous deed. A wily illusionist with her many ivory balls. Who devoted herself to the Potnians in their refurbished shrine. But then a matter he was not conversant with monopolized the conversation: the child the aristo took in had gone missing. The very child the Viceroy belatedly used to exhibit his magnanimity. Even a late encore by the blind drunk who could still rouse with fantastic evocation did not relieve the imputation of the whispering and stoney glances in his direction. He could explode. He thought he heard references to the Minotaur sacrifices, to the vis vitalis cakes...if the child did not turn up...even eyes of the artful Eunike were lid-

ded with disgust. But when one of the matrons spoke to the Lady, while looking in his direction, he seethed with anger — and summarily left, all the while debating with himself if doing so merely made things worse. Should he have not simply ignored the innuendo and blithely applauded the poet? But the thought of one of the Viceroy's security brutes suggesting he come for a walk sent him packing. How unbearable the plausible persuasive speculation about his activities! When he had done absolutely nothing this time to deserve it! His only option then was to find the missing brat, as craven as any messy job the Viceroy furtively charged to him. While slinking away into the night he did, again, fancy Eunike as an exemplary specimen for the *vis vitalis* cakes. He had tasted the White Thorn, the very pith, of such a one before, an ineffable after taste that lingered! He also knew how delicious young children tasted. Thus, if the child was to be found, would he gain anything by returning it — possibly reviving the very suspicions he kindled? He recalled how the body of the sickly King had to be burnt, only the head returned to the Regent. Who was so anxious that child disappeared...!

The following morning a dauntless Scheira, as herself, hiked to the Cloud Forest in part to shun the latest court drama — the missing child and especially the illusive pavilion! -- and the demands on Zelea's faction who worked to pacify if not regale another hectic ruler. For Scheira it was, yet again, the excruciating recognition of necessity, of Ananke and her stark emissaries, ex-

emplified as the Lady plied her good grace and humour before the wine laden Medju as he lapsed into another jeremiad about Greek wile and perfidy, his poignant awareness that Typhon and company were still at large a monumental headache. A recent letter from the Egyptian Chancellor mentioned some missing items, including a shrine pavilion! Because Medju lived in fear of his Shardana escort, he suspected one of their number as much as a remaining disgruntled Glaean. Yet only the Glaean might be tortured. But where to begin? The fact that she, as Phile, might have been seen near the pavilion worried her. Cerbes had stared at her intently at the villa, an attention that also vexed. Such poison inflames the mind. Indeed, she did not know just then if she would return to the polis at all.

She had eschewed the hermit's lean-to to reach the swirling height of the Northern scylla, the rush of sea air inviting adventure, daring. She was further surprised to feel the warmth at that swirling height above the water, which looked below as damson deep as she could remember. One might dive in — from such a height! As the timeless Britomaris did to escape the clutches of Minos! She found herself drawn to the challenge, the dare gagging resistance. It would be like no other. And judging from the water's livid color safe enough surely, the marbled charybdis rumoured to be much further out. The floating seabirds would serve as company going down. She could swim to the volcanic chimney and climb the cloud-veiled escarpment — or hunt mussels near the grotto. She felt herself hiving with anticipation. Heavens yes! Down, down, fusing the unity of mind



and matter. An interval without ambiguity, doubt, the prickly habit of vigilance briskly shed. The pun registered only when she debated what to jump in. The durable tunica would take a night to dry out, the old sandals smell to high heaven, which she would miss on the stony beach. She began to giggle at her quibbling just after the impetuous leap, as unadorned as a Coot's egg, falling like a star, arms outcast and swinging to stay aright, the Gulls, Bitterns and Shags barely giving nod.

She was several feet under and tingling with bubbles before sensing the release, one arm slightly out-stretched on entry and stung. The pain, however, was out vied as she careened to the surface feeling entirely recast. The excitement and momentary abandonment of her plight was such that she coolly climbed the escarpment to jump from the other side, on this second silvery descent nearly colliding with a hovering Bittern who listed in her air current part way to the water. While rising from the entry she glimpsed on the subsurface rocks an image in the sun-streaked water that startled and daunted. Further watery reconnoitre revealed two large eyes in a section of sea-greened mural that appeared to be a plaster dressing of the submerged rock itself. Rubbing at the veil of scum she released a feathered visage whose stark insular eyes seemed mobile. Wiping away more film revealed a wing, then another, stooped as in a dive or settling on a perch. A birdlike human or human bird, a nubile Swanlike creature arm-like wings settled to receive a garland from a dark Prince.....she felt herself shake her head, her hair resisting in the ocean swells.

On consecutive dives she discerned many shards of what appeared to be an entire wall, all wedged between two large boulders that turned into enormous marbled cylinders from collapsed columns — the remains of a great temple with uncanny semblances! Her own predicament intruded as she surfaced a last time, the sun a fiery remnant, the water newly surging about the rock, its scylla reputation alive. Yet she remained rapaciously curious — her ongoing obsession with Glaean fortune and destiny more esoteric than ever. Her sore arm almost forgotten, she swam toward the narrow beach that afforded an easier if longer climb to the top, her tunica and sandals, but no sooner touched down gingerly seeking footing beneath the submerged rocks than the giant figure loomed. Immediately she dropped beneath a swell and let the undertow pull her out a distance. When lungs gave to bursting she resurfaced but failed to detect the apparition, though after many dives her eyes were raw and perhaps untrustworthy. Heaven knew the past week itself was hardly to be believed. Mortals, she had little doubt, entertained the gods as wretches and buffoons. And she was unconvincing as a buffoon. So much outside the Potnian temple and shrine seemed endlessly black, like the inescapable descent of that evening, becoming raw, unforgiving. Everywhere she looked alien figures lurked in the shadows. Would she ever arrive at some balance in her life, the terrible swings of fate begging off?

Again approaching the narrow shore, her head alone above the now comparatively warmer water, her hermit's or Pan's suggestion of a genie began to intimidate. Genies were enormous, yes? Or could be. How won-

derful. Had she really lost it this time? Muscling down a shiver she at last braved the stony sand, adroitly picking her way to the further grotto and chasm that marked the ascent to the scarp. She was swearing audibly when at last she found her misplaced tunica. She sat on the trunk of a twisted olive tree to catch her breath and reconsider. Yes, she had discovered the evocative remains of something beneath the water, and yes she had seen a very large figure, also dark, aniline, walking the shore. She was perfectly sane — quite unambiguously cold and hungry. Then once more she began to doubt her sanity — she could hear voices. Voices. Snippets of conversation coming — from the shingle far below.

Voices! Which she could not put forms to for the narrow beach was now in shadow, the last rays of sun blocked by gathering clouds. Her instinct directed her inland, back to the lean-to. But her ever conscious curiosity drew her down to the clement sounds and growing acuteness of comprehension, one voice suddenly fondly recognized, the other sufficiently low and resonant, and forbearing, to be that of -- a veritable Genie or Gigante!

Her sensibility was only momentarily cautioned by the hint of horns in a lighter patch, for the voice belonging to them was teasingly familiar. The other, the enormity with bald pate shiny as any ancient brazier, called the horned creature 'Fen'! Immediately the specter of her Pan made her chuckle, while the sprightly quips of the twosome quelled all fear. Only generous and durable intimates punned like that. Her very stealth enhanced curiosity. Though the words were a little precious if not arcane.



“Fen, old chew, you sound like the Regent complaining about her hair.”

“Went to the same hairdresser did you?”

“She was inured to close shaves.”

“Singe a white fowl as a black do they?”

“You lick the white first.”

Fen was then distracted, presumably by the matter at hand. “I think the thing may be further East; can’t remember this rock.” The Gigante remained optimistic -- “Lots of footprints Two sets at least.” The sun suddenly cleared a low cloud bank and briefly gilded the watery sand. But Fen was newly vexed. The conversation began to trot.

“Maybe the Epopt nicked it?”

“He didn’t.”

“How can you be sure?”

Pronounced the Gigante with emphasis, “Very sure.”

Said a rarely sarcastic Fen, “What’d you do, steal a vitalis cake?” I m-  
passively the Genie countered, “No, the Viceroy got mad and stomped on his balls. Said he would make a ceremonial purgative out of his boo-boos.” Retorted Pachis, “Very sour grapes, old Cerbes.”

The Genie then skipped a measure. “You say it was no bigger than a pomegranate.”

“About the same. Smells awful. Get within a few strides and you know. I tried to dislodge it but I couldn’t. I don’t think it was meant for me. The thing that upset the dugout knew what it was doing. I wouldn’t have come

back otherwise. The bird's often been a herald of sorry events. Where it goes -- look about you." At this brief homage to mythic might the Gigante laughed. "You will believe such things. Big white bird. Full of big white finesse." But the Gigante didn't continue. His sudden silence cued them all. "Over here." She saw the two silhouettes come to stand opposite one another by the ribboned water before a jumble of rocks, neither speaking or moving.

"I see what you mean," said the larger form, just before covering his nose and stooping to release a vermicular rock and free a small oval object which he palmed as a game ball. Fen stood in a frozen aspect Scheira found novel in her stolid friend.

"Definitely a child's...with a large hole."

"I'm sure it will match one of the Epopot's awls."

The Gigante slipped the object into a leather satchel and tied it down. "You found nothing else? Curious it should wash up here. Likely snatched by an animal, a fox perhaps, or an eagle. Cerbes must have been nodding."

"It's late."

"Sometime you must tell me more about this bird of yours. The Swan that left."

The query sat like a harpy between them. For the first time Scheira had the unsettling suspicion they talked about the other Swan, Glaea's solicitous Palladium Swan -- the one who disappeared when Hespere proclaimed herself Regent. The image of the submerged rock returned with

a shiver. The image so like the polis's timeless Grace — the Muse Erato with the peerless sandals. The statue Zelea was said to have posed for. From which the bird emerged with the fabled 'child' when Medju came...signaling the calamity that followed.

Said Fen, "Well, you know how it is. Unless the bird taps you on the head, offers a ride."

"So you've been blessed at least."

But Fen was not to be reassured. "How to make the night bird sing."

The Gigante too seemed suddenly wistful. "The last to know, the last perhaps to speak. That would be sad."

"After this night, I cease to be."

The silence became then pervasive, cavernous. Scheira too recognized the imputations: that the busy Regent, at Cerbes' ghoulish connivance, may have devised the murder of the young king; that the Minoan line on Glaea would end with his death; that Medju's fawning over the Regent's substitute, not perhaps realizing it was a girl, would reassure his new subjects. The girl who had also disappeared. The humor of the two had abated. The words of the Gigante resonated over the water.

"The child will sing, you'll see." He patted the satchel. "The Swan from the Cloud Forest Lake will return." The recognition for Scheira came almost as a rebuke. How like the Viceroy the Gigante looked.



## SEVEN

Balo had overlooked the possibility of the pilgrim's habit being full of itinerant creatures. The old ascetic who offered him the cloak was he recalled dotted with leg scabs. Noting how the nearest members of the petitioners sidled away he anticipated the worst. The fleas or thrips likely bided their time in the cool mountain air then launched into a feeding frenzy when he entered the sunny warmth of the peristyle, which served as a commodious reception area to the great altar. He wanted to fling the garment into one of the larger braziers but needed the anonymity it afforded and thus remained reconciled to the torment. The new Oracle, a Pythia from Delos, he knew sat in an adjoining room on the high tripod awaiting divine inspiration. The first party had been granted an audience after about a week of idling and extravagant gift giving — the bribes one prayed might work. What many such petitioners wanted above all was time, the better to prepare for advantageous trade or protracted hostility. They also expected an interlude of beguiling entertainment. The trick was to learn who among the visitants would remain independent and affluent enough to seek a handsomely-paid-for audience. The current Oracle had been astute in her pronouncements — the shrine's sages being good judges of sufficiency, competence and need — and her reputation had grown as the distractions in the outer colonnades flourished. Balo's ascetic initially pretended to be struck by the plague, a made up role to discourage brigands and Medju's surly scouts. He claimed to have known the High Priestess Rhene when she was a child and gave Balo a letter of introduction requesting the shrine

shelter his student for a time. Balo presumed this would entail passing an hour or two in the baths and receiving clean well-pumiced raiment. The postscript he couldn't read, the symbols being an ancient hieratic form the ascetic said would flatter the Priestess and legitimize his coming. A private communication, the man intimated, for a younger but historic friend. Balo felt uncomfortable with the addendum, sensing the old schemer had been compelled to apologize for the presumption of a lone, and possibly fugitive, suppliant. Seeking sanctuary was not a venture he welcomed but his options had dwindled. Most of his citizen Hoplites, oarsmen, the captains and Navarchs, had furtively returned to their neglected farms or prospects as mercenaries on the mainland, his engineers to indentured labor on the new Acropolis. But he wished to remain anonymous and independent the better to assess the attitude and intent of the new regime, and had stumbled upon the old ascetic hiding in the ditch of the collapsed tunnel that once lead to the Stadium from the Boule, the old Council House. The codger was hungry, unkempt, resentful. Unlike Balo he was frail and chilled on the lengthening winter nights. For Balo's heavier tunica and chlamys he readily yielded his tawdry but concealing himation — with its waiting flotilla. Balo wryly pictured the wiseacre laughing at this stoic test of patience and endurance. Then reminded himself how irony was especially seductive for fugitives.

The vexation of the moment was relieved by a young reader-summoner, her face rendered in the half mask of bone white, who entered the peristyle and summoned a group of Paeonians waiting by the inner

garden to a hearing. The formal almost elegiac pronouncement was greeted with enthralled whispering and the shushed whistling of some Lotharios who plainly found the young woman up to expectation, her simple tunica a credible tease, given the single shoulder broach and the reputation of the guesthouses — a legacy of the late Regent's alluring processionals and late-night shenanigans which the creature, not unlike the Swan Balo thought, had ornamented and enriched. Yet such a presence chastened and cautioned. The Swan had helped hide him that terrible night only to perish in the ferocious siege. He stroked his beard, thankful it was so full. Anonymity he needed as air. Then he was flummoxed. The Lotharios softly hissed when the lithe creature sought out him, the dirty smelly loner, directing him to an inner hallway and waiting administrations of a very pretty boy. Balo decided the response was a boon, making his presence the subject of envy and derision rather than arid suspicion. So, the ascetic had put out. His progress along the corridor served to further lull as the sulphuric smell of the hot bath became more pronounced. He had helped build the tiled ditch from the hot springs. Twice the reader looked him up and down without comment then suggested he enjoy himself for the High Priestess had a difficult job waiting. Without acknowledging his curiosity she easily dismissed herself leaving him in the care of the winsome lad. He watched her leave with the same dismay he saw the Swan's sandals disappear up the wine cellar staircase two months before. How slow and thick he was with attractive women.



Soon he lay in the percolating water eating a delectable cut of lamb, an entire corner of the bath to himself, the ritual heed and courtesy according him altogether wondrous. If the lad had pulled a knife and slit his throat he may not have resisted, so calmed and sated was he by the cordiality and pacific surroundings. The providential hospitality of the old elaborate temple-shrine was confirmed. Few such temples had a peristyle and inner garden. Except for his recollection of the Swan, no one bore a familiar aspect and he barely recognized the heavily bearded creature staring back at him from the polished brass mirror the boy held out. Did he wish a light trim? Very light, he said, explaining that the barbarians (he didn't say Thracians) he must meet with later that week felt more comfortable conversing with a natural face. The boy appeared to immediately understand, his ready nod a further assurance to the other bathers, a few of whom then politely acknowledged his presence, this important incognito Envoy from some influential, mindful community. It was all Balo could do to keep from grinning. The old ascetic knew the ways of the timeless shrine. Would its Head Priestess give quarter to some desperate craven nostalgic Stalwart? Of course not. Only the reputable, wise and valiant might bathe in the shrine's blessed waters. Ha. As chastisement he thought again of the limber creature who presented herself in the peristyle, a sensation alien to the weeks past, and pictured such a girl performing at the symposium he must not attend that evening. The spasm passed, his vigilance returning as the lad began to trim his beard. Familiarity was the fated luxury. He must first determine the strange new Vice-

roy's mood and intent, what the Nubian had in store for those Glaeans who resisted his authority and rule. It would be assessed largely from hearsay, but he must risk the time to listen. Cerbes, he decided some time ago, served mainly as a butt, a laughingstock for the dark Medju, a Gigante, whose purpose and past was for Balo as benighted as any. Only the truth would prompt further resistance, compliance or flight. The perplexing activity in the agora was provocative as any gadfly. The very size, splendor and complexity of the new buildings and stout high wall about the Acropolis and Citadel sobering to any loyal longstanding citizen. Until now the Glaeans had no need for such show or ramparts, their fleet, now confiscated, once being entirely sufficient to defend their out-of-the-way island. He would allow himself a night's rest. Then he must overhear the talk in the agora.

The lad was offering him a choice of chitons, one richly dyed, one not, when a scene off the Exedar, the recess where both philosophers and panjandrums might give council, alerted his attention. Followed by a late-afternoon shadow, an acolyte of Cerbes, recognized as a peddler of charms in the agora, offered an object, a small sculpture, to the host greeter everyone had become so partial to. Even in her half mask it was obvious the girl was not enamored of the visitant, despite his deferential manner and royal dress, even less it seemed his trophy, but remained too self-possessed to give much away, though Balo would remember the hatred that flashed in her eyes. The acolyte apparently did not notice or heed her aversion and pressed his offering, each time holding out the odd wood carv-

ing immediately before her as she backed away, his words of supplication loud and elaborate. The bathers all took note, even the lad then proffering the chitons, the less conspicuous of which Balo selected with a genial smile.

The acolyte finally bowed low and placed the offering at the feet of the girl he had pressed into the Exedar where an older man in a royal tunica sat with a handsome athlete. Slowly, ceremoniously the acolyte left, leaving the girl the only option of accepting the gift which, to the confusion of the bathers, she delayed then put off by neatly sidestepping the object and smartly leaving the area. The many onlookers were alerted, astonished even, such refusal the kind of impolitic act that smacked of favoritism. That the acolyte had so pursued the embarrassed greeter, presumably all the way from the outside garden, and was dressed in the regnant costume of the Viceroy's own entourage, as the lad mentioned in passing, left Balo amazed. Despite the odd venue, the manifest refusal of the gift was a breach of protocol that could sully many weeks of smart pronouncements and providential happenstance. If Balo was right, the episode had all the hallmarks of a Cerbes parry — seeking the weak spot in preparation for a more costly thrust. If the acolyte was not shamming as a Viceroy emissary, the insult would be difficult to countermand.

And the statue itself! The more he looked. as did a slowly gathering throng, the more hairy the refusal became. The statue he learned from the animated chatter was one the Viceroy himself had brought to the Court from his native dominions, a wood carving of a votive figure with a



ceremonial bowl on her knees. The statue was one of several that had been widely noted and commented upon, the stylistic oddity a quaint conversation item that briefly provoked ridicule before the Court realized the Viceroy's fondness, indeed devotion, to it. It became in fact a call to conscience among the few remaining Glaean artists, victims of their own 'stubbornness and stolid conventionality', as the regime's arrivistes had put it. But for Balo and, he was certain, many of the others present, it was an ugly thing, abject, wrenched, grotesque. As unGreek as any salient-stark barbarian idol. Yet a few bumptious observers found the sculpture interesting -- "in its spare unflinching abnegation, it's sophrosyne" said one — a cue the others soon took up, all alert to the new hegemony.

Then an even stranger event took place. With perfunctory fanfare -- barely the touch of a gong and a Herald's rushed announcement — the Head Priestess entered the chamber, directly sought and affectionately gathered up the trophy, saying audibly to herself, "How sad to be so potent, so intimidating," while holding the carving as one might a pet tortoise or Terrapin. "And such an impetuous Envoy," she commented to the Herald before retiring, leaving behind a trace of settled laughter, the fond nods and exclamations from the onlookers nearly miraculous Balo thought. That she was an exceptional beauty at the height of her maturity, power and wit -- not the stoney housekeeper type one anticipated — was plain to all. He was loath to think such a creature ever beholden -- to a footpad now haunting the ruins of the agora. Yet he was here enjoying a hospitality customarily extended to tycoons and dignitaries. Even his young atten-

dant seemed enthralled. “She’s a great lady,” he stated, shaking his immaculate curls. Balo had never been attended by a more genial, agreeable barber. He decided he must find out what the acolyte was up to. Pace him in the agora. Despite Cerbers’s usefulness in carrying out unsavory tasks, the Viceroy kept his distance and would hardly send a Cerbes’ acolyte as an emissary. On leaving, the wily provocateur had headed toward the bustling stoa — the shops that bordered the shrine. Coming this far he might haunt a guesthouse. Balo had become a student of the Heraion and its many inner chambers, some still joined to the Labyrinth, now accommodating both the Diktaians and Potnians, a compact the Regent was never able to break. He did feel a chilly concern for the new reader. More and more her response seemed archly consequential. With this double obligation hanging over him he was determined to find and if possible expose the impostor. His hatred of the Eopt conferred a special élan!

Whereas Clearidas, Balo’s young servant barber, his duties dispatched for the day and his Prefect nodding, was as resolved as he stole away to meet his lover, a splendid athlete whose feats inspired many eager poets. Keen to reach the theatre entrance where the lover waited, the boy took a shortcut that skirted the back portico of the temple, then being extended. The construction guards had also been his lovers and readily permitted the youngster skip along the back path. Several times he paused to finger a smooth new plaster facing with its deep ivory luster in the late-afternoon sun. Well beyond the purview of the guards, a small opening left for an

iron ligature opened into a dim vault that otherwise resembled a star flecked sky, the gold, silver and gems of innumerable trophies glimmering at the edges like constellations. A baffled light well formed an asterism high in the centre. He'd heard tell but never seen inside the chamber, the brimming chests, amour, plate and gilded statues alive as night spray on a misted shore. Someone said the eye of the moon was laced with quicksilver, the stinging tears of Aphrodite! But a voice he could not place resumed a kind of recitation not intended to entertain. Stern and cutting as he recalled it to be mellow and fluent, the voice begged the luminous haunt of the trophies. It belonged to none other than the High Priestess herself!

Gradually he made out the silhouettes of two women standing by the entrance to a further natural cave or tunnel off the chamber, its black interior separating the two, one the voluptuous Priestess, the other the sometimes surly greeter. The Priestess was angry, vindictive even, a mood Clearidas had never witnessed in his short stay as junior valet and sweeper, helping in the bath and keeping the Oracle's audience room free of debris left by individual petitioners -- private notes secreted in niches in flooring and walls, on fragments of leather, linen and clay the Prefect collected and carefully carded. Always about the Adyton the voice of the Priestess was cordial, even mellifluous, an unusual demeanor compared to the solemnity of most diviners as they helped to interpret the Oracle. But now her tone was unimaginable, almost that of the Priestess at the Shrine of Smitheus Apollo he served a year ago, whose shrill and often ambiguous blether



kept her sanctuary in more straightened circumstances. He distinctly heard the word ‘disaster’ twice. Finally he put his ear to the chink and listened. For a time only silence, then his wonder grew as the Priestess continued, more accusatory than ever.

“The impertinence is bad enough, to ignore such a petitioner, however repugnant, but you had the gall to interrupt a special thank offering in the West colonnade simply to seek a shorter exit. Have you lost your senses? If the Viceroy hears of the slight from an unkind source you will be dismissed, however multi-talented you may be. A presumption of madness will be no help.” Clearidas easily imagined some sinister fate for the girl, himself having suffered her sometime acidic coolness when all he did was try to lift her tunica. Yes, give it to the bangtail he suavely intoned, imagining himself a youth of account and maturity. The Priestess was not finished though by now her voice, to Clearidas disappointment, softened.

“I will do what I can but another gaff like that and we may all end up in some Ashkelon seraglio, or worse. That must have crossed your mind — how you put everyone at risk. How the Eopt plays to your revulsion — to discredit the Shrine in the eyes of its petitioners — and thus the Viceroy. The point I will not belabor is you can have an illustrious future, you may even replace me one day — I do not exaggerate — but you came very close today ending up, again, in the Eopt’s Necropolis — the Viceroy keeps the monster around for just such intimidations. He’s very shrewd when it comes to meting out retribution — he slyly lets the cur occasionally have his way, pretending awe before the old exacting rites. And

we won't be rid of the lunatic until we can convince the Viceroy he's not in danger from us. He's as suspicious as they come. We can play that game too. For Heaven's sake do you understand?"

Clearidas was amazed. Such a scolding — for such a performer. Many times he'd watched as the uncanny acrobat sailed through the garden's fountainhead mist as if born by Boreas Himself, never dropping her pearl grey orbs! But that was really only the tease. What astonished all audiences was her late act in the old cella, where she appeared to fly, to veritably leave the chamber through a vent in the arched roof, returning to attend the quietus, materializing as a moulted human, a few tell-tail feathers clinging to bronzed skin. Not even the former bull vaulters in the arena whose skill was legend elicited wonder like that. He vaguely knew there were clever Priests at work with pulleys, camouflaged wires and such, but the actual disappearance was dumbfounding as the reappearance, as from the Omphalos, the Holy of Holies, the navel of the world! From heaven to netherworld and back. No one deciphered the trick, or sullied the prevailing presumption that it could indeed be transcendent — something only the descendent of Immortals — their illustrious ancestors — might undertake. A supposed Immortal who had so recently endangered them all by snubbing the acolyte! He wanted to swat the girl himself. And was sorry to hear the Priestess again summon words so tactful and solicitous.

"This Epop. A malignant creature. All this talk of again serving the Minotaur. He obviously wants to hobble our power. And uses someone

like you as his stalking horse. Let another be his quarry. You owe me that at least.” Here the Priestess gestured to several of the larger offerings in the vault. “Your own personal snit pales compared to this. It could still be the death of us all, this desperate act of Typhon’s. He’s terrified the Viceroy is on to him. By stealth, plus a desperate bribe or two, he’s managed to secrete much of his treasure in our own vault! Our trusting treasurer imagined it a gift, can you imagine? But we can’t put it all into the quarry garden. To lose out now because of your precious revulsion is almost more than I can take. And that’s saying a lot. It’s the slow poison that corrupts. You know what you must do, to quell the suspicions. Have him ostracized by attempting to rape you.” After a short pause she added, ‘He’ll be at the guesthouse until morning. You can change into my costume in the tunnel. Do note how it is worn.”

Clearidas thought he detected a belated nod, though the silence of the girl remained unbroken; he had only her mute scoldings of him, most infuriatingly deserved, to go on. So. She would have to entice then charge the acolyte with assault, baring a history of bestiality! In the current climate she could succeed, the siren harpy. As his eyes adjusted to the light he began to make out details of the two women that rekindled his astonishment — the girl might be dressed more as a boy, whereas the High Priestess...! For an instant he wondered if he looked upon another who sounded like the resplendent woman — but no, the face was unmistakable despite the makeup. But the dress, when a weak shaft of light from the air well gradually bathed her figure, intimated the attire of a wealthy hetaera! He was



vaguely aware something transpired with the girl when the Priestess's cloak came off. He was of late bug-eyed about the women's quarter of the sanctuary, incipiently aware that girls were remarkably different in ways not necessarily regrettable. The girl seemed a good example and had bourn the brunt of his curiosity. The jokes his lover told him about the hijinks some women got up to behind their screens and looms or in the fountain house he had been on the lookout for, and was certain something was imminent this night or had been, though he had difficulty imagining these two as the inimical 'rubbers' so described. Still, had not the scolding alerted the girl — almost as much as himself? Instinctively he guessed this was so. When the lecture lapsed the Priestess had sat down opposite the still, mute girl -- in one of the exceptional chairs that formed part of the cache that came laden with the awful curse. You had to be very careful with things Egyptian he learned. Behind the Priestess an older bonze statue held her cape in its outstretched hand, almost as a valet, as if it had been sculpted for the occasion. The more he looked the more amazed and aroused he became. The limbs of the Priestess seemed made from the purest pale marble. The golden girdle a glorious revel. The splendidly nipples breast that escaped the soft pectoral a revelation. The girl's bosom gnomish figs compared to this. There was definitely a lot to these creatures he decided. Perhaps his lover was not the best guide after all. And where had he seen hair like that? As if spun from a honey pot. In good light he had no doubt you could see nearly everything, as proud hetaerae displayed themselves at symposia — so he was told. Here however, against

the night-clad brilliance of the vault, the gravity remained manifest, the worry and confusion echoing as the Priestess rose and vanished into the dark tunnel. Oddly, he thought he saw the girl kick a small object, a stone or silver fragment, across the floor before she too entered the tunnel in that effortless sauntering gait. How dependent they all were on the reputation and security of the shrine and its Oracle. But as he quickly fled the scene the image of unslaked monsters faded with the sight of his Apollonian lover lounging on the steps leading to the stadium. Women! Always in a state, always finding fault.

In the cloud forest the hermit Fen, Scheira's Pan, while daydreaming about his Ibis, as he thought of her, was suddenly enveloped by a nightmare of stout arms binding his, thrusting him whole into a sack that soon straddled a bony steed whipped from behind to maintain frantic gait. He would be severed in two so strapped across the rib-rock spine. But as the paralysis began to set in the nag staggered to a halt, the sack stings gave, and his wracked carcass tumbled into more burly hands that dragged him to a murky chamber where he could make out the spidery form of the Epopt and two burkers, veritable shades of Hades. The buggers must have know the location of his forest redoubt all along. Or had done some recent and fiendish persuading. He resisted telling Cerbes he owed it to himself to take a bath. Said the Epopt, "You do seem moved, I must say. Not accustomed to flattery are you, goat." As expected, the ghoul had patience to flaunt. "Whenever you're ready. On your feet or not, either way

you have one slight means of easing your well-deserved end. If you do the job diligently and well I might even decide to let you go. For a very long sail. You seem to enjoy bobbing about in the Great Green Sea.” This produced a terse guffaw. Despite his anxiety, Fen would not deny a mordant curiosity as a torch bearer entered the gloomy chamber carrying a small statue.

Incrementally he learned he must create a marble copy of the small eccentric carving, a votive figure kneeling with a bowl in the knees. About a forearm span high. The original was in wood, highly polished in the flickering torchlight, and about as ugly a piece as he’d seen, though he soon convinced himself he had seen absolutely nothing like it. There was more. The interpretation of the work, the pose and bowl, must appear Glaean, the distortions, heavy slashes and keen edges in the original rendered smooth, fluent, stately. The form and pose should be readily recognizable but the figure and its rendering unmistakably Glaean. “Something ‘Swan-like’,” Cerbes mused. It was very hard for Fen to imagine Cerbes this subtle until he discerned a hooded figure in the shadows behind the Eopt prompting him. A block of Parian marble lay just behind the two.

Did the goat understand, Cerbes demanded, examining the hermit’s skull with a light smile. Fen swiftly nodded, saying he would begin immediately and not stop till the work was finished, swearing by all the Great Bull held dear. Cerbes, after some consideration, desisted looking for the reputed antlers.



“I give you four days,” he sniffed, the hooded figure nodding in agreement, surprising Fen with just how knowledgeable these ominous patrons were about such a rushed work. He just might make the awesome deadline. “Each day beyond the four you take to satisfy my connoisseur, you lose something dear to you. Whereas, should you manage to please my expert, you will be put ashore, in tact, on some island, somewhere. With your dug-out. We may even find one with a bit of grass. An irresistible offer, goat.”

Fen took no time in agreeing, though he suspected a successful completion really meant a swift unceremonial death here, nearly as desirable. To further ameliorate his abductors he said he would call up every smooth, fluent, stately idea he had. Said Cerbes, “No need to wrack your memory. We’ve got a subject. Just do her and all will be well.” The hooded figure then drew a woman from the back of the room, thrust her into the light and removed her cloak. She was quite pretty though not a youngster and, despite tawny skin, bearer of an Asian face. Cerbes felt impelled to brag about his find.

“She comes from Persepolis, before that who knows, some tribe in Bactria perhaps. She bears a resemblance to one of the Viceroy’s pretty ‘familiar’, shall we say, so we’re assured. And she is most anxious to see the work successfully completed.”

Despite Cerbes’s insinuation, the woman was strangely languid, impassive. Inanimate already Fen thought. Or had Cerbes already removed her brain. The thought intruded. Her jewelry and dress were that of an aristocrat or wealthy hetaera. That she would come to an atelier dressed for a

reception or thank offering meant she was likely abducted herself. She remained apathetic when Cerbes debonairly told her to remove her clothes, but did so after indulging a theatric shrug. The jewels and fabric would fetch a handsome sum Fen believed. Cerbes helped with the removal of her final garment and ran his hands over the figure after. “As you see, the figure is nearly Glaean to the core.” When additional torches were brought into the chamber Fen was further surprised to see two cots, a pantry of plain food, and two of the Epopot’s acolytes. Cerbes walked about the now detailed figure of the woman and put his fingers into her, rubbing her for some time, her lax expression unchanging. “Yes, she is now moist, let the marathon begin.”

And so it was the former celebrated sculptor once known as Aeacus the Faun and the Pickerel — the very immortalizer of the young Zelea and renderer of the conch shell Eidolon appropriated by the Regent — began chiseling a lovely piece of pale marble sufficiently soft and non-striated to prompt an audible sigh of relief. In her negligent state the model had to be pressed into the pose, was incapable of holding it for long and seemed immune to Cerbes’s taunts. The Epopot and his ‘connoisseur’ soon got bored however and left, the two acolytes remaining to see the work continued. Fen stoically accepted the vapid look on the woman’s face as he worked as swiftly and surely as he dare, requesting a resumption of the pose only as the progress dictated. She was surprisingly tall for an Asian, with some unusually fine bones, but a heaviness that made for a rather flaccid, by Glaean standards, sinew. Slowly it dawned on him, the discovery

the more forceful for its delayed impact: the creature could be a concubine from the Egyptian tomb spoils, a haunted figure to say the least, perhaps awaiting entombment with her embalmed master when the robbers arrived. He thought it impertinent if not rash to ask. It was all he could do to avoid the melancholic demeanor which, as the work progressed, melded into a trancelike state, though she managed to resume her role with a grimace when her immortalizer requested it. As with many of his past models, the toil lapsed with the realization that he was once more in love. Given her possible fate he was particularly anxious to preserve this glimpse of the truly exceptional, and reconciled himself to the fact his subject was more or less oblivious to the beauty of the work on its completion. A fact that made the recognition of her situation and his narcissism all the more poignant. His last view of her was as she stood before a nervous servant charged with attiring her as splendidly as when she arrived.

Scheira was disappointed to find Fen gone, then alarmed to see the disarray inside the lean-to, in particular the old chest dislodged from its resting place, its contents strewn about. The broken shrub branches at the edge suggested a struggle. So the retreat had been discovered, its furtive custodian fled or seized. She was shocked, angered, hurt. Her days now lacked a reliable resting place, a snugger of her own. She had been able to think, calmly assess matters, before the intimate fire, patient companion and deep forest quiet. The place had become her missing, omitted home. Judging from the wider trampled undergrowth, a group of attackers must



have stalked the lean-to, suggesting a concerted assault, meaning thugs of either Medju or the terrible Cerbes. Since Medju's coming and the demise of the Regent, there remained many uprooted Glaeans about the island, but she doubted many of these would find Fen, let alone assault him or taking him away. The more desperate might filch his food perhaps. But the meagre food was untouched and the contents of the trunk merely scattered about. Nothing, she concluded, actually missing except the stray witling himself, which brought matters back to the Viceroy or the Epopt. She resisted sorting through the pathetic remains and left as nimbly as she came, as much to stall the tears, alertly picking her way back into the cloud forest, heading in a Northerly direction that led at last to the sheer ocean cliff just beyond Zelea's garden villa. Another of the sheer Glaean scarps buffeted by waters several fathoms deep at its base.

In the light of a bright full moon, hours later, Zelea observed with astonishment the tiny figure dropping from a great height into the rilled ebony sea. Surfaced, the tiny swimmer all but disappeared, yet seemed headed away from Glaea — to Cos perhaps or some other island — a marathon only someone like the heroic Scheira would undertake alone and in the dark. That she may simply wish to return to Poseidon's realm also crossed Zelea's mind. Despite misgivings, the thrall of the heroic stalked the heart of the mason's daughter. Against her better judgement she urged the daring creature on, said a prayer to judicious Athena. Certainly Scheira would know the observant Lady would be on her terrace

that clear night, studying the stars, a witness to this moon gilded girl, this acrobat who might serve with such finesse at a distance, yet suffer a Maenad in an afternoon haze, the very rites in the former Regent's garden so curiously adventurous now. Zelea laughed aloud thinking of her own participation — that she even went, oiled and exposed as the novel rite mandated, to actually enjoin the wanton lovemaking. Prowess — the one form ever observed. And to think she was engaged initially as a simple but crucial distraction! A necessary 'muse'! How respectful she became of the deft undaunted Swan. This third love, its identity a mystery to the end. The presence of supple Scheira at these fêtes complected her vision, her sense of aptness and decorum. The disaster that came so suddenly that fateful night, which Schiera could not have anticipated, was now less perturbing knowing the alert performer was a veteran survivor.

The example of fearless Scheira was on her mind the day she received the distraught Viceroy in her seemly villa, his favorite consort having inexplicably disappeared, along with some arresting artworks he cherished from his homeland and had installed in the palace — to enhance the trappings of the new Egyptian regime he said. From the Viceroy's manner Zelea suspected he was alarmed for his companion as himself, given that someone on Glaea might be that daring and ruthless. She assured him she was as discountenanced as himself. They had talked before about the pirate Typhon and the Shardana scouts who discovered his cave caches but found only a few insignificant pieces he had taken from the original tomb

raiders. The concubine the mortuary priests had relinquished to his household -- she was intended as a tomb companion for a recently deceased royal advisor — was part reward for his undertaking the Glaean Enterprise. He was distraught. In an oddly abstracted state, he remarked that serenity, he was coming to believe, might reside only in stone itself! A veritable paean to Cleon the Able, Zelea's father, the architect-engineer who gave Glaea its stately grace and structural permanence. Zelea was floored by the pronouncement. Which reinforced her wish to be as accommodating of his civil instincts as she could. Mention of it even now amazed. Sturdy as Rhenes's reputation was the foundation of the Citadel his engineers had initially floundered against. On first seeing the durability of the interlocking design he swiftly sought out the authorities who might explain the wonder. In the end all pointed to the equanimous Zelea who, this day, did not presume to guess what may have happened to the cherished concubine, a nervous Asian she had met only briefly yet felt some empathy for. And to think all this -- the invasion even! — might have been avoided had the awful Typhon not elected Glaea to hide his filched imperial treasure!

They ended that day once more looking over the selection of sea shells which in pulverized form bonded with several types of mortar to leave a hard durable finish highly resistant to weather and age — even some menacing projectiles — the surface casting that so intrigued the Viceroy. A wall could be made like bedrock, only the colored pigment upon it vulnerable to a dilettante's or malcontent's graffiti. Or an attacker's batteries.



Yet no sooner had he paid homage, again to the wonder of mortar fortified from the sea, than he began to silently move about her simple spare rooms. His curiosity only matched by his presumption — something she had long since recognized as one of the new ‘givens’. He seemed disappointed this time however. “As absentious, self-abnegating as the mind of a any Egyptian priest,” he remarked when he’d seen the entire villa. “I use your words.” If she was amused it was his following enthusiasm she was unprepared for. Almost at once he became absorbed recollecting the beauty, energy and vigor of the art collection he had brought with him! Mainly splendid wood carvings from his home by the Head Cataract, some taken from sorties well below the great sand ocean to the very heart of the world. The very pith! He dared her to see them ‘live’ — invest them in her home. “You feel their passionate nature, the spirited blood. Not like your Olympian ichor at all. They warn and wake you. They speak with ancestral force. Signs and wonders you cannot miss.” Zelea had to work to hide her unease, the animation on his face a mask she’d not seen before. “Pediments, columns, coffered roofs are important,” he said, “but they did not throb, give back the magic flux, the tidal rapture.” She did not let on his argument was hardly new and tritely expressed. Their late Regent had been as enamored of such rapt expression, her many masks the measure of any exuberant Daemon. But he was not to be interrupted in this, for him, awesome quiet. His phrases surged as waves over a rampart — “Marble may be permanent, yes, but only in death, whereas the sinewed dance lived, thrived, returned the soul’s thunder.” Such words

did not, she believed, require comment from her. A complaisant smile was sufficient. She was content to let him think her deficient in the joys of ferment. It was after all the public spectacle of the wanton that offended. The passionate embrace was for the intimacy of privacy. She had put up with a lot in the rule of the late Regent and was determined not to irritate this highly temperamental Nubian whose better instincts, usually enlivened by association with her, seemed awash this day. Being denied the distraction of the concubine, he had become obsessed with his past. So it seemed. What she didn't know then was that the loss of his coveted prize was exacerbated by the disappearance of a votive sculptor he had adopted as his medium to initiate dialogue with his community of spirits. His pantheon was only Egyptian in expedience; the names of the gods he sometimes invoked in his many asides she had no inkling of, but assumed they were powerful, though they were apparently often disgusted with their human creations and would listen only under duress. In short you needed a good medium. And now he seemed more beset by them than ever for his votive figure had vanished — along with his adored concubine! The losses seemed to make him newly, rawly aware of his roots and his late neglect of those ties, imposing a terrible need to return and be made whole again, a regeneration that meant ridding himself of all adopted attitudes and habits. A change that irked her nearly as much as it dismayed. The spirit of obsession was ever tragic in her mind, its blind gaze immune to reason, plausibility. Her own husband had been killed obsessively pursuing marauders like Typhon. The need to overwhelm the senses — siege warfare

being a potent means, as the heroic poet attested — seemed bred in the bone, the single abduction multiplied many times over.

In her mind that night, as the Viceroy rambled on, emptying yet another kylix, coursed the old dilemma: the imperfect compact of Apollo with Dionysus. He lay on a couch smitten by recent events and his nostalgic recollections. His body guards sat outside on the terrace playing senet and consuming her best wine. Her least favorable servants looked on from shaded nooks with wry scowls. She knew he didn't fancy striplings, particularly those who might pass as boys. She told Thera to stay out of sight and dress plainly. Her dear father many times tried to point out the different nature of the two gods, the inveigler and ravisher. But in her readings of the great poets and chroniclers and her experience of life she saw them both as a couple of misfits, the only difference being the one seemed to enjoy himself a little more. The Viceroy astounded that day by referring to the Immortals that had founded his race. Her mind suddenly lit up — Immortals spawning this luxurious, grandiloquent barbarian. Her amusement was by then mischievous. The pompous oaf. He had little sense of stasis or harmony, of economy, the minimalism in elegance, let alone things like inertia or projected transit; not a jot of the numerical imperium, of seemly self-knowledge or decorum — the injunction to void excess — not an esthetically challenging consideration in his mind; she doubted he could even erect a lean-to of any real permanence. Immortal indeed. He must have sensed her amusement for he suddenly stopped in a lickerish stupor and scowled at her, at her meagre chest and pale limbs,



her unapparent pregnancy. He placed his rich molasses forearm against her lighter freckled skin and laughed, almost as if he'd found her out at last, the missing pigment the death knell of such studious calm. He stood and railed at her in his harsh indigenous language she derided and barely understood. But derision was not then on her mind, but the welling desperate anger of the mindful before the robust — in the arena of power where the voyeur, poltroon and bully happily looked on. The naked splendor of muscular intimidation. And penetration. The thrusts of witless nature. The sightless restless eye of the mercenary in the gymnasium. Her chagrin at the celebrated antic itself.

But then he did one of those things that endeared him to moderate Glaeans. He stopped midstream and dismounted, calmed himself and his laboured animal. "I did not come to upset you," he said after a breathtaking pause. "I would be close to Heh, that is all. The breath of the Ankh."

The loss of the concubine she believed a key to all this. "We pray for her return. And appeal to a protective Seth." She had seen a stone Seth figure sheltering a Pharaoh.

As much to himself he said, "May the Pharaoh be a petitioner and not a warrior? No, there is no hiding place here. The creature, my 'companion', as you say, has been abducted — and not as your poets make excuses for."

Zelea was abundantly aware of the dangers — that he might easily blame the lingering partisans, imagine a treacherous move in the new Court. Reason was not paramount here. Yet his melancholia this night

seemed mainly a rebuke of himself. Which seemed, in its way, an affirmation of his sympathy for her own sobering condition. Taking as he had Glaucus's confirmation at face value. He looked again at her. "You must not abandon your child. Such assaults often produce exemplars. I believe so."

She feared she blushed. "I sometimes think your eternal Heh a comer."

Almost at once she regretted the remark. It was all he needed. The anticipation in his wide rallying eyes she could not now disappoint.

With Thera in tow she was importuned back to the palace, to the chamber where the latest acquisitions lay, the mediums to his spirit world, the rigid fearsome artifacts he had so missed, all of them for her unfinished, gruesome, malevolent -- her candid estimation. But all crucial to his recovery and protection, and thus the protection of Glaea itself! Nemanos she spied anxiously looking on from a shaded corner. Medju, newly spirited, rambunctious, touched her barely detected camber, wondering how such a child must feel so pinched, stunted in the womb, his laughter echoing throughout the chamber. He drew about him several of his bulging concubines, bellies prodigal, breasts munificent as gourds, skins oiled, radiant. More torches were lit, to bring to life the carved wooden spirits of a feral energy, in their very imposture a frightening contempt for credible covetous man -- so she muted surmised. His gods were not a happy lot after all, so disappointed in their human creation. Before a carving with an erect phallus she managed a smile as the organ was oiled by the bulbous ador-

ers, the smell alone bilious for her, the corporeal distortions of the surrounding carvings as menacing as her host seemed then. He called in several drummers and ordered more wine, a thick red vintage the color of ox blood, which she fancied it partly was. By then he burped, belched, rubbed his crotch. And began to dance. A curious, veritable parody of Potnian sequence and stateliness. Ironically, he and the Maenad Regent might have hit it off — at this level, where propriety, order and trust were irrelevant. His earlier care had indeed lapsed, slipped away as any poorly anchored pier. Reminding her he had really only two states: despondency and riot. She just managed to share a smile with Nemanio. Many times her father had remarked on the inanity of licentious pomp, and this she had assimilated with her mother's wry patience, the daughter of a Macedonian stela engraver. Even Thera was speechless. They chose to sit on a row of caryatid stools, an act that immediately provoked visceral laughter among the concubines — only women with stubborn complaint sat there! The Viceroy broadly smiled, a grin that seemed to curl his very toes as he continued to strut and prance about, moving with a sinuous fluidity she found incredible. She'd seen nothing like it. His entire skeleton, the very tricky upright structure of man, relinquished, discarded, sloughed off. He turned into the very protoplasm that had obsessed a late tutor of hers — the flux sought as the basic ingredient of life! She could not imagine a human moving so and remaining whole. A serving girl stood beside her saying that Dionysus Himself was performing, surely the real Dionysus, yes? Zelea chuckled as much at the aptness as at the girl's knowing of the



Greek God. Strangely, the last revel she attended in the Regent's palace was preciously tedious as this was rudely fascinating. It was obvious this Dionysus needed no mushroom to rouse raw ebullient energy. By now her provocateur had become a veritable flame and she perched as any watchful child. Thera looked on as a waylaid governess. Many dancers now gyrated on the floor, some spinning as listing tops. Male and female invited the Viceroy to lascivious embrace. Yet he desisted, coming she slowly realized to beckon, invite her to join the fantastic molt, to shuck her stiff problematic mask. After a second kylix of the potent wine and third or fourth unfeigned smile, she stood with only marginal assistance from Thera, loosened her chiton, and began to exploit her fulsome Corybant training, the means they used as much to recover one's equilibrium in a whirling turn as blithely entertain. She believed Nemesis Herself could not have planned it more effectively. Before the inveterate clown, Medju's familiar, a countryman stained in a saffron dye, with face mask mirroring the visage of the Viceroy, she began moving as a practiced 'muse', her moves and gyrations unexpected and surprising in execution. Her sojourn with the Regent's Thyiads also helped, her use of the few rhythmic lifts and vaults the familiar promptly mimicked with nimble surety. By then the Viceroy looked on with incendiary wonder, demanding from Nemanos what spirit possessed her, a query that made everyone smile, including finally the Viceroy. By then Thera too began sampling the wine. She had long since said her peace and given the schenti one last hike. Not used to drink she was soon nodding. An observant servant led her to a couch in

the adjoining loggia where she listlessly fell asleep. By then Zelea had several makeup attendants. In no time she was nearly as greased and naked as the Viceroy, all inference to the phylum chordata challenged, her inchoate belly the focus of several spirit coddlers, their rattles and chants releasing the child from the stricture of necessity, rhetoric, logic. She might pace the barbarian at his very animated specialty! More or less — credulity being one consequence of germane inebriation. Even a late thunderstorm seemed to bless with timely concordant rumbles.

How it all concluded, if that word has coinage on such evenings, she didn't remember, and woke feeling sick and rather creaky, her bones having returned to their appointed places with a vengeance while the clouds of mind and sky swirled. The room she lay in overlooked a terrace and the former Regent's prize garden which opened onto the sweet smelling orchards. She tried to remember them before the tumult. It was the recognition that always amazed — the stamina Dionysus might impart for short periods. She rubbed at the drawing left on her abdomen by some conjurer and prayed it came off without astringents. As mystifying was the sprightly movements of the Viceroy on the terrace as he teased a pod of children who frisked as dolphins about a great whale in this ruddy dawn, making his dramatic show of pathos the day before an improbable act. It was then she realized the warmth in the bed she slept in came from two brown bodies on either side, neither as invigorated as the Viceroy. This small consolation -- that not all Nubians moved unceasing as atoms — calmed but did not assuage when a third then a fourth slipped off the hill-

ock of furs, the last a thick matron who scratched her behind and licked the fat nipple of an enormous breast to which an attendant brought a wriggling babe who readily relaxed when its mouth was full. She knew the Viceroy had many children and was thankful the current bearers did not include herself. He would, with mock regret, resist a Glaean prospect no longer virginal. But she hadn't anticipated the attentions of his spirit healers. She had many names for them -- the coterie who put the shadow world aright or themselves wasted away. If they had been gentle enough, some of the ingredients applied smelled awful, leaving her with a malicious urge to bathe. She was almost glad Nemanio and Thera had vanished. She suspected the thoughtful priest may have escorted a tipsy Thera home. She was halfway to the nearest fountain house, draped in a skin with harsh tufts of hair at the collar, when the first scream erupted, followed by another, then another, the last more curdling, hair-raising than the first. Everyone about the loggia froze. Further shrieks, higher pitched, excoriating, drew all but herself into the palace. The tumult was soon deafening, the ululations of women's voices terrible and wizenning. One wanted to know the worst but also flee, hide, perhaps forever. With growing trepidation she looked about for Nemanio.

Guards from all quarters rushed in weapons at the ready, she of the wide animal skin briskly searched and thrust aside. Her very confused, hungover state may have saved her life. The crescendo of bawling seemed to shake the very stones of the palace. A fleeing nursery slave was glimpsed being restrained by two of the Shardana skirmishers. She held



her throat begging for her life, declaiming she was innocent of the child's death. For an instant Zelea was aghast, seized with a terror and trembling as the wall before her reverberated, the very plaster coming briefly fitfully alive. When the screaming lulled — the slave had been dragged back into the palace — she noticed an absence of life about her and fled down the nearest open portico to a cart gate left awry, running as never before, bare feet impervious to the stony pathways she scampered over in a rush to clear the gardens, her only instinct flight as swift far and sure as Providence might allow. Twice she stumbled but continued, gripped by an urgency that belied fear. The very clouds seemed to race with her.

Meeting her at the Propylon, Thera was alarmed at her mistress's state but alerted by the tremor she too felt and the hubbub she anxiously witnessed from the breezeway. The Viceroy's guards assigned the villa left at once on hearing the faint but awesome cries. Zelea immediately dismissed her gate keeper, bearer, cook and gardner. Only Thera stayed, yielding to dismay before the emphatic movement of her mistress as she sought her humblest attire and secret money cache. Said her Lady, "I'm — we're, if you're coming — going to find a safe place for the next few hours. Period." Several gems she slipped into the girdle pouch and bade Thera rid herself of all aristocratic dress and bring whatever money she could find. She was adamant. Remarking in passing that they had lived on borrowed time since Medju's coming and now it may have lapsed, of this she felt certain. They had had a minor quake, one of Poseidon's very naughty thumbs, but the tremor was not, she believed, the cause of the protracted

tumult in the palace. “Something happened to one of the Viceroy’s favourites — a premonition I had earlier last night. And now, apparently, one of his children has died — as mysteriously I have little doubt. There’s going to be denunciations and reprisals. We have no choice.” She couldn’t help notice her servant’s hesitation. “That pretty annoyance does you proud but won’t charm the Chimaera, as they say. Now hurry up!” Thera remained not a little addled but did as she was told, humoring the exhortation to dress as a skivvy.

They avoided the main thoroughfares, striking out obliquely for the nestled harbor. There was some talk among the merchantmen and store layers about the goings on ‘up the hill’ and the slight tremor, but no one seemed concerned about two fishwives in a hurry. Since the Viceroy’s coming a long line of transport vessels was drawn up to the newly extended wharf. It took a while to traipse the splinted trestles, hoists, draw lots of timber, pyramids of stone, precast mud brick, oil and wine amphorae, augmented wool bales, grain sacks, ingots of copper and lead, and piles of quartz sand. The sky was hot, nude, close. Thera had no idea what Zelea intended and continued to wonder if her mistress had gone berserk. But seeing the hasty convening and departure of a cohort of shore watch diminished her doubt. With renewed vigor Zelea strode to the penteconter with the lyre prow lying near the end of an older pier that was cluttered with a medley of clay pithoi and wooden chests. She insisted Thera remain apart until she had conversed with the captain. The burly man was astonished to see her and at first amused by her appearance and

request until she mentioned the agitation in the palace and proffered the bag of coins. This he quickly vested, affecting nonchalance, then curtly beckoned to Thera to come aboard. The two women promptly headed to a small space in the prow of the ship, a triangular wedge cut off from the rest by the skycaster. By then there was talk on the pier of some ugly happening in the palace. The comments were anxious and wary. “More bloody retribution.” someone said. Zelea pulled a sail cover over them and sat back breathing heavily. “We can stay the night. The captain once worked for my husband and can I think be trusted. I’ve offered him a bonus if he’ll take us to Cos, if necessary. He promised to hunt down some oiled barley and wine. We’ve done the only prudent thing possible. Tonight I intend to find out for sure, as soon as it’s dark. Alone. Trust me. It’s a plan Nemanio and I worked out together. As you may have guessed.”

And with that Zelea sought Thera’s hand, said she was glad she came, and closed her eyes. Vigilant Thera could hardly relax, let alone sleep, and still believed she must be dreaming. Oil, barley and wine — if and when it came — rustic fare indeed. And Nemanio. She always knew he had a keen eye.

Zelea first reconnoitered the villa Propylon and was not surprised to find the Viceroy’s guard out in force. She prayed her servants took her word and fled. Her old gardener especially seemed unperturbed, saying the storm would blow itself out. She had not intended to risk a rendezvous with Nemanio but decided he would be a mine of information then and in-



formation she desperately needed. She feared most of the Elders would have been rounded up. Scheira she believed was safer off the island. At least for the time being.

Her approach to the old Labyrinth was doubly cautious, looking first for their lately agreed on sign of danger — a small branch of one of the stately pines that surrounded the ancient ruin bound to its trunk — a sight visible from the first of the tumuli that flanked the old precessional walkway. Seeing no doubled branch she headed to the tumbled entrance that once served a pottery magazine. There a second signal, the laying flat of a shard from a smashed pithos, would prompt a cessation of a meeting. But no sooner had she cleared the last of the tumuli than a hand went about her mouth and pulled her down behind the mound. Her momentary terror lapsed on recognizing the measured voice calming her. She and her paramour lay face down as a guard sauntered by the further East Entrance moments later, which she would have passed to reach the concealed lacuna in the outer wall. “I couldn’t get to the pine tree. Cerbes’s acolytes are everywhere. I can imagine what he’s told the distraught Viceroy. I believe he may have discovered the inner corridor after the small quake we had. The sudden invigilation and use of terror is the result of the discovery of the stolen shrine pavilion with the Viceroy’s dead child inside. A mazy tale.” Zelea listened as the condemned while the advent of the pavilion travesty unfolded — Nemanio had just returned from a meeting of Egyptian priests who were discussing the likelihood of the late Pharaoh’s treasure still being secreted somewhere on Glaea. “One of the concubines

discovered the dead child even as the Viceroy found a Greek facsimile replacing a favourite votive figure. You can imagine. Then, almost on the hour, after several days on a rough sea, a special Envoy arrived from Memphis with a royal edict critical of the Viceroy. I understand a judicial synod is now in session. The Envoy plans to search the Potnian treasury at day-break. Incidentally, the guard makes a further pass on the other side soon. We can hightail it then.”

It was a mouthful. But Zelea was soon alert and questing. “But why the treasury?”

Nemano sighed. “It seemed some of the tomb trophies are rumoured to be in the treasury there. Incredible, I know.”

Zelea closed her eyes. “So that’s what the pirate was up to.” She recalled the chest he so stealthily lugged to his penteconter early that morning months before, nearly dropping it when she narrowly missed him in her scramble to the scarp. The cave or caves he’d used were no longer safe. She thought of the large dark chamber of the treasury. But who would he have bribed to stash it there? Did someone there think it might be a gift? The questions loomed. Was the box she glimpsed not full of exotic gold figurines, possibly Egyptian? It seemed beyond reckoning. “You must come away with us,” she managed to say, not entirely clear what comfort that suggestion might bring.

“I think not,” he said with conviction. “And I trust Thera ought not to be kept waiting.”

Certain that she intended to leave, he urged her not to approach the wharf again on foot. “Very soon there will be an ill-humoured cordon about the harbour. If your ship is still berthed, and you believe your captain loyal and unsuspected, you’d best approach it seaward in a small dugout. I have one that might serve.”

“I must trust the captain. I have no choice. May the Gods bless you. The guard’s now out of sight.”

They embraced briefly, awkwardly. He slipped a breathing reed into her hair, in case she needed to swim, and led her to a small dugout screened by the large rocks marking the reach of the harbour. Once inside the bay he urged her to abandon the dugout and swim the remaining distance to the wharf...being in the water she should be able to return undetected...if need be. Seeing him linger on the shore, even as she approached the wharf, she prayed as she had many times before:

Dearest Athena, love him, one more time. As much as you can.

Thera responded to the knocking on the gunwhale and fought down a plaintiff’s groan as a sodden Zelea reached up for the hemp side ladder. When beneath the flaxen sail cover the wide-eyed servant was astonished at his mistress’s shivering. She knew when her ministrations were plainly welcome., and rubbed the cold quivering limbs. Later, the captain discreetly placed a dry tunic on the side rail when the first of the shore watch waved him a good night.



“A decent man,” Thera said later. “One of Hephaestus’s familiars I think. Always did fancy the ladies.” Her pleasure at hearing her mistress’s amused sigh infected and warmed them both.

## EIGHT

Again Cerbes’s ubiquitous actor-spy delivered himself of a precious yet usefully detailed monologue. The fellow earned his keep by being such a ‘harmless’ fop. He had talked to a tart who talked to a servant who had talked to a wet nurse who served in the corps tending the Viceroy’s litter of children.

“You couldn’t get higher than a wet nurse?”

“Well they do see a lot and rarely have to account for themselves. When you don’t have any lines to say you notice who’s doing the mugging and spitting.”

Cerbes dimly recalled that actors rarely account for themselves only their performance. He sat back withholding his reproof. The actor purred and touched his hair.

“Wael, the cause of the pretty tumult was, all things considered, two-fold. The Envoy we presume has our blessing.” Cerbes snorted. “Just so. The Viceoy was not really opening night material. One could see that.”

“Get on with it.”

“First came the discovery of the dead — I daresay poisoned — brat by her cross-eyed nanny who bit her tongue off rather than flub an entrance. The stylish aspect was leaving the corpse in the elusive shrine pavilion —

where an Egyptian mummy was to have ‘dossed’. So unfortunate the Viceroy overlooked the elegant craftsmanship.”

“I’m listening.”

“How it got onto the West Porch of the Viceroy’s seraglio is still a fine brain twister. The Envoy rushed in and became the second being to see the pretty little darling, surrounded by a swarm of devotional flies. After that everyone quite splendidly squeezed an onion. The child it turned out had been sick but the quacks both Glaean and Nubian hopeful, as any sane quack would be. Even if they felt honour bound to presume the girl a boy god.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“So, in the early hours this rather overdone pageant of Death, Metamorphosis minus a Resurrection. They’re still looking for the director. Must be a delicious cutup. To maintain the suspense, a Uraeus, that’s a symbol of the sacred Egyptian asp...”

“Get on with it.”

“...Especially useful for scrofulous old lechers...had been scrawled on the angel’s forehead. The royal attendants were by then competing with the professional murmurers. You can imagine!”

“Can the milk maid be believed?” Cerbes wished to reassure his stooge he was acutely listening.

“Oh I should think so. She’s far too stupid to extemporize. No one knew what to do. Well the script was a mess. Surely someone must cast

an augury but who could sling any bull at a time like that? The Viceroy's own putterer looked like a forgotten grease box. It's not every day you have to accommodate a Pharaoh's treasure with the curse full blown. Then the slight tremor began, a sign Hephaestus had found another sliver in his work stool. Or Poseidon put a thumb where it wasn't welcome. Or Seth or Horus sat on a cat. Rather anti-climactic though. One can take only so much classic melodrama in a single evening." He desisted at the sight of Cerbes fondling his beard, meaning the Epopot was thinking as well as listening. With a polite cough he continued.

"In Scene Two — the discovery of the new substitute figurine, a sweet little scene stealer I must say. We all stand in awe of bowl collectors. As you know, the original carving sits somewhere out of the sun. Rumour places it in the Potnian treasury. A rumour the Viceroy missed or overlooked. No one wants to bell the High Priestess, do they? Well not just yet."

Said Cerbes with guarded satisfaction. "It may just be possible. Though it's surely been moved by now."

"I can hardly tell you everyone tried to disown the stone hussy, who bore an uncanny likeness to the nautch who came with the Viceroy. Who noted the coincidence with admirable pathos. West of Naucratis you find the insatiable shedu, the calamity dears. Well, he was little winded by then. Anyway the pretty little bowl bitch was discovered in the very fire circle of the converted palace — the sacred ground the Viceroy looked for solace, the circle his ancestors would visit when their sacrifices weren't up



to scratch — the very circle he placed over the Potnian mosaic of the bull nuts. For the record. So many reflections in so small a pond.”

Cerbes barely kept from smiling. The actor sensed a near triumph.

“Well, the spirit clan — all those pinched woodies the Viceroy lugged here — were unhappy I can tell you. Seeing their human sovereign bent like an old wino — his carved familiar taking the waters at some Glaean fount, his paramour taking up with a randy Glaean sculptor — well, you know when someone’s dying on stage. Holding his ‘temple’ like Amun Himself had taken a dump. Even the prompters clammed up. And all because of a cracked door stop. The woody he declared, in a voice with great timbre I must say, would be redressed or the entire island raised. ‘Fine,’ the new Envoy said later, one of the Eastern bean counters, ‘Should’ve done it the first time.’ Never raising his voice, all sotto voce. Such calm you find in the desert.”

Cerbes absently nodded.

“I must say the Envoy’s patronage didn’t appease the Viceroy. He demanded the Lady Zelea be brought to him — remembering how he’d been upstaged the night before no doubt. She does have this reputation...”

Cerbes sat up. “She was at the palace last night?”

“Oh my yes. Greased like any nicely seasoned flank. A belly full. About three months according to the bon janglers.”

Cerbes held his astonishment at bay. “And the Envoy naturally went along with the order to summon the cat.”

The actor replied knowing his answer would delight. “These spell casters do distract the understudies. What makes them so endearing. She’ll be kissing your feet in no time. But as I said, was about to say — you must have been nodding — the Nubian ox seems bent on drowning himself first. It’s a long row back to Memphis. Boarding the lug sailer someone said he had to give up his famous Ibis pectoral. Now that would be a comedown. A serious lost of ballast.”

“And so the Envoy will visit the Potnian temple,” Cerbes mused, almost philosophical now.

“Well if that isn’t putting it charitably, I must say. I doubt he’ll smell too many narcissi along the river bed.” Closing his eyes, the actor concluded, “I understand there’s a gaggle of Glaeans the Envoy would like someone to relieve him of. Common gossip in the nursery. Naturally your name and enviable reputation came up.”

Cerbes stood and took the actor by his forelock. “You’re certain you’ve not left something out -- something concerning the Envoy’s wishes?” The actor assured him the summons would come within the hour. Cerbes seemed mollified. His precious spy never added concrete declarations unless they were flattering and true. The Eopt granted at last his leave. “I wouldn’t go too far. You can help with the list.” A task the actor smiled in accepting; he too had his undeserving critics.

As the convoluted tale of the infamous tomb treasure, dead surrogate child, lost votive carving and arrived Envoy made the rounds of the

Glaean hoi polloi, there was revived distress over the vanished, presumably murdered, young King — their once expectant, seamless future — but measured relief the new Envoy was a sober Egyptian priest. There was little sympathy for the deposed Nubian, especially among the remaining gentry, most of whom found the Viceroy's rituals, decorations and artworks bewildering if not ridiculous, and his fuss over the missing concubine craven and reckless. To say nothing of never finding the spoils she lucklessly came with. The surrogate statue even approximated fine art, the like of which had been lacking in Glaea since the coup. The incident of the statue separated the two cultures almost as neatly as any clash over sovereignty itself. The Egyptian Envoy seemed entirely indifferent. Nubian or Glaean bobbles made little difference. The sons of men matured only by the Nile. What indeed can one expect from a tribe of impulsive children? But that was before he entered the celebrated villa and sensed the tranquility rarely visited on an Egyptian scribe. Grandeur, awe, hauteur waylaid the contemplative mind. Here, amidst this tasteful genteel tranquility — concinnity was the word his translator invoked — he might have a decent bowel movement, even compose a nimble expressive letter without summoning a diviner. Yet his instincts said 'beware'. He had a job to do.

In the meantime Cerbes made the rounds extracting those youths who best met the standard, the children most likely to appease the recently neglected Minoan mythos of Asterion, in particular the tribute payments to the Minotaur, whom the Envoy now saw as a useful means — to stalk and chasten the remaining political malcontents on the island. One last final



house cleaning. Which Fen and the Gigantes observed with ready disgust. Both were poignantly aware of the change Hephaestus's or Poseidon's rumble caused in the old Labyrinth. It seemed a terrible beast that had lain dormant was dislodged from its catalepsy. Spirits live on. Theseus killed the progenitor, but the gods were ever reviving, reconfiguring old dramas -- they had to, their boredom otherwise insufferable.

The initial trace evidence of this returned brute came in Cerbes's Necropolis as he prepared a youngster for sacrifice to the Minotaur. He first imagined it a rare gust of wind. Sometimes, through the air wells of the Necropolis, one got such drafts. Then it seemed more a displacement of air in the chamber itself, from a suitably aligned corridor in the adjacent Labyrinth. The lamps even flickered. With the breeze came the odour, the smell of decay. A veritable tonic for him. At first he imagined a particularly flatulent lad among the acolytes, then an animal, perhaps fallen into one of the narrower shafts, a dead mouldering carcass. How odd the stench should reach him then. This he noted with great curiosity as the youth's hands were at last secure to the ankles, the spirit of resistance all but stanching, the form lifted to the contoured marble, the neck artery shimmied over the bung hole, the young flesh sanguine in the torchlight. He regarded the day glass. But a few grains left. The Envoy's observer stoked his chin. He was present to see the form unconscious before the organs were removed. Killing Glaeans was one thing; slighting Egyptian mummification rites another. Cerbes had always presumed the condemned might be vivisected. You never apprised the working of the nerv-

ous system on a cadaver, never learned, assimilated the fervency of the gods! The observer scowled again at the normal unconstricted pupils. He had told the medicaster to double the opiate. How careless young people were these days Cerbes mused aloud. The peculiar displacement of air reached him again. He could even feel a flutter of wind, a rush across dusty stone. He snorted. Some bloodthirsty daemon getting an eyeful. Perhaps a former lover, a winged Hermes say, savoring the finale. As with many misanthropes, Cerbes misunderstood the mindful Hermes!

When the sand bulb ran out he took up the knife and motioned to the burker to stiffen the restraints. It was curious how some secretions varied during the final pulsations, given the dram measure. Again the form recoiled at his touch with satisfying promptness. As the knife was poised to sever the carotid a dark heavy hand swiped at the head of the burker. A surprised Cerbes watched the nearest acolytes shrink in terror. The assailant Cerbes imagined a costumed novice at work, wanting an ear or toe for talisman or bribe, teeth for a smiling mask. But when the burker held his head blood seeping through his fingers, Cerbes got angry. How uncanny the disguise of the novice — a roving bull's head a splendid approximation of the real thing. The Envoy's observer cowered the while to one side, quite indescribably speechless. Cerbes decided he must really discipline the imp this time when the massive head drew close to him, the shunting of nostrils and animal hide on the torso precociously authentic. The terrible bellow that followed made him start — they, someone, had a real animal close at hand — so incredulous was he by the daring and impudence

that he slapped the creature and sternly lectured it on the mischievous nature of the interruption. Any more meddling and the japer would be flogged! Even when the horned head bent and speared him in the groin, leaving a gash that bled like a geyser, he imagined fake blood until the pain keened his mind. His incredulity was inimitable. In frozen horror he watched the fluent cataract as his knees buckled, barely noting the fleeing observer and the acolytes. The monster bellowed again as the ranging horn lanced and finally impaled the Epopt, flinging the body into the air like an old servant shaking an apron. By then the observer breathlessly churned through the nearest corridor with the acolytes wondering when he must awake. He would never smile at Glean-Greek myth again, his mind fixed on the sickening hide and strange moist eyes, each a round dense ocean. With unprecedented numinous gratitude he found himself before the stone outreach and shimmer of daylight where one might draw breath...as did the young lad in the Necropolis wiggling free the restraints in shafts of sunbeam motes following another tremor. The same sun that graced Zelea's face as the penteconter sailed in a brisk wind to Cos.

## NINE

The substance of the terrible unfolding in the palace Balo learned from the widely knowledgeable Rhene, the Heraion's High Priestess. How she might be so placid in the telling or come by such information he could only marvel at. He had always, it seemed, underestimated the craft and resource of women. The experience of the Envoy's observer was apparently



sufficient for the him to seek out the Glaean ‘wise woman’, the one most ministers and retainers of the new regime pointed to with begrudged resignation.

Balo’s admission to her fold began just after he sought out, caught and stripped of his disguise the acolyte who so incensed the girl who reminded him of the Swan. Out of sheer incendiary anger had he pursued the man, identified as a tout for the Eopt and not a standing member of the Viceroy’s entourage — an impostor jeered and clouted as he left the guest house, the High Priestess expressing seemly regret at seeing the mischief maker so thrashed. The caustic denouement of the acolyte — whom Cerbes disowned — plus the return of Medju’s all-important votive figure to the palace, served as reminders of the shrine’s objectivity and sanctity, a reputation adroit Rhene then especially want to enhance. To that end she personally sought out the old ascetic’s protégé to ask if he would undertake a second more demanding task. The setting for such a request Balo would never have imagined. He had just departed the guesthouse when Rhene’s emissary approached. After his noisy tussle with the acolyte the day before he feared he might also have been recognized, and chose to move on as soon as it was dark. For an instant he imagined the priestess some kind of siren, a pretty decoy for an attacker. It was a close suffocating evening — the calm before the thunderstorm that coincided with the earth tremors -- her stark presence against the dark backdrop of the ocean revealed by a flash of lightening.

His belated recognition of a Potnian priestess was further puzzle. What would she be doing here, on a night like this? The lightening continued to blanch the sky as she motioned to a deserted portico off the descending pathway. The storm began suddenly and violently when they reached the overhang which sheltered several doorways. Her faint laughter at the downpour he almost misinterpreted, thinking it careless, misplaced. Then, to his astonishment Clearidas emerged from the other side of the portico, saying Balo would soon understand all and be amply rewarded for his intervention — spiritually and materially he added before leading Balo through one of the doorways, down a flight of steps into a large subterranean vault, where he left after saying, with a sly smile, that a Stalwart partisan was on his way. As the clouds grumbled and occasionally parted, the chamber was lit by intermittent slivers of moonlight that filtered through crevasses in the floor above.

He waited some time, many times questioning his resolve to wait -- as he had done once before. When accustomed to the light his sense of propriety was again assailed: he picked out many sumptuous trophies nearest the entrance and, last to arrive, objects from an aristocratic cache — treasure beyond imagining. Conspicuously, a moon-laced throne and gem encrusted bed, the gems so many distant fireflies in the filtered light. As his eyes further adjusted, gold, onyx and lapis animals reposed on the high bed. Some of the chests gave off a bouquet of food offerings, others the faint reek of an embalmer's studio, of vessels prepared but emptied! Surrounding this litter were hutches brimming with jewelry, spangled fabrics

and thick sumptuous rugs. The realization took his breath away — that an Oracle, this Oracle, might receive a tribute, almost surely desecrated, from a dynasty powerful enough to do the known custodian grievous harm. And here he was, ensconced in the midst of it, awaiting an unknown agent. Then it dawned on him, this was no tribute awaiting placement but a hiding place for a treasure with a momentous curse on it! Typhon's terrible menacing heist!

But this rumination was snuffed by the appearance of someone masked and himation wrapped, slipping as silently through the low door as a wisp of smoke. Two stout attendants rolled a massive stone discus over the entrance leaving the lamp he or she held glowing like a coal. They might very well have been rawly buried alive themselves! Her rings identified her as the wondrous Rhene. Seeing her thus he could only imagine that she had come not from an antiphony but a symposium entertainment, her costume beneath the wrap that of a select hetaera, her mask a fanciful rendering of a giant jewelled wasp, which she removed the moment the stone rolled into place, her face beneath ornately made over. So this was Cleadias's 'Stalwart partisan'! As she moved closer she took in his bewilderment saying, "The attire is sometimes useful. As your expression confirms. People tend to like the Pythia's household rarified — not involved in mundane matters. Certainly not as tarts, hence the reliable presumption it could not be me observing from an exclusive corner of a bustling guest house. We tend to share the same requirement that priest's housekeepers do -- the woman should be housebound and over fifty." She



seemed to welcome his belated smile. “Please believe such resort is not routine, but these are menacing times. One must be fully aware. And occasionally bold.” This said, she studied him for several seconds, almost he imagined as prelude to calling her guard and having him drowned forthwith.

Instead she set the lamp down on one of the unopened chests and drew up two golden chairs, both occasionally glinting in the ambient light. A draught seemed to come from the nearby droning ocean itself, fanning the light wick into a glimmering that intermittently damasked her figure, a bacchante reflected in a shield, the voice alone clear and unambiguous. She began to speak as to a bright and favored student, an act that soothed as it alerted.

“I have been quite fortunate, most of my life. Only my face plays upon the complexions. It is not difficult to affect anxiety in these times. What you see about you beggars explanation. The exquisite offerings in this section are mainly Egyptian, delivered to the Oracle by stealth in large concealing crates. The priest who attends our treasury imagined us singularly blessed until he began to set out the trophies. Needless to say the bearers left the moment the cargo was unloaded. When we saw what it was and meant — the sheerest intimidation from, we presume, old Typhon, who must now be terrified of the new Envoy’s reach — we moved the treasure here as quickly and quietly as possible. Our main treasury occupies the basement of the Dove Shrine’s sanctuary. We daren’t keep the collection and must see it returned — to the court at Memphis. The problem is get-

ting it off the island without the Shardana noticing or beady eyed Typhon — who expects an optimistic reading for a phratry of merchant traders or, as some say, a seat on the Council, ha, ha. The Envoy brought some Egyptian regulars with him but relies on mercenaries, mainly Illyrian and Sicilian skirmishers, former chariot runners most of them, as you must know — who are not much interested in Egyptian custom or protocol. They would readily loot our treasury using the Envoy's concern as an excuse to steal what has been legitimately pledged to us, then abscond with the lot. Can you imagine their delight in finding this cache! They are fully aware of their growing power, these Northern Sea Peoples, and really serve no one. They are resourceful, fearless and innately rapacious. Too few of our world's stolid rulers realize this.”

Balo's attentive silence seemed the response she anticipated though he barely attended the words, the beauty of the female before him, so unnoticed before, a long neglected pleasure. But she was not yet finished.

“Sadly, complexity seems to thrive on itself.”

Balo sighed, still eyeing the costume. “You won't find we wanting. Or inattentive. I'll do my best to think of a way to remove the treasure. Without incident. Some of the former Navarchs resent having to farm. They still keep up with the current traders and sea lanes. Give me a day or two.”

“We must trust you. Your actions here have been admirable — the old mindful ascetic told me you were Glaean to the bone. The ruckus over the planted votive carving could have been much worse. There is thus much

to do. You are I think quite indispensable.” His impatience must have surfaced for she continued with a trace of whimsy after touching her face. “You can have your way for half a hand glass, no more. Though not here. We must be ‘discreetly’ observed. The spy and toady make allowances for the sweeter trull. Yes?” This said she replaced the mask and shouldered the himation, adding, “After which you will toil like a miner, I promise you. But with an excellent downdraft and easy face. Come along my requisite Titan.”

Her cryptic words teased nearly as much as her request that he roll back the stone, which he discovered so faultlessly round that once the secret baffle was thrown, a child could move it. Two hooded priests lowered their heads as they passed, one turning inside the vault immediately after. The wasp queen who yet might sting, he mused to himself as he followed the shapely ankles and chided himself again for being so easily flattered and accepting.

He was led to a moonlit porch off an open shrine, she by then raffishly pulling his tunica sash to an area graced by a single couch. The himation she drew over the one cushion, the brief flimsy costume nimbly released and slung underneath, leaving only the mask for him to deal with — as she set the small hand glass behind a leg of the couch.

She was somewhat older than he imagined yet altogether magnificent. A form both strong and fluent in the quicksilver light, only loose breasts somewhat forsaking the Amazon. He had no sooner removed the mask that she appeared crestfallen, looking up behind him. “Agh, the old gar-



dener cut it back.” Following her gaze he saw the spangled grapes hanging just out of reach in the pergola. “Leg up, Titus.” If the words teased, not so her raised foot, expecting a hoist, which he provided only to have her legs slip about his neck as a yoke, her hands free to seek the heavier fruit above. He felt like Atlas, all humanity ardently questing above, swaying listing, reeling. Once he almost stumbled. “Hey, not so fast.”

Sounds of her actually eating, the pits pelting the moon dappled floor, was accompanied by a knee shifting to his shoulder to better access the heavenward fruit. He soon palmed a thigh and crotch, setting her almost as a constellation in the dark pergola sky. She began laughing, a laughter rich and unaffected, the mark of an active player he presumed — only busy humans seemed to know how to smile — even as individual grapes glanced off his head, nose and chin, and penis, then as hard as a leering stone Herm. Amusement at an occasional hit vivified his palming of the resilient flesh.

When he began slipping in the fruit, some of it pulped, he lowered her to the couch and set about staying their embraces to the measure of the hand glass. Twice he raised her above him, the better to see this replete Aphrodite, defy a love rush, and return in kind her game stroke of ‘dangling fruit.’

The appointed deadline he arrived at oblivious of, sufficiently exhausted to only weakly protest the instatement of the himation and rushed departure, her disappearing form a mist disclosing a presumptive Clearidas urging the bearded one dress and follow with dispatch. Clearidas

would help with the ‘earth removal’. Earth removal? All too soon her canny words returned — down draft, mine face — portorage! The immediate necessity of which he torpidly reminded himself — the removal of the Egyptian treasure. His only experience of actual mining came from the stories of deathtrap silver deposits in the Laurium hills near Sunium, stories baleful and appalling, only the unluckiest of slave...yet even there he would at that moment have gone on her behalf, with or without the sturdy tunic Clearidas held out for him.

A day later, on a moonless night, a large bireme, lay discretely berthed near a heavily treed grotto, onto which several of Clearidas pals and a team directed by two Navarchs loaded many nondescript chests and trunks that a team of movers trundled down a deep steep path, a veritable ‘mine face’.

## TEN

In a rosy fingered sunset, from the cover of the sandstone outcrop, the sight of the heavily laden penteconter anchored in the shallows by the narrow Southern coast of the large island of Keftiu delighted Typhon. Time enough before nightfall, he calculated, to stalk and kill the drowsy oarsmen who waddled shore and fell to the sand. Never had he seen such exhaustion. They must have rowed a day or two nonstop. Lifeless as shells buoyed by the tide and tumbled on the beach. Even the captain. Astonishing no one seemed to have stayed on board, a fact that momentarily cautioned. Said the ancient Poseda who ought to know, “They could also be sick, very sick.” The pirate had nearly died several years ago of the

plague. Typhon had not been bedridden but was left with a pock marked face. “Our relic croc,” Poseda called him when they were both hale again.

But the sporadic laughter quelled all doubt. Though exhausted the handful of sailors and oarsmen were happy, joyous even. From a small pithos one group rounded draughts of a spirit wine in a sandy hollow. Spontaneous exclamations echoed along the beach, blithe, carefree. The sailors had apparently survived the most Southern Sporades. Typhon and Poseda exchanged looks. They knew the feeling and anticipated a lucrative heist. Child’s play really. Like robbing a drunk. Said Poseda, “Better from the other side.” Typhon nodded. The sun would be their cover, a molten bronze helmet blinding anyone near the bowsprit. One sailer fell into the water, was clumsily hauled to the shore. Said Typhon, “I’ll take the waves.” The gang of matey attackers, cutlasses in hand, crept down a further embankment, silent as mice. Half came over the rocks, the other swimming into the surf lapped stern, hunkering onto the beach. Simple cudgelling proved sufficient, a single blow laying out most oarsmen. A few were snorting so loudly the very sounds of the falling knob sticks were muted. Most would recover with very sore heads. That would be sufficient. They were after all Typhon’s same sort of bullhead. He recognized no one who might have sailed with him before but could not be sure.

When the sailor’s few weapons had been confiscated and guards posted, Typhon and Poseda finally skipped aboard the old penteconter, the oars left helter-skelter. Torches were needed to peer into the cuddy. The sight of inferior amphorae on the deck made Typhon scowl. The hold



was likely full of questionable olive oil or backdated wine tightwad Canaeus intended for Naucratis or Alexandria, hiring boats on the cheap as usual, wanting to clear the bay watch on Glaea before sunrise. Hence the exhausted sailors and spent captain. Some stout chests full of offertory paraphernalia were viewed more amenably. Likely destined to the Temple Round in Halicarnassus. And behind one of these two bodies sprawled on an old folded mast, their feet alone distinct in the dappled light. Additional torches were needed to reveal the identity that made the wily pirate look to his partner in wonder — it was, yes, he was sure, the very creature who almost ran into them above the grotto several weeks before. The nymph stirred but did not open her eyes. Both women might have served at the oars, given their exhaustion, an oddity the pirates found entertaining. Though not for long. When the redhead awoke a Daemon in full frenzy confronted them.

If the crew of the merchantman was easily incapacitated on the beach, the redhead in the cuddy proved a fury with murderous nails and teeth, her form sufficiently merchandisable for Typhon to want her whole. A small sickle knife that materialized from the folds of her tunic had been wielded with considerable skill. That weapon was not yet confiscated and the last bravo who tried still reviled a gash in his hand. Despite Typhon's sharp command no one positioned himself to try again. "She's a Harpy," said another skeptic who had just recovered his candor. A brief economic stalemate vivified the vanquished state of the seemly partner whose fine skin seemed bruise free, except for an older lesion on the side of her head

that had nearly healed. Aloud Typhon said to Poseda, “I think we take a slight detour. The bazaar at Naucratis for these two. Yes, Naucratis it is.” To his sullen crew he gave the order to remove the chests and scuttle the ship, adding, “They’ll soon come up for air.”

As Balo, who had spelled his skycaster at the tiller, piloted the broad merchantman to the other side of the isthmus that grew from Keftiu, the sleek bireme sat plainly pulled up on the moon-bright beach. With unflinching caution he noted an older style penteconter further out, all but submerged, only its lyre prow and mast showing above the prune surfaced sea. The bireme, with extra deck and reinforced ram, was a privateer he could not outrun and would risk alerting if he kept to his course. On such a relatively bright night, its captain may already have spotted him. Still, there was no sign of it giving chase. Thus he pulled closer to the sheer end of the isthmus, trusting the pirates would be too preoccupied celebrating their heist to maintain a close scan of the horizon. His plan to sail through the night — a considerable risk given the recent storm — had thus far paid off, but he had little doubt the penteconter suffered the fate he narrowly escaped. After an exacting debate he drew his ship behind the isthmus, dropped anchor, and prepared to swim ashore for a better assessment. He estimated he had an hour before he might head to the near side of the island. Clearidas wanted to come but was persuaded to stay. Balo set a hand glass. If he was not back when it was half empty his Lieutenant Crino, who had stayed with him throughout their earlier ‘walk-

about', was to rouse the older Navarch and take the ship off. For now a single scout was best. If discovered they should scuttle the ship and take their chances ashore. All in all it seemed miraculous they got this far. His arms still ached from the exertion. The 'downdraft' the High Priestess casually spoke of turned out to come from a natural wonder, a shaft worn into the limestone cliff by an older sewer sluice, the bore just large enough once widened in a couple of spots to trundle the Egyptian treasure down to the secreted merchantman. Throughout the ordeal he had kept his complaining mind focused on the wondrous Potnian temple. The sun had nearly set before he lay down his hauler's sling with its rappel hook and attended to his tormented hands. With the ship loaded and ready to depart, he was instructed to seek out a particular store layer in Naucratis who would put him in touch with a priest in service of an Egyptian shore marshal who served the current Chancellor. If the store layer could not be found he was to scuttle the craft and disperse his crew. To his dismay, Clearidas had stolen aboard and hid out behind one of the chests. He was bored with his routine at the shrine and, so he claimed, just loved the sea. The Priestess could choose her spies and shills with enviable guile.

When the moon edged a lone cloud he chose to head in. From the lack of activity on the bireme and growing pricks of fire on the beach he presumed the looting complete. With luck he just might get within earshot of the campsite. To get an overview he climbed partway up a layered shingle to look across the deck of the bireme. By an oil lamp a helmsman repaired a clew and some reef tackle. So perhaps there had been a struggle.



Several figures sat in a row below a gunwhale arms bound behind. The survivors, he presumed. Those worth selling at the market in Naucratis perhaps. Or Miletus or Thebes. Abydos was like too far off. Below the top deck a voice briefly cried out, in pain or ecstasy he couldn't tell. Neither male nor female. Something was dumped overboard later by a cook. Perhaps an amputation.

The talk around the nearest fire was the usual drunken braggadocio and brisk gambling — some of the penteconter's crew having joined the bravos. A fairly routine heist then. Swiftly as he dared he returned to the still merchantman and newly vigilant crew. It was decided they best take their chances in the dark on the near side of the island. But no sooner had they slipped anchor than a second bireme was spotted near the faint horizon following it seemed in the first bireme's imagined wake. The anchor was speedily but gently returned to the water and wide sail furled.

Typhon, not yet aware of the approaching craft, briefly imagined a distant flapping of wings as he basked in his good luck, which seemed to grow minute by minute as the moon skirted the growing cloud cover. The hellcat had finally given up her weapon for the dressing of an injury suffered by the penteconter's captain — a bargain one of the alert and servile merchantmen devised. Poseda, a fine versatile quack, had applied a poultice himself. The old penteconter was easily scuttled after. Relaxing now by the fire, he took in his prize find, who appeared alive and more or less well, despite the surprise miscarriage an hour before — a mixed bless-

ing — as she sipped some of Canaeus's wine, which wasn't as bad as expected. He decided he would be patient. And thought instead of the venerable Martina, the seasoned Nauratic witch who often helped him when he needed a special medicine for a boil, itch or laceration. She also had an uncontested reputation for charms, spells and hexes. The locals were wary of her wisdom and experience but never hesitated to call in need. She had helped him once before with a specialized device for simulating virginity, and he felt certain the latest candidate might be salvaged in much the same way. Even as they washed off the blood the nymph's beauty emerged. But he had to get to Naucratis to draw upon the doughty witch's talents. The more he considered his options, the more the ancient colony fetched his imagination. What better place to peddle the precious stones he now palmed in the flickering orange light. The lady and her maid had a covey of them tucked away in their misleading rags. With rest and agreeable eats the two cats, one astute, talented, the other exceptionally pretty when her rags were removed, would fetch exceptional prices. If most of the penteconter's stolid crew were easily recruited by Poseda, the penteconter's captain, his mate and several loyal sailors — the stiff-necked holdouts — were a problem though. Such types usually had a limited market. Most buyers had uses for strong men but didn't like ones their women might take a shine to. Fine mine slaves though, or maybe one of the lion baiters some Westerners, the new fierce Sea Peoples, found entertaining. In any case, with Martina's assistance and the blessing of the great connois-

seur — himself! — they would have a bountiful take. By Ares, the maid could even read and do sums! Now that was class.

They were packed and barely underway when the second bireme came out of the dawn mist, piloted by a compeer whose defiant raised arm might not be denied. For a time the two craft played a kind of mutual stalk-the-jackel as the island receded in the widening horizon. Then, following a sudden hail of voices, an inconvenient item on the second bireme was chucked overboard with apparent satisfaction by those charged with the task. Typhon was puzzled to recognize the shucked commodity as human, a young hellion who managed one last shrill taunt before hitting the swell. The sailors charged with her removal all looked emaciated and seemed covered in sores they scratched at, a puzzle until Typhon realized the creature might not be human after all, but some kind of Keres, a female death-spirit, shamming as a human. An agent of the Nosoi perhaps, the daemons who sired sickness and plagues, ripping souls from the severely wounded or sick and sending them to Hades. The terror of being near a ship cursed with the plague prompted Typhon to shout to the drummer to increase his beat. “Triple time, now, now!” He knew most sailors respected their lore. Such malignant agents were best returned to the sea. No one doubted that wisdom. Only a storm sent by Poseidon Himself might drown such lamia. He was relieved to see the ship dawdle in the water about the hell hag as it became smaller and smaller.



As Scheira swam toward the distant isthmus she prayed to Athena, again, for the strength to get her there. Once more, once more dearest She...

She knew the gods lived complex lives but wondered what she had done to deserve the banes someone put upon her. This time to be plucked from the sea on her way to Cos by a gaggle of Sidonian freebooters, who were in turn rammed and despoiled by a swarm of Mycenaean pigheads — the helmets of boar tusks identifying the marauders — who just minutes ago had been stalked by an unknown craft of equal repugnance. An abductor of an abductor, the last often the worst. But she had dealt with such witless sea rovers before. This time Fen's itching power, one item she took from his ransacked lean-to, kept them frantically absorbed with themselves. The welts left by scratching looked like broken plague boils one know-it-all whispered to the captain. She was chucked overboard shortly after to a hail of curses. If she had to endure the attentions of three bravos, the few pinches of powder they left with infected most of the galley tars she guessed. The small water-tight flask that held the powder she could now affirm as almost water-tight. Part of the powder — ground rose hips and something Martina called pile beans — was damp but with enough aridity left to deploy, the flask a last minute take from the lean-to before she left Glaea.

But her freedom seemed a transient state. She swam away from the ship with a prow shaped like a bull to belatedly note the other craft — moving away, at a feverish pace. She could barely believe her eyes. Rising

in a higher swell she confirmed the flight, the oars working at attack pace — but away from the ship she just been cast off from. No wonder the Oracle was reluctant to give these waters her blessing. Pirates seemed as thick as Pelicans after a thunderstorm. Drowning seemed so easy and seductive then — she had seen more than one woman resort to it, the Wheel of Necessity so heartless and unstinting. The sea a world of scavengers, gleaning the left overs, the debris and cast off refuse, much like herself. But as the sounds of the attacked-paced oars faded, and the shouts and bellows continued on the ship behind her — the helmsmen were feverishly arranging a quarantine area -- she discovered herself terribly venomously thirsty. One didn't happily drown dying for a drink. Then a rumble of thunder touched the one ear not yet water logged. In no time a sheet of rain pitted the water. Turning over she gawped at the fresh liquid. During one deluge the trickle actually became several swallows. So it might not be unalterably grim, the venerable Potnia less insouciant than sometimes rumoured. Though while bobbing about in the increasing swells time itself seemed to have come to a halt.

She idled thus, a bit of flotsam and jetsam, the process unexpectedly slow, the difference between rain nectar and salt sea enough to force a debate. Was there not a handsome dolphin somewhere, or beautiful breasting bull having misplaced his reluctant rider? Might not Tethys Herself happen by hungry for a bit of fish market tittle tattle? Or a mighty Swan, the real birdlike daemon, tired of the old rigmarole? But what bird would fly out in a storm like this, the swells ever increasing in height, becoming

more choppy, her struggle to keep her head above the spray becoming hopeless. So many restless waves, each a poisoned krator. One could never satisfy one's ache like this. Again she sought to swim. Gagging would prompt an extra effort. Surely Thethys would send gentle Theos...but what was this...so suddenly lurching in the wave before her? Not a god, no. Through her inflamed eyes the blurry craft seemed miserable, pitiable, forlorn as she. A lame creature clung to the mast, ridiculous with a purple veil or ribbon billowing. A banner! Heavens, she had really lost it this time. Not even a proper boat but a dugout full of slivers as she touched the side. Festooned with a banner! "She who conceals things," the nitwit at the mast called out. "The dandy dipper!" He had apparently spied her in the water. "You are the foam, be frank with me."

She clung to the side, too exhausted to wrest herself from the water. She could barely believe her ears, kept slipping back, then gagged, her throat pickled with brine. "So like she..." She grasped the extended arm, surprisingly firm. A second hand caught her hair. A leg, her leg, appeared over the side, as the dugout filled with water. About all that could be done. "Oh for an oak and rested shade." Yet the dugout full of slivers would not sink.

As long as she remembered the blurry, furry, horned thing rambled on. Yet somehow he held on, she held on. As the dead sometime return in a snarl of rigging. Was it not the beleaguered Fen, more cruelly destitute and deranged then ever?...



For the nauseated Balo the scene came and went, the bireme with the bull prow slipping from sight, though he feared he and his crew might not ride out the coming storm...hence the appearance then disappearance then re-appearance of the pitiful torn banner that willowed in the brisk wind left him dumbfounded. A banner, a purple banner? The sea rose and settled, the storm fanning the spray on the icy peaks into intermittent storms. He would not only be drowned but go mad beforehand. Crino was himself sea sick and slipped about the deck like an abandoned toy. How foolish he'd been to leave the shelter of the isthmus. To gain an extra hour or two — only to flee into a growing savage storm.

He then froze, became a fixture of the pitching deck. The ghostly bird careening just below the dense purple sky was immense and carried in its bill a purple banner! What mockery! Never before had he seen the awesome creature, only its human energumen high up, in its sorry state, behind the vanquished Regent. The haunt of the myth never left one. The endless turn of the sea. Even Clearidas noted the omen and imagined the worst. The turbulence of a wind that once impregnated Rhea Herself!

## ELEVEN

He had been asleep for some time. And at first expected, awaited another towering, obliterating wave. It seemed he had anticipated pretty much everything except getting morbidly sick. But the sound of bearers and shore men had replaced the creaking, groaning timbers. His trusted Lieutenant, who had readily accepted the necessity and danger of the voyage, sat be-

fore him now in a backlit haze of daylight. Clearidas and an Egyptian priest looked on from behind. Said the trusty Crino, “You flaked out just before we arrived. The hull’s in one piece amazingly enough, only a couple of the smaller chests lost. Otherwise the lashings held.” The steadfast sunshine outside the cabin helped. And the spirited din on the wharf. Balo slowly sat up. The Lieutenant looked at the Priest before he resumed.

“I thought I’d better see the letter delivered soon as we berthed. I found the store layer and he took the letter to the harbour shrine’s Head Priest, who came at once with a seal bearer and a soldier — all of them dressed as store layers. We’re to proceed to the new harbour and must leave soon. Glad you’re okay.”

“They’ve accepted the losses?” Balo looked cautiously at the Priest who solemnly nodded then said, “Yes. The storm did considerable damage here. We’re setting out a detailed inventory. I’m amazed you got this far.” He continued with a faint smile.

“As it turned out the Chancellor, from Medju’s sorry account, guessed that Rhene, the High Priestess, must have anticipated the worst. Despite the misgivings of the Hippodrome and Chariot Corps Commanders, the Pharaoh uses many Northern mercenaries these days, a troupe was sent with the Envoy to find the treasure. The Chancellor worried the treasure might easily subvert their loyalty. Providently, as ironically as that must seem now, Typhon tried to hide it in the Potnian treasury. Rhene, thank the Gods, was in charge. Can you imagine a lesser Priestess thinking

they'd been blessed? The Envoy would have acted harshly and summarily. Well, enough said. But we still don't know how you came, what route you took." When Crino told him they passed the Pigadia chain without hitting any pirates he was astonished. The storm helped there of course. The priest smiled, saying, "I must point out the one bireme you just avoided. Typhon's very ship! Curiously it is berthed in a busy section of the old harbour not far from here. A party went ashore this morning. Our store layer will have the Harbour Master verify the manifest. Should be interesting. We're to keep out of sight. All of us, including yourselves."

After getting his unsteady feet to the floor Balo said with a grunt, "No difficulty there."

The transfer of the dynastic treasure was accomplished early the following morning. A disguised broker from the Chancellor's office had negotiated the 'sale'. The bearers were humbly dressed and their carts unremarkable. Extra guards, also commonly attired, were dispersed among the milling crowd. Balo was particularly anxious the transfer proceeded smoothly and at first did not notice the interest of the Chancellor's deputy Bak, a skinny man with a broad smile who had taken in the activity aboard Typhon's bireme in the old harbour. Only as the last of the cases were fetched from the hold did Balo, gazing through a curtained portal, surmise the extent of the surveillance. He learned from Crino that a spy nest had been established in the old harbour atop a river barge laden with giant cedar logs from Byblos. A short log in the topmost tier provided a



gap for a single body to sit in private. On first returning from the perch Bak extolled the guile of the pirates who had put up tall trestles and set about mending sails. Only from the higher vantage on the barge could one see beyond the clever blind. The arrival of the hag known as Martina set the stage for the unstinting daily reports Balo and Crino were privy to in the busy stoa facing the wharf. The alcove of a wine and spirit merchant proved a favourite hangout for Bak and his rotating watchers. By then Balo was able to sip a light sweet wine without disdain. A veteran spy, Bak talked softly and fondly. Giving away only a few entertaining details.

“The witch, yes. An interesting woman. Works sometimes in the Necropolis at Sais as a hex inhibitor. Many families worry about pronouncements that may hang over the departed and have great faith Martina can reconcile the energumen. She has many talents of course.” Bak smiled to himself. “Several brokers, ‘noddies’ we call them, have come and gone from the cuddy where the up-market slaves are displayed. The conventions here regarding slavery are ingenious: to abduct a free person, provided he or she comes from a polis that is part of the current favoured federation is a crime punishable by a heavy fine. But if the abducted person is sold without protest from a third party, the conditions of the sale are binding and the buyer may not be dispossessed of his purchase while in the harbour jurisdiction. Hence both the jealous national and keen vendor are honoured. Needless to say, the third party must have influence or wealth to intervene -- or the person being sold. If you have a ‘dear one’

taken by a privateer you must identify that person with the Harbour Master before the sale, either here or in the bazaar. Then, depending on the eminence and resource of the broker, the Marshal may or may not accede to the protocol.” The kingly treasure aboard Typhon’s bireme, which Bak took delight in enumerating, Balo made no attempt to memorize, and roused himself only when Bak began describing a chest that Poseda and Typhon opened before Martina. “Very handsome the wonder there. Martina was even silent for a time. Superb bronze armour — as new as the day the guild master put his stamp on it. Which apparently was what got Martina going — the stamp appeared to be ages old! The very size of the pieces was also interesting. When Typhon, being the clown he imagines he is, put on a breastplate and set of greaves, he proved to be much too small, and he is a big man. The armour appeared to be that of a Gigantes — a son of Gaia, a veritable Titan, possibly with a snake-like tail. If you believe such stories. Anyway, Poseda and some of the maties had a good laugh, which the old compeer did not appreciate. But the curiosity here was Martina’s demeanor. She indeed looked as if she’d seen a ghost. She’s practically one herself. I think old Typhon got a rise when she identified the armour’s stamp as Cycladic. That’s very old as you know. I imagine he’s still basking in his ‘preternatural’ luck — as he sees it.”

All of which Balo took in with a limp smile until he was led to a late afternoon audience with the a stately Elder, whose hooked nose seemed already mummy-like, and who listened without comment or expression to Bak’s description of Typhon’s select Egyptian wares, beginning with some

singular chests that also contained items taken from a Hittite tomb in Caria. Their identification was interrupted by a second arresting find on the bireme. A woman the pirate wished to exhibit in the bazaar seemed to fit the description and circumstance of a crucial character in an ancient but influential prophesy — which an agent of the Office or the Mazkir, or ‘remembrancer’ noticed. Balo had glumly verified the woman’s identity after a brief visit to the spy nest on the adjacent barge as the Lady Zelea and that of her close servant Thera. Bak, who had told the Elder how Balo and his crew were instrumental in returning highly valued treasures of the late Pharaoh, mentioned now how ‘his friend’ was distressed to find this celebrated Glaean being readied for sale — the one who fit the prophesy the Office of the Mazkir or ‘remembrancer’ was concerned about. The Elder motioned to a scribe to take notes on his wax slate. In doing so he revealed the ring worn by the Vizier, the chief minster to the Pharaoh! The venerable man waved aside Balo’s sudden compulsion after a second take from Bak to genuflect. “Always fine theatrics from our Greek cousins,” the Vizier jovially remarked. Everyone smiled, even Balo after assuring himself he was not a pariah here. The Vizier then motioned for Bak to continue. Who, in a nostalgic tone, told about an old prophesy from the Troad of a pretty intelligent slave becoming a royal consort then a Queen and having a splendid pyramid built for herself. The Vizier appeared lost in thought as Bak continued. “Originally a Greek myth, which our diligent Mazkir has found an Egyptian parallel to. Balo will of course vouchsafe how educated she is, respected and liked by many in her polis, plus the



fact that she may be described as rhodopis — ‘pink cheeked’. One of the oddities about her. In the Egyptian tale she is called Nitocris. It is a tale the Pharaoh Himself has taken up. To the Vizier’s show of diffidence, Bak added, “It may be prudent to restore the Lady to her former status.” He then wryly smiled when the Vizier slowly shook his head. For Balo it was not a promising exchange, it being apparent that both Bak and the Vizier, despite their bemused state, found their Pharaoh’s concern with a dated prophecy formidable. The Vizier then told Balo he would be informed in due course of the decision of the Pharaoh’s Privy Council. Wanly he concluded, “I would do nothing to interfere with the working of the bazaar.”

“Not a provident scene,” Balo mumbled to Bak when the Vizier and his scribe left. Retorted Bak, “My good fellow, Providence does not come into it when your legends and prophecies are as awesome as ours. I think we must be most respectful of this aristo of yours. As our Amun Godhead would wish. I’m told there is a beautiful statue of her on Glaea, a kind of Paladin with wondrous gold sandals. Such a creature figures in a prophecy the Pharaoh was visited with when a child. He’s never forgotten it. It is said that if a similar pair of sandals fit the Lady Zelea the Pharaoh will insist on her becoming a Best Wife. Sadly, the Court is badly divided. Both over the rule of the Pharaoh and this prophecy.”

Balo immediately sensed the tension. “You would tell me if she is simply going to serve as a surrogate for the former Glaean Viceroy’s missing concubine? To be entombed forthwith.”

“My poor fellow, it’s hardly that simple.”

The ensuing developments Balo would find anything but reassuring. The following day Bak told Balo how that morning the bodies of Typhon and his crew were found slaughtered to a man and stuffed in the hold. It appeared they had been drugged first. The bireme had been stripped of its cargo, as expected — to remove all evidence of where it came from. However the celebrated Lady and her maid were nowhere to be found. Bak was most distressed. At least before Balo and Crino. The Lady’s disappearance foretold calamity. According to the prophesy the reigning Pharaoh might forfeit his crown to a Chief or Lawagetas of the Sea Peoples if the enigmatic Zelea did not become a royal consort. Some of the Sea Peoples had that very year created havoc in many delta settlements and routed an Egyptian force in Lybia. Worse, the Double Crown might again be split in two. Shortly thereafter, Balo was summoned to the palace, to the very Council of Diviners, and commanded to lead a company across the Great Green Sea in search of the missing Daemon, a word the Pharaoh’s reader used to the dismay of the Vizier. The Troad legend mentioned a mysterious Swan that Pallas Athena sent to guard her special wards, one of these being the smart aristocrat. Apparently only an older, loyal, time-honoured Glaean might behold and importune the awesome bird. Balo was suspicious and finely incredulous. What bird?

But it was the threat of the rebellious skirmishers to the West and North that Balo took to heart. He did not wish to see the venerable Egyp-

tian state dismembered by the reckless Sea Peoples — the Shardana that were used to attack Glaea being one mercenary contingent. Their deployment a measure of the Pharaoh's desperation to have the tomb treasure returned. As pertinent was Balo's anxiety about the mischief uncanny tales can cause. He was surprised that the astute Vizier might be so upstaged by the obdurate Mazkir. The devout 'remembrancer'. Such a division at the Memphis Court did not augur well.

The two, Zelea and her servant, were never found of course. A fanciful story existed for a time that said they never were taken off a distant island and ensconced in the royal apartments in Memphis. The story mentioned how one advisor to the Pharaoh thought the servant more 'rhopis' than her mistress. But the Prince, the Pharaoh's elder son, was satisfied the Lady was the prophesied Doricha. He knew the Pharaoh was dying and had taken a fancy to this Glaean who married the old Pharaoh shortly before his death. Much of her time as the Pharaoh's Best Wife she spent badgering the Chancellor to restore Glaea its former sovereignty. Not that it did much good. Though she was good with an estimable argument. Even as the spies listened they were impressed with her — but also cautioned.

In the struggle for power after the King died, Doricha was reviled by many opportunistic critics. Her so-called eccentric habits and dress. She preferred double-girdled Glaean chitons to Egyptian haiks for one and little makeup. The faction opposed to the Orphic prophecy continued argu-



ing that in fact the servant was the more ‘rhodopis’ of the two, thus abjuring the prophecy. Several adjudicators were called and the Sibylline text re-examined. The consensus was that Thera was too old, too loyal to her Glaean mistress, and not as accomplished in the venerable poetry of dance. Zelea was stung at having to be assessed as her maid, yet performed as bid. Satisfied, the Prolocutor to the new Vizier said the prophecy was correctly fulfilled and the ethereal Nitocris duly incarnated, thus abetting the older faction at court. Yet it was soon apparent her investiture incited a new power hungry faction at court, for the infatuated Prince was weak and inexperienced. The Best Wife’s food was tampered with. Many days she was disoriented and dressed in an odd manner, one headdress in particular as fanciful as one the young prince designed for her, an eccentric affair the Prince was rebuked for by the old Vizier . In her distress she imagined a Glaean water park where she might recruit Perseus’ pal Pegasus...but only a lame stallion materialized, hobbled by the Erinnyes, sent by Hera to avenge her willful ‘musing’ of the ‘dutiful’ Maenad Regent! Sometimes a winged revenant appeared, a sky dancer to beguile a jaded boy king: the spectre of herself in a prodigal court.

Years later the account was updated by another storyteller before a captive Glaean audience.

In the struggle for power after the old Pharaoh died, Nitocris was reviled as a prostitute-slave who had seduced the young Prince with witchcraft and even poisoned the old King, who took a time dying and even sired more children. Her eldest son proved to be a dreamer and incompe-

tent ruler. He was killed by a fanatical priest. She would rule for a time as a Regent. The second son was an eccentric dilettante and musician not much interested in helping out. Her third live child, a daughter, would marry a future Pharaoh but was only a babe when the tide turned against the mother. Yet it was her teeth that finally did the exceptional woman in, an abscess to a molar that no physician Greek or Egyptian could stanch. Her jaw swelled terribly and a fever raged for a week. She died crying out a name no one knew — a certain Nemanos, a fictional being some thought, with whom she imagined having a child. It was later learned that a Glaean priest by the name of Nemanos was killed in an earthquake that devastated Glaea and some neighboring islands a year after she left Glaea. Her body was laid to rest in a much humbler tomb than her husband had intended though a pyramid dedicated to her honor was eventually completed.

And so the stories grow and intermingle of how a Greek slave rose to beguile a young Prince and become his Queen, and an Egyptian prostitute who flourished briefly as a sly witch and murderer. The Greek and Egyptian tales respectively.

But stories will flesh out the facts according to fashion. An elderly Balo told a stranger years later, during a symposium, a different tale. The stranger told his wife who told her clique of weavers on a tumid afternoon.

The former Glaean Commander did land on the island of the Swan the prophesy described — in the search the Pharaoh demanded he under-

take. After a diligent reconnoitre of the island he came across a pretty nymph playing a lyre in a grotto filled with magnificent water lilies. Two morose Fauns, one more goat than human listened in, both it seemed taken with the rich beguiling sadness of the lyric. They might have ravished her were the song not so captivating. Her eyes too were moist. Not the stinging tears of Aphrodite but the wide tears of Lethe. Some imagine it a smile. Yes, the unusual chest of trophies in Typhon's bireme was old, very old. In opening it before a familiar like Martina the distraught Immortal whose armor lay in the chest, whose Olympian deeds once inspired a blind poet, was roused and returned to the terrible place of the mortals to kill the last great bird, the last creature that might still rouse and captivate... remind them of the ability to fly, to soar for a time beyond the pale...and remind him that an eternal life in the Elysian Fields or, when bored and slumming, the raven-tressed forests of Hades, was finally an embarrassing affair. The example that chafed, disclosing how boring and pointless their existence was.

The Immortals took no lasting delight in giving stolid man such wondrous credulity which they finally could not share! Melancholy they found even worse despite the poetry it sometimes inspired. They might again be tempted to indulge the charismatic and labyrinthine thrall — of dying! A passion play they could not adopt. Only glimpse. And so they left.

With the proliferation of mortal man the Immortal gifts became thinned and rarified. The nymph with the lyre knew she had lost many of the talents she once had. Now only a dazed Satyr and tired old Faun



might stare and dumbly listen. She too had lost the trappings of the adventure. Soon her lyre would have no strings left. She must try very hard to remember — all she could.

Another island in the Great Green Sea, ever shrouded in gathering mists, seamen only glanced at when they passed. Something about it inspired foreboding, menace. A rocky expanse with a few straggly pines poking up from the foamy centre. The mists sometimes took on a feathery aspect. Even the weathered mask of a bird's face. A few daring storytellers fashioned some tales about it. Some more telling, engaging than others.

They had been avidly gathering brambleberries when they first met, the girl and the hermit —and backed into one another, so engrossed were they in gleaning and gobbling the ripe fruit. “And greetings to you loyal skedaddler!” he exclaimed after the initial shock. He was flushed, had consumed too many of the older fermented berries, and pretended to be lost. He claimed to have left a symposium yet it was obvious he'd been in the forest some time. Separately they picked more berries for a time, he inanely humming to himself. She left him supposedly sleeping off a stupor. A week later, her curiosity undiminished, she stumbled on his lean-to and him at work mending a snare. She stayed the day, helped set a few traps and shared in the evening meal of wild rice and the roasted leg of a hare. It was perhaps the mutual recognition of their loner, wastrel selves that matched up wit and empathy, and fear of familiarity. He called her Ibis

and Bluebill. And seemed to thrive on caricature and perplexity — this improbable forest wit....