

The Maiden's Odyssey

*The god vindictive doomed them never more
(Ah, men unblest!) to touch that natal shore.
Oh, snatch some portion of these acts from fate,
Immortal Muse! and to our world relate.*

Homer, ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑ

History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.

James Joyce, ULYSSES

... there was no telling whether he was long overdue to return, or just setting out on his journey.

Charles Frazier, COLD MOUNTAIN

Blind Seer: You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. You will find a fortune, though it will not be the one you seek. But first... first you must travel a long and difficult road, a road fraught with peril. Mm-hmm. You shall see thangs, wonderful to tell. You shall see a... a cow... on the roof of a cotton house, ha.

Joel & Ethan Coen, O BROTHER WHERE ART THOU?

The mission is too important to allow you to jeopardize it.

Stanley Kubrick, 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

Prologos

It was a moment's work for Chymides Eight-fingers to release Nerissa's leg iron. By the time she'd struggled onto bare, cracked feet, every surviving slave was standing. If they hadn't pressed so close against her, Nerissa would have fallen at the ship's first lurch. She could feel her shin bones threatening to crumble. Judging from gnawed marks in her splintered plank, she'd been more than two months on the Thallia. Chained in its reeking hold, she'd seen out her fourteenth year.

When the captain on that first day out of Tyre offered an easy voyage, she'd refused a soft berth in his cabin. She'd stepped aboard more or less a virgin, but it wasn't that. With so much lost already, one further torn place in Nerissa's body mattered little. Still, virtue mattered much. Captain Hycron's eyes were hard like the new coins made of silver/gold electrum. Every time he spoke, a foul mist of half-digested garlic spewed from his mouth. His oiled beard was split in two like some lust-maddened satyr. She wouldn't shame Father's memory by rutting with this goat.

How many nights had Hycron plagued her fitful sleep? In Nerissa's dreams, his face loomed at her like a black cloud blotting the red sky. Just as it had darkened at her insult the instant after she'd rebuffed him.

For all his rude appearance, Hycron seemed to pride himself on manly beauty. At the height of all his many qualities, Hycron saw himself as the reborn Adonis. Nerissa knew that to this depraved man, the offer had been more than generous. Not only a straw pallet by his bed and food from his own table, but the godsend of his skill in the bedchamber.

From the back row, a Thracian sailor jested underneath his breath. Capable in many languages, Nerissa heard him say the captain's face turned the exact shade of an ass's unsheathed phallus. Fortunately for the sailor's pock-marked hide, Hycron's hearing wasn't sharp. He'd flayed men for much less.

For once, Hycron mastered his rage. It would be far beneath him to force this girl into his

quarters. Nerissa's face might be exquisite, a faultless Aphrodite, her eyes two gentle pools that pulled men in their innocent, blue depths, her complexion like the finest Theban marble, her silken hair the color of honey mixed with melted butter, her body just now at the moment of perfection, a budding wonder untouched by men or time... but he could have her any day he wished. He was Zeus aboard this ship and she a friendless slave. After a few days in the hold, this girl would beg for the rare honor of being his receptacle.

Instead, Hycron jerked his forked beard at an older girl he'd bought the day before they sailed. The Tyrean broker claimed that she'd been captured deep in Scythia, the daughter of a chieftain. Her face, if not as delicate as Nerissa's, possessed appealing luster. Her onyx eyes aroused him with their promise of exotic pleasures. Her long hair was the blue/black color of ripe Minoan plums. Her voluptuous form would have tempted Tantalus to leave his eternally beguiling grapes. Hycron usually preferred lithe maidens, but a well-padded bedmate would make an amusing change this trip.

Though she didn't understand a word from any of these slavers, the Scythian beauty stepped forward immediately. Knowing well what Hycron wanted, an easy voyage suited Dzunga. Personally, she liked the smell of garlic. Her father had been the only tribesman rich enough to barter for this luxury. Maybe if she pleased the captain, he'd keep her for his concubine when they reached journey's end.

As she passed Nerissa, a flash of scorn arced across Dzunga's face. She knew this girl was worth far more. That body and that face would hold men's eyes long past the time her own flesh sagged. She wondered if the young Hellene's radiant complexion was god-sent, or was it the product of witchcraft? Those bow-shaped lips, were they always the moist pink color of pomegranate seeds, or did her people know the secret of some wondrous salve? Where had she gained such perfect serenity at this tender age? And yet, she was a fool to give another girl this chance.

Odd, Nerissa thought. She'd expected the derisive sneer, the toss of that black hair. The Scythian had glared at her with jealousy all day while they'd waited in the holding cage. But now aboard the ship, there'd also been a touch of pity. With a slight smile, Nerissa nodded at Dzunga as she stepped back to the ranks of slaves.

An instant later, Hycron caught her by the wrist. He held her there an instant, torn between desire and commercial instincts. *No, I'm right*, the thought formed in his eyes. *I can't let this go unpunished*. He jerked so hard, Nerissa slid across the greasy deck into his chest.

Though Hycron knew that scars would cut her value by as much as tenfold, he couldn't let Nerissa's insult pass. With a transport full of captives to control, manned by sailors scraped

from the most vicious dens in Crete, any sign of weakness could prove fatal. Who was this *doulos* to spurn his famed virility? Harsh discipline was essential to protect his reputation. He'd suffer an economic loss, but profit in the long run.

He grabbed Nerissa's peplos, ripped it open, then slashed his knife across her breasts. Forged from the finest Assyrian iron, its blade was sharper than a harpy's bite. Immediately, fine red lines welled beneath both nipples. Large drops began to splatter on the deck.

Careful not to stain his cloak, Hycron shoved her toward a knot of sailors standing by the capstan.

"For all the men, you understand," he said to Chymides, the fiercest sailor. "But you may have her first."

And so, Nerissa became common property among the crew. That first time, as she clutched torn linen to the gashes, Chymides had raped her in the rope locker. He'd laughed with pleasure at her cries of pain. He didn't bother to shut the door. Past his shoulder, Nerissa watched dark clouds bruise a brooding sky. Behind them, she could hear the silence from Olympus. This new stage of her punishment must fill the Gods with scorn. A girl who'd let her brother die deserved far worse.

Those nineteen evil-smelling men who followed couldn't blot the knowledge that her own guilt made them seem like paragons. She welcomed the pain and degradation, but day after day, her misery failed to ease her self-contempt. Afterwards, they'd chained Nerissa in the slave hold. It was a bottom berth where all could see her shame. Her breasts looked like leavings from the butcher's stall as blood continued oozing from their blackened wounds. The one consolation was that most of the captives chose to keep their dignity. Week after week, all but Evander the Samite looked away when sailors came to take their pleasure.

She'd lost track of the days consumed aboard. That's why she'd begun to chew marks into her berth. The Thallia had taken months to cross the sea. This vessel was a round ship, designed to hold much cargo, not for speed. It had a square-rigged sail, though there'd rarely been a tail wind. Hostile Triton raged against their progress while blazing Helios abandoned the drowned field both day and night. They'd pitched across oncoming waves solely by the sweat of slaves who manned auxiliary oars. And yes, these men, the personal property of Hycron, had been allowed to use her, too.

Now unchained for the first time in months, Nerissa straightened painfully. She knew they must be coming into port. A sailor called Hematheus had told her they were bound for Ithaca. He must have thought it showed consideration to offer a few words of talk before rising from her plank.

Hematheus must feel some kindness toward me, she supposed, having mistaken groans of pain for pleasure.

From Father's charts, she recalled that Ithaca was an island northwest of the Peloponnese mainland. And from Hematheus, she'd learned that its slave market was the largest in all of western Hellas.

Now, Chymides yelled at everyone to get above for washing. Nerissa guessed it was to make the slaves presentable before they landed.

"Maybe we'll get new clothes after bathing," whispered Berenice, her shipboard neighbor. "Something pretty to attract the highest bids. Maybe linen. Maybe even dyed."

Nerissa hardly cared. It had been weeks since she'd bothered with the torn folds of her peplos after the latest rape. There wasn't one person on this ship who hadn't seen her naked.

As she struggled up the ladder, supported by Berenice from the rung below, the fresh air reminded Nerissa of one blessing that remained. While they sluiced buckets of water on the slaves, she'd be free to take her only possible revenge. Chymides hadn't thought it necessary to shackle weakened cargo for the trip above. By leaping into the sea, she could cost Hycron the few drachmai he'd earn for a half-dead girl with a battered face and ruined body.

Nerissa found her balance on the salt washed boards. Daughter of a fisherman, the stance came naturally despite her frail condition. She took a last few seconds to gaze across the angry waves.

She saw that it was true. The Thallia finally approached landfall. In the direction of the morning sun, rows of white surf marked a large island. But Hycron appeared to be circling its headland, instead of making for port. Behind the first island was a smaller one. Smaller in circumference, that is, but with a noticeably higher profile. A steep ridge loomed above the roiled water. Its summits glinted where bright rays struck bare rock. In contrast to Poseidon's leaden sea, the isle's highlands were the green of olive trees in leaf.

Ithaca appeared to be well-watered, with favorable soil. Late in this month of Sowing Corn, its fields would be growing rich with life. Wheat and barley stalks would sprout many-seeded heads. If Demeter sent rain, they'd swell until they bent before the mild wind. Above these fertile fields, vineyards rich with grapes would fill the hillsides with their heady scent. And high above these all, gnarled olive trees would grow the fruit that had sustained this land for centuries.

Nerissa knew that she'd be dead before the olive groves would plump. Men would beat the trees with flails while crabs ate bits of flesh left clinging to her ribcage. On the seabed, she'd become a chalky skeleton, while on the land, countless olives fermented inside wicker baskets.

The tides would strew her bones before men pressed the fruit to reap its golden oil.

Nerissa had no intention of swimming toward freedom. Not that she'd soon founder, even now. Among the herring boats of Smyrna, children learned to stay afloat soon after they learned to walk. Still, the larger island was thousands of stadia across the foul-tempered sea. She'd never swum such a great distance. She could scarcely expect Poseidon's aid. Why should He relent after the dark oaths that she'd spat into the gale that capsized Father's ship?

And how she'd cursed the lightning shattered skies. Which meant that there was little chance Athena would take pity. What hubris it would be to beseech another miracle. Yes, the Goddess had guided her onto that moon washed shore with bold Andrastus, but it turned out to be the greatest heartache yet. Miracles came only once, she knew. Today, no massive owl would swoop down to pluck her gently in its talons. No Nereids enchanted into dolphins would race to her deliverance.

As for Aeolus, guardian of all the winds, Nerissa knew that He was no protector. In proof, the breeze had stiffened to a dismal whine. At last, it filled the Thallia's gray sail. Though numb and almost at an end to mortal feeling, she noticed Berenice's long hair whip against her cheek. She recalled the rage of Aeolus against her father Asclemeleon. The God had turned so furious, He blew their ship far out to sea just when they'd been in sight of home. And now, the Sail-filler's heart remained embittered against Father's last remaining child.

Nerissa entertained no visions of escape as she edged toward the rail. Hurling herself into the sea was only meant to wrest a small victory from Hycron.

No, Mother, Nerissa had to admit, that isn't my sole motive.

As she'd heard so many times through childhood, Mother's words came echoing in the sharp wind.

"Among decent people, the full truth is the only thing acceptable."

Even at this distance, there was no escaping Mother's reverence for honesty. Nerissa had to admit that death would also spare her many bitter days as some smallholder's drudge. The sort of man who'd thrash her at the least excuse, who'd work her to an early grave, who'd show more consideration for his meanest sow, who might use her in the dark byre where she slept, but would never foul himself by acknowledging such an ugly creature in daylight.

As loose-jawed Hematheus pulled Berenice to the sluicing trough, Nerissa touched her friend's arm as an unspoken farewell. Ever since Chloe's betrayal resulted in her capture, Berenice was the only person who'd been kind. Bracing her legs, Nerissa added a silent goodbye to her parents, brothers, sister, and all her kinsmen wherever they were now. Scorned as she might be among the Gods both great and small, nonetheless Nerissa murmured heartfelt

prayers. Despite the misery they'd caused, it seemed unimaginable that all Olympus would refuse protection for her family in death.

Her large clan was obliterated. Some slain so close beside her, she'd heard their dying rales. Some thrown so far by the deaf Fates, she'd never learned which of them, if any, still drew breath. Some like Andrastus, whom Father had adopted in his fifteenth year, he might remain alive... but the last time Nerissa saw him, Andrastus had been clouted into blank-eyed flesh and flung into the sea. From her torn heart, Nerissa released him, too. And finally, the love he'd never known she felt.

A gasp from Berenice broke into these cheerless thoughts. Nerissa turned to see what had happened to her only friend. Ah, good -- they hadn't injured Berenice. Her gasp was only from the shock as a bucket of cold water struck.

The sea will be far colder, thought Nerissa. But I'll simply let it take me. Enyo can pull me down, or toss my body in Her spume. Either way, it will be over soon.

Biting her lip against the pain, Nerissa got one leg over the rail. She felt the frigid, salty spray cut into her wounds. The scars had never closed. Little wonder, since the sailors often raked her breasts with filthy nails when they gripped her from behind. The sting was even sharper as a large wave broke against the oars below. Nerissa clung tightly to the rail, determined to jump over it.

Now she saw that it wouldn't be possible to simply let the water do its will. Unless she could plummet straight down, she'd have to swim rapidly away. Otherwise, Hycron would order the crew to haul her out. Neighboring slaves would clamp her with their oars. A third one would jump in, lashed to a rope.

Before another roller struck, Nerissa perched atop the rail. She gathered herself for a leap to clear the single tier of oars. She thought a last time of her family. Those butchered into soup meat on Laestrygon, others drowned or speared or crushed to mollify the heartless Gods. The fearsome end woven for her closest brother Euredon those starving days at Smyrna. Her own part in his death. Her little sister Geneia, who loved to sing among the birds, snatched from their boat into the swirling terror. Sweet Geneia would never rest inside a crypt. There'd be no figurines of loom and bed and such for comfort.

But this failure was the least of it. No one was left to tend her family altar. *No one but me*, Nerissa realized. *For half a year, I haven't even managed this. I've let my grief add to my guilt. Mother would think even less of me for that.*

Back home, she'd been instructed daily about the most important of all filial duties. Nerissa couldn't remember a day so lean that Mother failed to honor their ancestors. With each

offering, she'd always include aromatic herbs into the hearth.

"Knissa might be strong enough for Gods," she'd say, "but the smell and smoke of burning bones alone can't reach our long dead kin."

Above the seabirds' clamor, Nerissa could almost hear the cries of brave Euredon, innocent Geneia, and all the others as they languished by the Acheron, River of Eternal Sorrow.

"Hey, you!" shouted Chymides Eight-fingers. "That's right -- *you*. Geddown from there, you crazy bitch!"

As another roller broke against the hull, Nerissa launched herself into its spray. But Chymides caught her by the tattered hem of her peplos. His hands might be missing pinkies, but his arms were very long. Slender to begin with, Nerissa weighed no more than a yearling ewe-lamb now. Though she fought to break his grip, Chymides easily hauled her back aboard. He punched her jaw so hard, Nerissa was unconscious before her body struck the deck.

When she returned to this world of sorrow, Nerissa found herself chained once more to her bile-crusted plank. She understood that delaying on the rail had cost her chance at death's liberation. She cursed her faithless legs, but it had been the right decision. Someone must remain alive to carry on her family's memory.

Glancing down her body, though stung by its rebellion, Nerissa eased her scowl. She could only smile thinly at the Gods' cruel joke. So Berenice's guess was right. Indeed, there *was* another blessing. Someone had changed her clothing. Though the chiton was far too loose for her gaunt body, and its coarse wool rubbed against her wounds, the miracle was that it came freshly laundered.

Someone had scoured her, too -- she smelled of ocean salt. Her skin was scrubbed so raw, the pain was almost a relief. At least she'd have something beside despair to fill her thoughts until they landed.

Alpha

Chained to Berenice in front and a fussy slave named Aphion behind, Nerissa stared resolutely at the port. This town was no great metropolis, yet it lay on the largest harbor she'd seen in all her travels. A high peak rose behind, extremely steep except for its bare summit. She heard the navigator Psatos call its name.

"Hail, shining Neriton, proud seat of valor-draped Ithacus," he said with words that sounded ancient. His arms were held up to the sky. "All praise to mighty, peerless Poseidon who guides us safely home."

Nerissa remembered Father's tale of the ancient hero Ithacus. He'd come shipwrecked to this island, then slain the winged monster Periphyne on the highest peak. He freed men from the torpor that the gryphon's vapor bred. Revived, they hailed Ithacus as the first king of their island.

At an order from Chymides, the galley slaves all shipped their oars. The mute who manned the kettle drum silenced his beat. The Thallia rode effortlessly into Ithaca's vast harbor. The water, now dark blue and free of waves except for a fast moving rip, surged at neap tide toward the port. Nerissa watched Psatos as he used a sounding rod to probe for clearance. She heard him sing out depths to Hycron at the helm. The Thallia glided to a smooth landing at the pier.

Above, three sailors raced across ratlines to furl the frayed sail tight. Others threw down mooring hawsers. Dock slaves tied these ropes to iron rings set into stone bollards. Rough voices rose into a great cacophony. Among the many languages, Nerissa picked out Ionian, Aeolian, Corinthian, Ionic, and Attic, alongside Minoan and Aramaic. She'd noticed the same thing in Smyrna. Slaves came from so many different places, they could hardly speak to one another, let alone organize to defy their overseers.

Bare-chested men extended a ramp from the pier up to the weather deck. Chymides shouted at his landing crew to get the slaves ashore at once. Hematheus prodded Berenice, who

stood at the front of Nerissa's ten-slave chain.

Berenice reached back to squeeze Nerissa's hand in encouragement, then stepped onto the ramp. She shuffled forward, careful not to trip. Nerissa followed slowly, then Aphion, and then the seven others. Hycron said nothing before they left, not even a warning of those things that would bring wrath from their new owners. He regarded them appraisingly, measuring their value by the weight they'd managed to keep on. He'd no more speak to them than a cargo of livestock or bales of fleece.

Once the ten slaves stood on land, four more chains followed, the last one short. Including herself, Nerissa counted 49 surviving slaves. Seven sevens. It would have been the most fortunate of omens, except that this was also the number of corpses hauled out of their hold.

Mother hadn't approved, but as a child, Father taught her how to cipher. Though he valued her three older brothers' strength and courage, he'd recognized Nerissa as the best choice for inclusion in the mystery of numbers. By the age of eight, she was adept at making tallies, following the system adapted from Phoenicia. She could quickly identify long strings of numerals, barred Ð for pente, D for deka, H for hekaton, X for chilia, and M for myriads, then calculate the added values when they were arrayed in columns. It proved to be a very useful skill, in recording baskets of delivered fish, drachmai earned and spent, supplies delivered from the chandlers. Without this knowledge, they never could have kept the tradesmen honest.

The short chain now on land, Chymides snapped his lash to move them forward. He was enjoying himself, singing the bawdy song about a shipwright's uncomfortably long association with a narrow knothole. Though the slaves shared no part of his cheerful spirit, all 49 moved off with a brisk step, before the ox-hide reached them. Of course, this now unlucky sum didn't include the oarsmen, who'd remained fastened to their benches. They weren't part of Hycron's trading venture with his Ithacan partners.

The five chains of consigned slaves jerked uphill with the jarring clash of metal. But after numerous tugs against raw ankles, they learned to move as one. By the time they reached a wide street leading to the agora, their rhythm had grown syncopated. It produced a curiously appealing beat.

This island was rich, Nerissa saw. While there'd been rough dress and even rougher language at the docks, Ithaca's townsmen took great pride in their appearance. The women adorned their wrists with elaborately chased bands of silver or electrum. There were costly silken sashes on each peplos, belted just below the bust to compliment their figures. Nerissa couldn't help but admire this style. In Smyrna, women wore their sashes at the waist. Of course, it had been more than two years since she'd left home. Maybe this new fashion had traveled

across the sea by now.

Then she noticed that girls her age had plaited blossoms in their hair, tied by cords of matching color. She guessed it meant that they were marriageable, the way that pleated folds on a maiden's hem meant the same in her part of the world.

The prettiest girl wore narcissus flowers, bound in gold. Nerissa wondered if the ribbon was actually woven out of hammered gold.

"Do you think she can resist her own reflection?" whispered Berenice as the chain had to halt for passing carts. "You know, like Narcissus, herself."

"I see what you mean," said Nerissa. "She does look the sort who loves her beauty so well she might fall into a pond and drown from staring at it.

"But you have to admit, it's exquisite the way they dress and fix their hair."

"I wonder if they wear it daily. Their body slaves must take hours to arrange such an elaborate style. Who wants to sit still for such a long time every morning?"

"You're right. They probably only do it for feast days, when eligible men will see them. What would be the point most days at home, when they don't leave the women's quarter?"

Nerissa felt a little better as they started up again. She could kiss Berenice for cheering her with ordinary conversation. For a moment, it had taken her mind away from all the shades who plagued it.

With the gloom lifted, she continued to notice the Ithacans. Did the men always wear such spotless chitons, made of the finest, snow-white linen? Some trailed on the ground, wrapped from luxuriously wide fabric. But short or long, the fashion here was to drape a fold under the left arm, leaving the right side open. She wondered if they forced left-handed boys to switch. This wasn't the case in Smyrna -- for example, her eldest brother Kestides had gripped his sword left-handed. That's why he'd arranged his chiton to fall open on that side. Until that disastrous battle on Imbrus, it had always served him well.

Two men, noble in appearance, wore cloaks stained to a deep indigo. She'd once heard Father say this precious color came from sea snails, imported all the way from Libya. She could see that many people here were prosperous. Their class status seemed to come from wealth, whereas in Smyrna, it had depended on one's family name.

Now as they entered the agora, Nerissa saw a long, colonnaded stoa. Open on one side to the central square, it contained the stalls of many merchants. While it was made of common limestone, prominent buildings surrounding the agora had walls of gleaming marble. Another sign that this place was very prosperous. Ithaca's masons had used massive blocks, soft and creamy in appearance, laced with fine, speckled veins of black. They'd dressed the stones with

such exceptional care, it was difficult to see the seams between them.

Framed by the central columns of the largest structure, four priests surrounded a pure white bullock garlanded with red and yellow flowers. Three held it down, while the fourth prepared to slit its belly. Nerissa could see that the altar had already been anointed with spring water and the beast sprinkled with grain. An alabaster bowl stood ready to accept the bullock's entrails. Holding up a gleaming blade, the senior priest invoked Olympus to look with favor on this sacrifice. His scratchy voice rose high in volume to compete with the bullock's frantic lowing.

As Nerissa watched, the beast's rear hoof thumped one of the assistant priests square in his stomach. The young man staggered back, tumbled down the marble steps, then lay at the bottom in a heap. Those waiting to be blessed with blood gathered nervously around him. They all thought he was dead, badly injured at the very least. Their faces showed deep fear at this dire omen.

But the only injury was to the young priest's pride. Rising now, he struggled free from the many hands that pulled his long, thin arms. He dusted off his white tunic, hurried up the stairs, mumbled an apology to his scowling superior, and once more grasped the bullock's hind legs. With an irritated glance, the senior priest resumed his prayer.

A larger audience attracted by this drama stayed to watch. The beast thrashed wildly as the bright blade slashed its belly open. Nerissa wondered why they didn't club it first and cut its throat. That's what priests did in Smyrna and everywhere she'd seen. Then all this tumult could have been avoided.

The three assistant priests hung on, but their robes were splashed with blood and gore. The graybeard looked up at them, but not reproachfully this time. From the way he studied them, Nerissa guessed the red patterns across their robes formed the augury he sought. It must have been auspicious, because he nodded with approval.

He smiled as he said something to the gangly one who'd fallen down the steps. This young priest let go of the now quivering bullock, stood, and brought the basin. To Nerissa, the pattern on his robe appeared to be a map of the Aegean. Fortunate for Ithacans, maybe, but not for her. She wondered which God blessed this temple and this auction day. Was it one of those who'd been so hostile to her clan?

Peering past the knot of priests, Nerissa looked for statuary between the temple's many columns. But the day was bright, and the peristylon's recesses lay in shadow. The God, undisturbed by this respectful outdoor rite, enjoyed His privacy within. Lowering her gaze to the temple's plinth, its inscription read, "Dedicated to the glory of Poseidon from The Demos of

Ithaca.”

Yes, in addition to mathematics, Father had taught Nerissa how to read. Over Mother's strong objections, he'd encouraged her to recite lessons with her older brothers Euredon, Nikos, and Kestides.

Though only a fisherman, Father hadn't always been so humble. At least, Nerissa suspected as much, from something she'd overheard Smyrna's aged harbormaster blurt after three large bowls of wine. Neither of her parents would explain what this drunken comment meant, but it was obvious that Father and Mother both possessed fine educations.

They didn't speak in coarse tones like others in the herring fleet. Straining at their hardest tasks, they were more likely to quote poetry than utter foulmouthed oaths. Mother, so careful to conserve their funds, never complained if Father accepted moth eaten scrolls as barter. And every evening that Father was ashore, there'd be music so melodious, Nerissa used to listen with her mouth agape. When Father played his dented lyre and Mother her well-polished harp, it always seemed like each note was a drop of golden nectar waiting to be tasted. As a little girl, she longed to know the secret of turning sound to sweetness on her tongue.

Mother used to look so happy on those evenings. She'd glance up as she played a flowing passage, stealing looks at Father, blushing like a girl. And when he'd smile at her, his white teeth gleaming at the center of his burnished beard, she'd glow just like a candle's flame. It gave Nerissa hope that some day a bit of that same love might be turned on her.

Before the family went to bed, Father would burn costly oil reading an installment from some ancient tale aloud. From the table where she sewed, Mother always gazed on him with all-accepting admiration. She couldn't take her eyes off Father's ruddy face, but never pricked her finger with the needle or even missed a stitch.

With such a youth, Nerissa had learned two lessons well. The first was that nothing she could do would ever win Mother's approval, much less her affection. The second was that the surest way to a safe berth in Father's heart was by mastering the ancient texts he treasured. She'd diligently learned the art of turning each bought or borrowed scroll into fresh knowledge -- fresh to a young girl, anyway.

Now, as they approached a wooden platform, Nerissa remembered one of Father's favorites. It was the legend of Cadmus, inventor of the alphabet and agriculture. While trying to rescue his sister Europa, who'd been abducted to Crete by Zeus in the form of a white bull, he'd slain a dragon sacred to Ares. He'd sown its teeth into the race of men called Spartans, further enraging Ares. No penance was enough -- misfortune followed Cadmus and his family all their days. The tale was sad, but these lines were full of iron. Nerissa knew that she must also be as

hard as forged metal, to face what lay ahead.

Four brawny guards took charge of them, each armed with a pike. They stopped in front of empty pens. At first, Nerissa thought the slaves were meant to go inside, but no one opened the gate. Then she realized these pens weren't for humans. Horses, breeding rams, and kine must be auctioned here on different days. After all, there wasn't much difference between selling animals and slaves. Back home in Smyrna, the markets had also been adjacent. In fact, the Ionian dialect they spoke on Ithaca referred to a four legged beast as *tetrapodon*, and a slave as *andropodon*. In other words, chattel with the feet of a man.

Overhearing the guards' talk, Nerissa gathered that they didn't think much of this new lot. They discussed the slaves' thin bodies as if they were appraising horses. She also gathered that this town was known as Polis. Which suggested a deep lack of imagination among the Ithacans, since Polis simply meant "city" in Ionian.

Atop the platform, a clean-shaven slave dealer stood studying a bound codex of parchment sheets. Nerissa assumed it was his record of accounts. She wondered how her name looked on the open leaf. Back home, she'd practiced tracing it into the sand along the Meles, but she'd never seen it written on expensive parchment.

An argument nearby diverted her attention. A weedy man with badly cropped hair was squabbling over short weights used at a fishmonger's stall. Too poor to own a slave, Nerissa guessed. So impoverished that he didn't even have a wife. Who must serve as the poor man's slave, the saying went. It was rare to see a male customer haggling in the market. This one commanded a rare variety of filthy language, too.

It wasn't the only thing filthy about him. Unlike others in the crowd, his clothes were anything but neat. As the breeze shifted toward her, Nerissa learned he wasn't careful in his hygiene, either. Probably a swineherd. He smelled just like a boar in rut.

The swineherd caught her staring at him. He glowered so fiercely, Nerissa dropped her eyes at once. It was unlike her to be timid, but she was in chains and this fellow had a seething look. The sort whose rage against the world was always a tiny spark away from leaping into conflagration. She'd met such men before. They marched around just looking for that spark.

"Come on, they're starting soon." It was a huge man speaking to the scrawny one. "You can sweet talk with your darling later."

"*What?* She's not my darling!" He turned back with a contemptuous look at the fishmonger's daughter. "Her face is bloated like those rotten mullets she tried to sell me. And her eyes bulge out more than theirs."

"Yeah, and you stink even worse."

"I stink, do I? How about I bash your nose in? Then you won't have to smell me any more."

"I'd like to see you try. Here, I'll give you a boost, so you can reach. Just don't complain when I squeeze your guts out through Aphrodite's tunnel."

"Oh, very clever. At least my spearhead's where it should be. Everyone says yours is in the center of your face, poking through a ragged foreskin. With that kind of nose, I'll be doing you a favor to mash it flat."

The huge one took a swing, easily dodged by the smaller man. Though very thin, he was quick and agile. He got around his friend, leapt on his back, and pummeled him about the ears. The big man whirled just like a dancing bear Nerissa once saw exhibited in Smyrna on the Feast Day of Apollo. Here in Ithaca, the fellow slapped at his tormentor as if he were a plague of gnats. More often than not, he hit himself.

Nerissa smiled, again distracted from her grief, her body's aches, and the ordeal ahead. These two brawlers reminded her of a giant and a dwarf back home, who'd competed with the dancing bear for coins. In the Smyrnan market, everybody loved to watch these two. The feast day crowd all cheered when the dwarf smacked his partner with a pole or jabbed him in the gut or pelted him with steaming horse turds. When the giant finally caught him, raised him up as if to bite the dwarf in two, everybody roared with delight to see the little fellow piss into his towering opponent's eyes.

This didn't happen here, of course. As a bell sounded to announce the auction's start, the swineherd jumped down from his friend's back, and hurried toward the platform.

The crowd gathered from every corner of the square, from the vegetable market to the saddler's stall, from the man cooking chunks of roasted kid over a brazier, from the shops of potters, mercers, armorers, chandlers, lamp merchants, apothecaries, and many more. A holy mendicant scooped up the pile of alms tossed onto his blanket, a knife sharpener abandoned his grindstone. Down the long agora's length, the only one remaining was a slave who tested coins, afraid to leave his master's coffer.

The cacophony of sounds that filled the market minutes earlier, the arguments, competing cries of merchants, squawks of poultry hoisted by their feet, delighted whoops of children at a tumbler's antics, intonation of the priests over their sacrificial bullock, declamation of an orator, yelp of a small boy as the barber lanced his boil, enticements of two prostitutes leaning out from upper windows, strumming of a kithara and fluting from a syrinx and sweet tones of the double-reeded aulos, the chink of oboloi tossed into these players' bowl... all this had transformed into a growing rumble of excitement.

Now latecomers rushed in, jostling for positions at the back. A father hoisted his little son onto his shoulders. Older youths knocked down younger ones who'd climbed onto the roofs of stalls. When there was a batch of slaves to sell, the event not only drew many customers, but it was a much relished entertainment.

Again, Hematheus prodded Berenice to step forward. As she began to climb the platform's steps, the slave dealer Antechron held up a hand to stop her. He spoke to Chymides, making it clear he wanted children first. Because she was fluent in Ionian, Nerissa learned the sequence needed to be girls, then boys, then older women, followed by the nubile ones. Finally, they'd sell full-grown men. Antechron wished to let his auction build to slaves of greatest value. Experience must have taught him that this order would produce the highest profits.

While six prepubescent girls were sold, Nerissa took the opportunity to study the most active bidders. Men of property were allowed to examine each lot for a period of one quarter hour. The buyers weren't rough, she noticed. Some spoke gently to those children who could answer in Ionian. They felt arms and legs, raised tunics to make sure everything was where it should be, looked into mouths to check they had full sets of teeth. Though all were thin from the long voyage, none showed signs of wasting sickness. The fever that claimed 49 had passed last week. The Gods had spared these children to a different fate.

Nerissa recognized one of the most active bidders. It was the weedy swineherd who'd haggled over fish, then brawled with his huge friend. He'd opened the auctions for three of the younger girls. He'd lost each time, unwilling to exceed one hundred drachmai. He'd glowered at the eventual winners as they raised their arms to top his bids. If she'd read his darting eyes correctly, he threatened to harm their families if they dared to cross him. Maybe he'd send his enormous friend to pull down their doorframes. But the successful buyers hadn't paid the least attention. The swineherd obviously held little repute among his fellow Ithacans. Frankly, Nerissa felt surprised he even had one hundred drachmai.

Turning from the bidders, she gazed around the crowd. It was easy to identify slaves by the coarse fabric of their chitons and wooden fibulai that bound these robes. They looked well fed, and reasonably well contented with their stations. One plump woman appeared to be a wet nurse. Her features were Anatolian, her hair as black as pitch, but she carried a blond infant at her breast. Another slave minded two small children, while a richly ornamented woman chatted with a friend. Both of these matrons were veiled and gloved. The only features they exposed were sky-blue eyes delicately lined with green. Nerissa wondered if this cosmetic might be powdered malachite, imported at great expense from Egypt.

Maybe one of these fine women will buy me, Nerissa thought with a slight rise of

optimism. *If I please my mistress well, in time she might allow me some degree of freedom. Maybe even a cottage of my own, a place to build the shrine for those who've died.*

They finished auctioning the boys, then the largest guard prodded Berenice to mount the stairs. Aphion and two other men had already been removed from Nerissa's chain. So had two older women. These five sets of leg irons were filled by nubile maidens pulled from other chains.

Now they all stood on the platform. Before he invited potential bidders to come make their inspections, Antechron launched into a spiel of praise. He pointed out Dzunga's splendid form and sultry face. It was true she'd kept her figure, since she'd spent the voyage eating scraps from Captain Hycron's table. But she had deep bruises on her back, out of the crowd's view. And Dzunga's expression was more sullen than sultry. In Scythian, she'd cursed Hycron all the way from their vessel to the plaza. He'd shown not one mark of favor, after bedding her for weeks on end. He couldn't care less who bought Dzunga, so long as it gained him a maximum return.

Antechron turned to Berenice. Eldest of the maidens, she had a shape more motherly than ripe. But he extolled her lineage, from an ancient clan on Rhodos. Nerissa knew this couldn't be further from the truth. On one of those many long nights in the hold, when the last sailor had left, Berenice confided she was the daughter of a prostitute and she'd never known her father.

"I was ten when the tavern keeper who pandered Mama sold me into slavery. He said it was time I earned my keep as a khamaitypes."

Beyond the word's literal meaning of "one who hits the ground," Nerissa knew exactly what it meant for Berenice. She'd had to earn her daily bowl of gruel by screwing a never ending line of customers on a stinking, muddy floor.

"But our building burned down five years later, then our master's biggest competitor bought me. He had me walk the sailors' district wearing sandals with AKOLOUTHI carved into their soles."

Nerissa could picture the reason immediately. In the dirt lanes of her route, Berenice's footprints urged men to "Follow me."

"Then in my eighteenth year, a tinsmith bought my contract. He was one of my regular clients and took a liking to me. But only a year later, he sold me to Hycron after I miscarried a male child. My new master said the boy would've become his son, because his wife was barren, but now he decided that I was unlucky."

Here on the Ithacan platform, Berenice sighed with resignation. Antechron drew a

dagger from his sash, its silver hilt shaped into a faun. He used its point to trace Berenice's fertile shape. Quite plump when their voyage started, she wasn't rail thin like everyone but Dzunga. As the men grinned with appreciation, the slave dealer suddenly grabbed Berenice's arm. With one quick motion, he slit her robe from neck to waist. He pulled the rent halves of the fabric off her shoulders, then passed his hands over Berenice's full breasts and round hips. She reddened with shame, but knew better than to protest.

When Antechron was done with Berenice, he proceeded down the line. He richly praised something about each maiden, either her face or fecundity or willingness to please. He came last to Nerissa, spreading out his arms in silent tribute. No words were necessary to describe the delicate beauty of her features.

Of course, he'd intentionally positioned her in profile. From this side, no one in the crowd could see what Chymides had done to her jaw. Thanks to his three-knuckled fist, it was badly swollen, discolored to the dark color of rotting meat, beginning to go a sickly yellow around the edges. And Antechron didn't strip her, as he'd done with Berenice. He'd taken one look at her jaw and guessed her body was a mass of bruises, far worse than Dzunga's.

Won't his game be up once bidders step onto the platform? Nerissa wondered. *Someone will lift my chiton, like they did to the young girls. Everyone will see my mutilated breasts.*

When the public inspection commenced, Nerissa's foreboding turned out to be accurate. The very things she'd feared began to happen almost immediately. A knot of twenty men flocked straight to her, while maybe half that number went to look at Dzunga. For a moment, Dzunga's glare of irritation gave Nerissa a rare glint of pleasure.

It faded quickly once the first men saw the damage caused by Chymides. They couldn't help but do so, since Nerissa straightened painfully and turned that side to them. "It'll heal," said one of the caped men to the other, but when he raised her chiton, Nerissa knew he'd never buy her for a bed mate.

The men left quickly. Most didn't bother to mask their repulsion. Nerissa felt as if each man had punched her in the stomach.

Most of the buyers now went in a beeline toward Dzunga. A heavy one seemed to be taken with Berenice, and a tall man hovered jealously beside the youngest girl. Wiping off the one teardrop that had managed to break through her resolve, Nerissa regained her composure. She exhaled with relief. The twin scars from Hycron may have been a gift.

Then one of the crowd surrounding Dzunga turned and left her. Though he came rapidly toward Nerissa, there was something furtive about his gait. His eyes were even slier. He seemed incapable of holding them in one direction for more than a single second.

Nerissa didn't recognize him immediately, because his huge friend wasn't with him any more. But now she saw it was the swineherd who'd tried to buy the younger girls.

She turned the left side of her face toward him, too. The sooner he saw her ugliness and left, the less she'd have to endure his stench.

Instead, the man grinned with satisfaction, exposing his stained teeth. She wished he hadn't, because his breath smelled fouler than his body. It was anything but the way he'd glared at her before. Or maybe that was why he looked so smug. He probably imagined how he'd make Nerissa pay for the insolence of staring at him earlier. Once she was his property, he could do anything he wanted.

He continued grinning even as Nerissa scowled at him. Showing meekness wouldn't save her now, but maybe she could give him second thoughts about buying such an ugly slave. His eyes held still long enough to see they were a murky brown. His uneven hair was mud brown, too. He must have hacked it with a knife. Probably the same chipped blade he used for eating. She noticed there were bits of dirty straw caught in his hair. A tangle above his right ear looked cemented by manure. He reached into his knee-length chiton, brought out a purse of coins, and bounced it on his palm.

"I'll get you for a song," he said with a smirk. "I'll offer fifty. I'll go as high as eighty. Let's see these bastards top that for a Gorgon."

"If I'm a Gorgon, why would you want me?" Nerissa couldn't help but ask.

"Because my ewe shed doesn't have a lantern. It makes no difference what you look like in the dark."



"Who'll open the bidding at one hundred?" asked Antechron when it was Nerissa's turn. "A mere one hundred drachmai for this doe-eyed princess. I don't claim she's perfect. You all know I'm an honest man. It's true she's had a rough voyage. But let's speak plainly, gentlemen. When will you have another chance to lay your hands on such a lovely specimen? Just look at her profile. No man can deny it's perfect! The other side will heal, and those scratches on her titties, why they're nothing. She's young and healthy. She'll fill out every day. Give it a month or two, and you can have Aphrodite in your bed."

"I'll give you fifty," offered the swineherd.

There was a murmur in the crowd. The swineherd wheeled around to glare at them. Whether it was from his silent promise of revenge or the other buyers' conviction that she wasn't

worth fifty drachmai, let alone one hundred, no one topped his bid.

"Fifty?" said Antechron in a tone of disbelief. "Has Hephaestus blown smoke from His eternal forge into your eyes? Can't you see this maiden's great potential? I can't possibly accept less than one hundred drachmai for such a treasure."

The buyers remained silent. For a minute, the only sounds within the square were a crying infant and Nerissa's heart beat.

"Sixty," a voice finally spoke up from the rear.

Nerissa couldn't see who it was, but the tone was weak and high pitched, like that of an elderly man.

That won't be so bad, Nerissa thought. He won't use my body often. And if he beats me, the strokes won't have much force.

"Eighty," said the swineherd, jumping past seventy to the figure he'd cited as his limit.

It worked, freezing out the other bidder. The crowd turned back to watch him. Through a gap, Nerissa could see it wasn't an old-timer, but an ordinary looking man. He broke out in a fit of wheezing and turned his head away. Maybe he suffered from the coughing sickness. Now, Nerissa felt relieved he hadn't won the auction.

"Eighty? Is that all you fine men of Ithaca can spend on a prime bedmate? I just sold a consignment of artisans at Korinthos for two hundred each. They'll earn their masters a drachma every day. A lovely handful of oboloi. If you choose to rent her out, this girl could easily double that."

Only silence met his spiel. Nerissa felt increasingly afraid that the swineherd's bid would win.

"Come, I know your purses jingle happily this year," coaxed Antechron. "We've had three straight bountiful harvests. Our boatyard's gained renown for the speed and power of our triremes. Many of you have profited on our pottery's fine reputation throughout Hellas. And you can't even afford one hundred drachmai for this slightly imperfect goddess?"

"She's mine at eighty!" shouted the swineherd. "Stop dragging it out. I have other things to do today."

"Right -- the wine shop opens at the second hour," Nerissa heard the man who'd admired Berenice say to his wife.

"Eighty's all you're getting," insisted the swineherd. "You've wasted enough time. Just say, 'Sold!' you charlatan. You can be damned glad I'm willing to give you eighty, when fifty's more than generous."

"Very well," said Antechron. "I hate to do it, when she's a pearl who should bring

hundreds, but--”

“You’ll be so good as to wait while I climb up,” came a well-bred, female voice.

“Er, you mean to come onto the platform, Lady Phyllis? For what reason, if I may ask?”

“My husband isn’t expected back from Stratos until tomorrow. I know it’s not the custom, but I need to inspect the slave, myself.”

“You wish to make a bid, my lady?”

“If she’s satisfactory.”

“In what way? If you wish an opportunity to see her body like the men, I admit that she’s been cut across, er--”

“So I gathered from your earlier comments. But I’m not interested in her body. What I require is a well-trained girl who speaks our language fluently. My neighbor Rhialete tells me that her husband heard this girl speaking in Ionian.”

“It’s true, my lady,” spoke up Nerissa. “I also have some knowledge of literature, mathematics, and geography, if perhaps you need a she-pedagogue.”

“You have excellent diction,” said Phyllis. “But your accent’s strange. I take it that Ionian isn’t your first language?”

“No, my lady. I come from Smyrna, where we speak Ionic. Which as I’m sure you know, is very different from Ionian, though the names are similar.”

“Very well, that will do.” Then addressing Antechron, she added, “I won’t need to breach custom after all. I can see from here she’ll serve. You may have your one hundred for her.”

“No!” roared the swineherd. “That offer is illegal. Women aren’t allowed to bid on slaves. You shouldn’t even be here at an auction.”

“Show me where it says that in our laws,” said Lady Phyllis. “That’s merely how our great-grandmothers behaved. But these are modern times. We don’t bar wives from public life. We don’t hold women less than respectable for speaking to an unrelated man.”

“It’s a rule that goes back centuries, unwritten or not. You’ll offend the Gods by entering the commercial province of men.”

“There’s no sound reason why I shouldn’t buy a slave who’ll serve me and not my husband. He was called away to attend urgent business in Stratos, as you all know. He’d honor my request and buy this slave, if he were here.”

“But he’s not, and that’s an end to it,” the swineherd said. “No disrespect, but you don’t have the right to buy a slave.”

“The council can argue this question later. A council on which my husband sits, in case

too many bowls of wine have washed that fact out of your head. For now, there's no law you can cite that prevents me from purchasing this girl."

"You're wrong. There *is* a law. You can't pledge silver you don't have. Only men control a family's funds. If you spent it, that would be the same as theft."

"These hundred drachmai are my own money, inherited from my father. You have no protest on those grounds."

"That's true," said Antechron. "I've seen similar cases elsewhere. This is hardly the first time a woman's bought a slave from me."

The swineherd turned to his huge friend. Though she couldn't hear what he said, Nerissa could see that he was demanding a loan. The big man kept shaking his head. Finally, the swineherd grabbed his friend's purse. They pulled it back and forth until it spilled open. Only a few oboloi tumbled on the ground. Mortified that everyone saw his penury, he snatched up his coins and fled.

"I take it you don't wish to raise your offer?" Antechron said to the swineherd. "If there are no other bids--"

"I'll match one hundred drachmai if you'll give her to me."

It was clear that he had no more money.

"Sorry, I can't do that. Lady Phyllis made the offer first."

"Sleep lightly, Antechron," the swineherd threatened, then shoved his way through the crowd.

"Sold," said Antechron. "This comely maiden goes to Lady Phyllis for the sum of one hundred drachmai. And well played, may I say."

Nerissa knew that beauty was the last thing behind her purchase. Her new mistress looked extremely clever. Who better to serve a noble household than a capable young woman whom her husband wouldn't touch?

Beta

Nerissa followed two steps behind Lady Phyllis. She wished she'd had a chance to say goodbye to Berenice, but her only friend was quickly led off in the opposite direction. She wondered if she'd ever see Berenice again. Maybe if she worked hard, her new mistress might grant this privilege. From what she'd seen, Ithaca was a small island. On feast days, slaves might be allowed to attend dramas, gathering in the amphitheater's back rows, as they'd done in Smyrna.

To the south of the agora, they turned at the Temple of Poseidon. Above its sacrificial altar, smoke rose from the offering of bones and entrails wrapped in fat. As the nourished Gods looked down, a knot of widows waited for their share of meat. Other worshippers stood nearby in prayer, palms raised to the heavens, crying out aloud. One man stamped the ground with every phrase, calling out to Minos. The custom was familiar to Nerissa. It was reassuring, in fact. This land wasn't very different from Smyrna, after all. Uncle Xolon had always done the same when he wished to attract the ear of Hades, another God who dwelt below.

Leaving the temple behind, they entered a wide street lined with cypress trees. Its houses were very large, immaculately maintained. Slaves were outside trimming hedges, scrubbing walls, and sweeping tiled walkways.

Lady Phyllis headed for the grandest of these residences. Two stories high, it was easily as large as the palace of Baron Iadros, who ruled the district where Nerissa had been born. But it made his home seem rude in comparison. Instead of brick, it was built of stone. These blocks easily supported a roof of heavy tiles. Nerissa could instantly see the advantage. They were far less prone to fire than the thatching used throughout Ionia. Since there was no need to protect mud-brick walls from rain, the roof didn't have to extend past the walls.

She wondered if Lady Phyllis's husband was a baron. Her mistress had the manner of an aristocrat. Maybe she was a younger daughter of the island's king. She'd certainly been treated

with deference by the slave dealer Antechron. Her gait was regal, her bearing so straight, she might have been a ship's mast. She was very elegantly coiffed, fine strings of pearls woven through her hair. Her golden threaded peplos extended to her ankles. Since she wasn't veiled, Nerissa had seen her face quite clearly at the auction. It also suggested she'd come with a rich dowry, since she was anything but beautiful.

Lady Phyllis had a noticeably large mouth. Her ears stuck out through the mouse-brown curls with which she tried to hide them. Nonetheless, there was great self-assurance in her doughy face.

An old slave opened the sturdy iron gates that stood between thick walls. Lady Phyllis didn't thank her gateman. She passed two gardeners without a word, then entered the house through a door flanked by marble statues. Nerissa recognized one as Ares, God of War and the other as Hephaestus, the Divine Smith. Did these favored Olympians mean her new master's fortune came from the implements of battle?

Lady Phyllis stopped in front of a tall, stern-faced slave who'd opened the door. This time, she acknowledged the man with a slight nod.

"Praegon, this girl is to serve Vasiledes. I don't recall her name or country, but she speaks Ionian well enough. She can tell you all of that. Take her to the nursery, instruct her in her duties."

"Yes, my lady."

"Oh, and one thing before you get settled," Phyllis spoke to Nerissa for the first time since the auction. "Don't use this entrance or this portion of the house in future. Your sphere is confined to the nursery, the kitchen, the store rooms coming off the east end of our courtyard, the well where you may bathe and wash your clothing, and the female dormitory should you need to enter it, though you'll sleep in the nursery. You may not enter my husband's library for any reason. In fact, stay out of the andron altogether. You have no business in my husband's quarters. If Lord Theoton sends for Vasiledes, bring him to Praegon first. Is that clear?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And do something about your face. That swelling looks unhealthful. I won't have Vasiledes catch a flux. We wash here every day, you know. I don't care what barbaric practices slaves followed in their countries. I won't tolerate filth in my household."

"I understand, my lady." Nerissa didn't find it difficult to keep resentment from her tone. The insinuation that her people were any less clean than Ithacans was nothing next to everything she'd suffered.

Praegon led Nerissa through the reception hall. Its mosaic floor impressed her more than

anything she'd seen so far. In Smyrna, even the wealthiest of families had floors of beaten earth. They covered these with woolen rugs. Looking down, she saw a scene of deerhounds fighting a wounded stag. One dog lay gored, while two had leapt onto the stag's back, and another latched onto its throat. Ruby colored tiles dripped goutts of blood onto the stag's hooves, reminding Nerissa of Captain Hycron's blade.

She found her hand shielding her breast as they passed the courtyard's peristylon. With a blush, she lowered it, but fortunately Praegon walked in front and hadn't noticed. She glanced between two columns into the courtyard. Its only ornamentation was a sundial surrounded by four marble benches. It seemed a stern place, designed for contemplation, not for pleasure.

Nerissa recalled the yearly feast for townsmen at Baron Iadros's palace. There, the interior was richly ornamented. A fountain played at the center of the baron's courtyard, surrounded by lush gardens and many statues. In Ionia, the style wasn't nearly as harsh as this Doric architecture.

Artwork had covered the baron's wooden walls. Here, these walls were plastered into the pattern of an orderly stone fence. The ceiling was made of timber beams, whereas back home, a rich man's ceiling would be covered with terra cotta tiles, each imprinted with a pleasing image. Even the house's shape was different, rectangular, rather than a square. Overall, the effect seemed cold, unyielding.

"What's your name, girl?" Praegon asked her.

He was white-haired and white-bearded, but with clear eyes and smooth skin.

"Nerissa, sir."

"Don't call me sir. I'm a slave like you. But I imagine you've been taught never to address your elders by name. You may call me Keys, since that is my position. I've been here so long, they've made me keeper-of-the-keys.

They came into the kitchen. It was a large room with stone flagging on the floor. There was a hearth at either end, where great iron kettles hung from hooks. Two young slaves worked chopping vegetables, while a fat cook stuffed a brace of ducks. Praegon introduced the cheerful, heavy woman, whose name was Thea. The two assistants were Dora and Aglaia.

"Come back when you get a chance," said Thea. "I'll give you a good bowl of porridge and cow's butter. I know how those slave ships are. You look like they starved you half to death."

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am, I'd love a bowl of porridge. But I'm all right, though I know my face looks awful."

"I've got something for that, too. My own salve, made from goose droppings and lime.

Better than anything the apothecary could sell you.”

“Thank you, ma’am. That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s nothing, dear. Slaves have to stick together. We’ll get you fixed and fattened up right quick.”

Praegon jerked his head impatiently. Nerissa followed him from the kitchen, then around the back side of the courtyard. They passed two slaves scrubbing the floor, but Praegon didn’t stop to introduce them. When they reached the nursery, Praegon selected a large key from his iron ring, then opened the heavy door.

“It’s always kept locked?” Nerissa asked.

In Smyrna, it was rare for any room to have a door, let alone a lock. Nerissa didn’t like the look of this. To her, the heavy oak door seemed like a casket’s lid.

“The Mistress is particular that way. Vasiledes is her only child. She fears someone will steal him.”

“Then how do I get him out in an emergency? What if there’s a fire?”

“My instructions are to run here first and rescue him.”

“Or I could carry him through a window.”

“They’re too high for you to reach.”

“I could stand on a storage chest.”

“The windows are also very narrow.”

“I’m very thin.”

“You’ll wait for me.”

“What about on normal days?”

“I’ll let you out at meal times. You may use the privy, then.

“And the child? He also must contain himself?”

“Of course. It’s our honored lady’s rule.”

Inside the room, an old woman sat making yarn on a hand spindle. A pale little boy carefully piled blocks carved out of some dark wood. He looked about four years old, but for such a young child, he was very self-composed. He didn’t turn to watch them as they entered, but placed his next block precisely atop the tower.

“Szeta, you may go.” Praegon jerked his head again. “Vasiledes has a new gerula.”

The slave left without a word. It seemed to be a common habit in this austere household.

“This child’s only had an old woman for company?” Nerissa asked.

Apparently, she was to take care of the boy alone. It seemed odd because nursemaids usually were under close supervision. In a household as wealthy as this, there should be a Nurse

Father. He should have many nursemaids, both wet and dry, reporting to him.

"Szeta was filling in," said Praegon. "She never managed to learn much of our language. She's from somewhere in the wild lands of Etruria. The southern part, I think, the place we call Oenotria because it's full of grape vines. They're very stupid there, you know."

"What happened to the boy's previous nursemaid?"

"The usual with young, pretty slaves, so she had to go."

"What do you mean, 'the usual?'"

"Got herself a great big tummy, didn't she? We all know the Master was responsible, but Lady Phyllis convinced him the girl was also screwing our former gateman Zephilon."

"Was she?"

"Hardly. Zephilon was a friend of mine."

Praegon's raised eyebrow made it clear he meant that they were catamites. It was also clear that Praegon had said nothing in Zephilon's defense. Still, Nerissa knew better than to let her disapproval show. The last thing she needed was an enemy in her new life.

"What happened to them, Honored Keys?" she asked.

"They both were sold to Stenarch. Believe me, that's the last job you want, so just be sure to watch your step."

"What's so bad about this Stenarch?"

"Owns the lead mine, doesn't he?"

"Oh. His slaves must have a terribly hard life."

"It's a death sentence. I promise you that, my girl. He goes through so many that he usually leases slaves instead of buying them outright. For this, he pays one obolos per slave per day. No one lasts more than a year working down that pit. It comes from breathing poisoned air until they spit up blood."

"Then I'll be sure to stay on our Mistress's good side. She'll find me very capable at taking care of children. I like them and they like me. Lady Phyllis will have no complaints."

"So long as you keep Vasiledes clean, she doesn't care. She only sees him once a month. The main thing is to stay away from the Master. He can't keep his hands off pretty girls. Once the injured side of your face heals, he'll be all over you. So you're best off sticking to the kitchen at meal times. He never goes in there."

"Thank you. I'll remember that... And my duties in the nursery? Lady Phyllis said that you'd explain them."

"Just keep him bathed. And quiet, too. She doesn't stand for noise."

"He seems a very quiet boy, as it is."

"That comes from being sickly. I doubt this one will live to be the heir."



Once Praegon left, Nerissa sat down near the little boy Vasiledes. He had a sweet face with lank brown hair, a tiny nose, and soft gray eyes. His pale lips were pressed together in concentration. Though he seemed intent on the structure he was making, he also seemed terribly alone. Nerissa longed to wrap the boy's thin body in her arms. He was the same age that her baby brother Mavros would have been.

"I'm Nerissa, your new nursemaid," she said. "Would you like me to help build?"

"It's a temple," said Vasiledes. His voice was surprisingly strong for a child who appeared so frail. "These are the pillars."

"I see. They're very nicely made."

"I like them to be straight. Or the roof will fall."

"What do you use for the roof?"

"My wax tablet. But don't tell Papa. He said it's for practicing my letters."

"I won't tell, I promise. But I can help you with the letters, later, if you like."

"I don't know them all yet, but I can make Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Oh, and Papa showed me Theta. It's the first letter of his name. He says that I must practice every day. Except, the holder of the stylus digs into my hand."

"You mean the flat end? That's for rubbing out mistakes. I'll show you how to hold it in the middle so it doesn't hurt. But first, let's finish your temple."

"It's for Poseidon. Like the big one at the end of our street. I pray to Poseidon every day. When I'm big, I want to be captain of a ship. Poseidon will help me, I hope, but Papa likes Ares and Hephaestus better."

"Is he a general?"

"No, he makes armor. Big shields, too."

"You mean he owns a workshop where they're made."

"Yes. Papa took me there one time. He says that there are eighty slaves, but I can't count that high."

"It's easy. I'll teach you, young Master."

"That's not my name. It's Vasy."

"Is that what you like to be called? Instead of Vasiledes?"

"Only Mama calls me that. Papa calls me Vasy, and so did Rinea."

"She used to be your nursemaid?"

"Yes. She was very pretty."

"And was she nice?"

"Sometimes. Papa and her used to laugh a lot when he'd come in here. They'd play a tickling game. And once I saw them wrestling, like athletes do at the palaestra. Without their clothes, I mean."

"Oh... I used to wrestle with my brothers. But I'd better not do that with your father. I'm sure he's much too strong for me."

"He's very big. I ask Poseidon to make me grow up just as big."

"You will. Don't worry, Vasy. We can practice wrestling and other contests, too. All my games will be with you. We'll turn you into a champion athlete."

"Could you really? I'd like that very much."

Nerissa tousled the boy's thin hair, then stroked it back from his eyes. She resisted a powerful urge to cover him with kisses. He reminded her so much of little Mavros. No, he didn't have her baby brother's happy laugh. They looked nothing alike. Mavros had been blond-haired, rosy-cheeked, and very plump, at least before the famine. But they both had boundless trust and curiosity in their soft eyes. Of all the ones she'd lost, Nerissa felt saddest when Mavros visited her dreams. He'd never had a life. Without a proper burial, there was no guarantee he'd even have a place inside the realm of Hades.

They finished the temple, chatting about ships and naval battles all the while. Then Nerissa helped Vasy practice his letters. She showed him how to draw war craft on his tablet, then traced the words ocean, wind, and sail for him. There were wooden swords in the nursery, so they played a game of pirates next.

Two chairs turned seat to seat became a great trireme. A candle stand between them was its mast. It had no oars, because they'd been snapped off by an enemy vessel's pass. Nerissa was a Cretan pirate, intent on taking hostages and plunder. But she'd met her match in the heroic captain Vasiledes. After an epic battle, in which they were the last survivors, Vasy ran her through and flung her in the sea.

Nerissa's good impression of the little boy held firm. Throughout their fight, he was very careful with his sword, never attacking above Nerissa's waist. He could see her jaw was injured, and though he couldn't have known about her other injury, he must have sensed it was improper to strike a girl's chest. Maybe his former nursemaid Rinea had explained it.

"How did you hurt your face?" he asked as Nerissa rose.

She didn't want to talk about Chymides Eight-fingers and her suicide attempt. Instead,

she told how a band of real pirates had attacked her family.

After the midday meal, Nerissa asked permission from Praegon to take her charge outside. The steward said that such a change in routine could only be decided by the Master, and he was still away.

“But couldn't you ask Lady Phyllis? Surely the boy's supervision falls under her domain at this young age. It won't disturb the household's peace, and the fresh air will do wonders for Vasiledes.”

“What does air have to do with it? Is that some Ionic notion? Where did you say you're from again?”

“Smyrna, Honored Keys. And yes, we do hold fresh air to be very healthful.”

“There's air in here. We breathe it, don't we?”

“Yes, but outdoors, there's the added benefit of mixing air with two other elements, earth and fire, the latter represented by Helios. And the fourth element, too, if one is near the sea, like here on Ithaca. A lake or stream would also do for water.”

“Those arguments will cut no weight with Lady Phyllis. She isn't fond of earth or fire. You should hear her lay into Thea about hearth soot getting tracked out of the kitchen. But it's true she values water highly. She might agree, if you could teach the boy to swim.”

“It would be my pleasure. I'm the daughter of a fisherman. I was swimming in my second year. Is there a protected cove where I could take him? Or maybe there's a natatorium in Polis?”

“There is. But you'll need permission from Theoton to use it.”

“Theoton is our master's name?”

“Of course. Didn't I tell you that already?”

“Maybe so.” He hadn't. “But this is such a large house, I've been introduced to twenty slaves already. Their names must have squeezed Theoton out of my head. If you'll forgive a foolish girl. It won't happen again.”

“See that it doesn't. And remember to address the Master as Lord Theoton when you ask about the natatorium.”

“But can't you ask him for me, Honored Keys? The Mistress made it very clear I'm not to bother him. And you told me yourself it's best to stay out of the Master's sight.”

“That's only after you look human. Right now, you'd hardly tempt a man shipwrecked for years.”

“But still, I wouldn't like to go against the wishes of Lady Phyllis. Besides, Lord Theoton might not return for days. I think it's important for his health that young Vasiledes

begin to exercise at once. Couldn't you ask the Mistress now?"

"Impossible. I never bother her unless it's necessary."

By which Praegon meant he liked his elevated place too much to risk the Lady's disfavor.

"She respects you, Honored Keys. And you're the model of excellent health, yourself. I can see she'd listen to you on the subject of improving her son's strength. You needn't put it in terms of fresh air. But in a household that honors Ares, shouldn't its son have the chance to exercise, so he might prove a strong and fearless warrior some day?"

"You're a clever one, aren't you, my girl? But tell me, why does it matter so much to you? Do you hope to escape when you're outside? That would be very foolish."

"Of course not, Honored Keys. I know that Ithaca is very small. I'd soon be captured, then sent to the mine. I fear that very much. And I know how fortunate I've been to gain a place in this esteemed household."

"Then what's your angle?"

"I had a little brother the age of Vasiledes. I played with him outside every day. He was the picture of good health and cheerfulness. I'd like to see Vasiledes enjoy his life as much."

While this was true, Nerissa had her selfish reasons, too. She'd wither to dust if locked inside this room each day. Also, if she could take the boy on outings in the countryside, she hoped to find the herbs she'd learned about from Mother. At lunch, Thea had presented a vial of her goose dropping poultice. Not that Nerissa didn't appreciate the cook's kindness, but she'd rather be scarred for life than press the foul green stuff into her wounds.

"Can I bring my toy boat to the swimming place?" spoke up Vasiledes.

Nerissa hadn't realized that he was paying attention to the conversation.

"I'm not sure," she answered him. "But Honored Keys can ask your mother."

"Yes, please ask," Vasiledes said to Praegon. "I like boats very much. And water. When I get my bath, I'm not scared at all to put my head under."

"Yes, but the Onoskolon might eat you in that great big pool," said Praegon.

"He will?" The little boy's voice went very soft.

"That's right. He'll swim out of the shadows."

Nerissa gaped. She couldn't believe the steward was mean enough to frighten Vasiledes. They had this tale in Smyrna, too. The Onoskolon was a grotesque monster with one foot of brass. It devoured children who refuse to obey their elders.

"That only happens to very naughty children," Nerissa hurried to explain. "And you're anything but bad. You're one of the best little boys I've ever known. Honored Keys was just teasing." She turned to stare at Praegon, but kept her expression neutral. "Isn't that right?"

“Not at all. I happen to know the Onoskolon's already eaten five children at the natatorium. Lamia lurks there, too.”

“Lamia, who's that?”

Vasiledes was trembling now. His normally pale face was practically white.

“She was once a beautiful woman loved by Zeus. Jealous Hera killed their son, which drove Lamia mad. She endures her endless life by destroying other women's children.”

“It's only a legend,” Nerissa said at once. “I doubt very much she's real. And she's certainly nowhere near Polis. She hates water, anyway. So does the Onoskolon. You're very safe at the natatorium, Vasy... And some monsters should find their fun in other ways than terrifying little children.” She glared at Praegon now. She didn't care if he had the power to beat her. Then she turned back to Vasiledes. “Don't worry. No one's going to hurt you. Anyone who tries is an enemy of mine.”



Five days later, Nerissa had the opportunity to approach Lady Phyllis. The Mistress required her to serve at a banquet, since one of the housemaids was sick with ague and another was in her time of menses, making her unfit to handle food. Lord Theoton wasn't home yet, but it didn't matter since this gathering was for female friends of Lady Phyllis.

“You'll carry platters and pour wine,” she said. “You do know how to do that?”

“Yes, my lady. But who'll attend to the young Master?”

“Get the crone to sit with him. What's her name, you know, the one from Oenotria. She may be a barbarian, but she's clean enough.”

“Very good, my lady... And while I have your ear, may I ask permission to teach Vasiledes to swim?”

“To swim, you say?”

“Yes, if you'll allow it. The water and the exercise would be very good for him. I could take him to the natatorium, if you'd speak to his father.”

“Very well. I'll mention it to Lord Theoton, when he returns.” Her tone was disinterested. It was of little importance to her. “See that your peplos is freshly laundered tomorrow when you serve. And I thought I told you to do something about your face.”

“Thea gave me a poultice, but I don't think it's working. My mother once showed me an effective remedy, however. And there's a plant called feverfew that could help your serving maid. I could gather the herbs, if I might take Vasiledes for walks out in the countryside until

our swimming lessons begin.”

“The countryside? Certainly not. He'll pick up all manner of dirt and filth.”



The banquet went from noon the next day until early evening. Five of Lady Phyllis's elegant friends attended. Each was exquisitely coiffed with gems and silken ribbons and flowers in their hair. Lady Phyllis had chosen dark red as her color, with rubies shaped like tear drops and amaryllis blossoms. Nerissa wondered where she got them -- legend said this never dying flower grew only on the slopes of Mount Olympus.

The guests' attire was equally beautiful, their shimmering garments trailing from the couches where they reclined. The banquet hall was as austere as the rest of the house, but the low table was handsomely carved. It showed a scene of Dionysus feasting at the right hand of Zeus, the most honored position in His pantheon. Nerissa helped serve seven courses, along with copious amounts of the finest wine.

It seemed strange that Ithacan women feasted in the banquet hall, which after all was part of the andron. It was even odder that they consumed intoxicating drink. In Smyrna, and everywhere she'd been thereafter, only medicinal wine was allowed for females. Here, they barely watered the potent Chian red. And the ladies had her pour bowlful after bowlful into each deep skyphos. Not for them the shallow kylix. Maybe this simply was the way of Ithacan aristocracy. At the servants' meals, the women all drank water, while Praegon and the other men drank cheap wine made from the secondary press of grape lees.

While the ladies' unbridled thirst disturbed Nerissa, she greatly admired the oenochoe from which she poured. It was the finest piece of pottery she'd ever seen. Its deep black glaze was painted in white and ocher tones with scenes of women dipping their serving jugs into a mixing krater, then pouring wine onto the ground as a libation to the Gods. Its long, graceful neck flared into a lip shaped like a trefoil leaf.

She'd seen the amphora that held a large store of this red. Its pitch seal was marked with the stamp of Chios, that distant island so close to her home. If she got the chance later, it seemed almost worth the risk of madness to pour unwatered wine directly from this marvelous oenochoe into her mouth.

The food began with numerous propomata -- roasted chestnuts, honey cakes, soft boiled pheasant eggs, fried eggplant, salted olives, and many more. After these appetizers, Nerissa carried elaborate platters of smoked eels, octopus in a sauce of poppy seeds and yoghurt, roast

boar dressed with figs and turnips, sea turtle stewed in thick, sweet Thasos wine. This last dish was especially distressing. Didn't the Ithacans know these creatures were allied with sacred dolphins?

It was a far cry from the simple food she'd eaten all her life. The rich aromas sickened her. She wondered how Thea could bear to cook these things. Yes, of course tastes varied in every nation, but this diet seemed unhealthy. Even Baron Iadros didn't serve anything like this at his annual feast for the villagers. She remembered what Father's favorite poet Hesiod had to say about the food that made a perfect closing to his day. That great man recommended eating the most simple meats, such as "...flesh of a heifer fed in the woods, that has never calved, and of firstling kids."

The ladies continued to drink as they ate many delicacies for *tragemata*. This was an Ionian word Nerissa hadn't heard before. Thea said it meant dessert, or literally, "chewed with wine." Later as she cleared, there was entertainment for the ladies in the courtyard. She listened to a poet's booming voice as he declaimed:

Rage -- Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion, feasts for the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end. Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed, Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.

Nerissa felt happy for the first time in months. Her nausea had vanished. This verse was excellent. She'd never heard its like, and Father had recited all the best poets. It must be a new work, though its subject was extremely old. She recognized the scene this poet painted with his words. She wondered if a long line of bards had passed the story through his family. Maybe the first of them had been there with Agamemnon and Achilles. His subject was the ancient war of the Achaeans against Troy. It had taken place not far from Smyrna. Father said he'd seen the ruins as a youth. After a short pause for breath, the poet pressed ahead:

And which of the gods was it that set them on to quarrel? It was the son of Zeus and Leto; for he was angry with the king and sent a pestilence upon the host to plague the people, because the son of Atreus had dishonored Chryses his priest. Now Chryses had come to the ships of the Achaeans to free his daughter, and had brought with him a great ransom: moreover he bore in his hand the scepter of Apollo wreathed with a suppliant's wreath, and he besought the Achaeans, but most of all the two sons of Atreus, who were their chiefs. "Sons of Atreus," he cried, "and all other Achaeans, may the gods who dwell in Olympus grant you to sack the city of Priam, and to reach your homes in safety; but free my daughter, and accept a ransom for her, in

reverence to Apollo, son of Zeus."

"But what of the battles?" interrupted Lady Phyllis. "You've skipped so much. You seem to begin your story nine years into the war. I happen to know that the daughter of Chryses wasn't taken until then."

"Exactly," said the poet. "As you heard me say, I call on the Muse to begin when Achilles and Agamemnon first broke and clashed. The rest of that long war is tedious. What's more, the story is well known. A poet must never bore his audience."

"*Bore* us? Why do you think I hired you? My own ancestors gained their glory in this time. You say nothing of their heroics. Or are you building to that? Starting at the end, as it were. I believe you poets often do that."

"I start at the very heart. Why, my first word should tell you what this tale presents. *Menin!* Can't you feel the rage of great Achilles? He's taken the most beautiful of captives, and now that white-beard Agamemnon demands he give her to him. It's as if the gods conspired to make these two fierce allies clash and cause the death of thousands. Which is exactly what they did. Have you not heard that's what my poem describes? It's gained great fame and accolades across the lands of Hellas. I thought that's why you invited me here."

"I didn't invite you. I paid you to attend. And I want to hear the names of my ancestors."

"So you will, if you'll be patient, Lady Phyllis." Nerissa could hear the unspoken frustration in the poet's voice. A great artist, forced to grub for silver from his intellectual inferiors. He'd made immortals come to life with all their epic fortitude and petty jealousies, but all Lady Phyllis cared about was if her kinsmen gained a mention. "I believe two of them do make their appearances in the fourteenth book."

"Very well. Continue."

Nerissa listened through the afternoon as she scrubbed the wine soaked couches. The poet's voice was deep and resonant. How she wished she could enter the courtyard to watch him declaim. She could see him in her mind, a vigorous man, full in his prime. A dark black beard, and piercing eyes the color of a polished sword. Her heart surged with surprising tenderness for this hidden poet.

She slapped her breast to clear the unbidden warmth. She did it hard enough to ache, but that's exactly what she wanted. She bit her lip as she felt the wound on her left breast begin to seep fresh blood. This attraction to the poet's words and voice was disloyal to Andrastus. She'd loved him all her life. If anyone could have survived his plummet from that cliff into the sea, it was her adopted brother. Some day he'd land on Ithaca and buy her freedom. If Lord Theoton

refused to sell her, she and Andrastus would fight their way off this island, then continue home. Or if he had no means to trace her here, she'd gain freedom somehow, then find Andrastus herself.

Nerissa finished cleaning, then headed for the nursery. She'd recite what she remembered of this poem for Vasy. She knew he'd like it very much. On her way past the courtyard, she paused for a few seconds, pretending that her sandal had slipped loose. The poet had just described the famed battle between Diomedes and Ares, where Athena intervenes and causes Ares to be wounded. As she listened, he sent Ares fleeing to Olympus:

As a dark cloud in the sky when it comes on to blow after heat, even so did Diomedes son of Tydeus see Ares ascend into the broad heavens. With all speed he reached high Olympus, home of the gods, and in great pain sat down beside Zeus the son of Cronus. He showed Zeus the ichor that was flowing from his wound, and spoke piteously, saying, "Father Zeus, are you not angered by such doings? We gods are continually suffering in the most cruel manner at one another's hands while helping mortals; and we all owe you a grudge for having begotten that mad termagant of a daughter, who is always committing outrage of some kind. We other gods must all do as you bid us, but her you neither scold nor punish; you encourage her because the pestilent creature is your daughter. See how she has been inciting proud Diomedes to vent his rage on the immortal gods. First he went up to the Cyprian and wounded her in the hand near her wrist, and then he sprang upon me too as though he were a god. Had I not run for it, I must either have lain there for long enough in torments among the ghastly corpses, or have been eaten alive with spears until I had no more strength left in me."

Zeus looked angrily at him and said, "Do not come whining here, Sir Facing-both-ways. I hate you worst of all the gods in Olympus, for you are ever fighting and making mischief. You have the intolerable and stubborn spirit of your mother Hera: it is all I can do to manage her, and it is her doing that you are now in this plight: still, I cannot let you remain longer in such great pain; you are my own offspring, and it was by me that your mother conceived you; if, however, you had been the son of any other god, you are so destructive that by this time you should have been lying lower than the Titans."

It was brilliant. Beneath her seeping wound, Nerissa felt her heart surge insistently again. This poet so perfectly described the ways of Gods, their constant interference in the lives of men. Hadn't her clan learned at grievous cost the necessary result that when one party's lifted up, the other suffers terribly. Here was Ares, full of rage when thwarted, insistent that he'd only meant to help, heedless that he ruined others' lives, crying to his father over wounds that had no power to kill him.

Nerissa would dearly love to see this poet who had such skill to harness Gods as well as men. She lingered for a moment longer, pretending to wipe up crumbs she'd noticed on the floor. Maybe she could bring the ladies another amphora of wine, or a tray of sweetmeats.

No, she was new here, and the Mistress seemed extremely strict. There was no legitimate excuse that might bring her in the courtyard without risking the wrath of Lady Phyllis. But maybe the poet would be invited back some day. By then, she'd solidify her place in the household of Theoton by restoring his son to health. And then, she could ask the favor of being allowed to meet this poet. With a brief sigh, she rose. She soon found Praegon, who let her in the nursery.



Lord Theoton returned that night, but Nerissa only learned of it when she joined the other slaves for akratismos early the next morning. As she munched her breakfast of barley bread, the kitchen gossip was that Theoton was in a fine mood. His groom reported that the Master had made a profitable sale of armor to the city state of Stratos. Apparently, Theoton conducted business personally, instead of employing a factor. Nerissa wondered if he was of the merchant class, originally. Maybe his title came through marrying Lady Phyllis. Or maybe he'd earned it through bravery in battle.

She suspected that he cared little for his son. He hadn't sent for Vasy, though he'd been away at least a week. Maybe he was ashamed to have such a frail child as his heir. It made Nerissa even more determined to build up her charge's strength. Already, she was very fond of the solemn little boy.

Lady Phyllis swept into the kitchen at that moment. She hadn't visited Vasy since purchasing Nerissa, either. If it wouldn't mean a quick trip to the mine, Nerissa would have liked to grab the Mistress by her wrist and pull her into the nursery. It seemed no safer to mention that Vasy asked for his mother every day. Unless directly addressed, Nerissa knew she was expected to keep silent.

"I'll need two of you girls for deipnon," Lady Phyllis said. "My serving girls still are unable to leave their beds. Or so they claim. Isn't that what you told me, Praegon?"

"Yes, my lady. I assure you, the feverish one is drenched with sweat and other one is still unclean. If there were any hint of malingering, I'd beat them for you."

"Very well. We'll give them one more day. But that still leaves me short this evening... You, girl." She indicated Nerissa with her lumpy chin. "You did well enough yesterday. Didn't

disgrace my household by dropping anything, at least.”

She glared at Aglaia.

“Please, ma’am, I won’t spill anything this time,” the scullery maid answered in a whining tone.

Everybody laughed, except for Lady Phyllis. Her stern face quickly silenced them. But Nerissa understood the joke. Already, she’d seen Aglaia break four earthen dishes and one of the large storage urns used for keeping grain away from rats. Aglaia’s pudgy fingers were perpetually greasy from the bites of duck fat she enjoyed. Though Thea chided her about this habit, she was too dim to understand the connection. It seemed odd that she wasn’t flogged. In her short time here, Nerissa had seen Praegon punish slaves for all manner of offenses. Likely, Thea managed to keep Praegon and the Mistress from discovering this breakage. The pantry was so well stocked with crockery, they might never learn about it.

“You, girl. Dora, is it?”

“Yes, Lady Phyllis.

A wide grin stretched across the other scullery maid’s thin face. She glowed with pride that the Mistress knew her name. She’d only been here three years. Some had worked here half a life without ever hearing their mother-given names from Lady Phyllis.

“You’ll do, too. Remember, your clothes must be freshly laundered and carefully draped.”

“Yes, Lady Phyllis,” both Nerissa and Dora answered together.

After a long day of playing with Vasy, Nerissa dressed in the fresh peplos that was a loan from Thea. There hadn’t been time to scrub the one she’d used for serving yesterday. She joined Dora in the kitchen, where the other slaves were eating their deipnon, then began carrying trays down the hallway past the courtyard.

Unlike yesterday, this food smelled wonderful. Apparently, Theoton had simpler tastes than his wife. There was a tray of grilled swordfish and one of salted sturgeon. For starters, there’d been a plate of raw vegetables, onions, sweet peas, broad beans, and celery, and a bowl of cooked lentils served with wedges of flat bread. Nerissa felt very hungry. She’d had a bowl of pottage for the midday ariston, but wouldn’t get her evening meal until she’d finished cleaning once the banquet ended.

Her first sight of Theoton brought Nerissa to a sudden halt. He looked exactly like the spearman who’d killed her eldest brother Kestides. She almost dropped her platter, but managed to set it on the table with only a slight bump.

Theoton had a warrior’s face. He was the sort of heavy featured man considered

handsome. His face featured a prominent jaw, along with an aquiline nose, brooding lips, eyes that went straight to their mark like arrows, and a closely trimmed dark beard. Though the weather wasn't cold, he wore a fur himation over his broad shoulders. She'd never seen one like it. This cloak appeared to be made of a lion's skin, complete with a black mane.

Together with the Mistress, he took his deipnon in a smaller room next to the banquet hall. Instead of finely painted bowls and dishes, they used metal plates. Still, these would have marked them as a family of great wealth in Smyrna. Like others in her village, Nerissa's family had eaten meals from rounds of bread that Mother baked.

Instead of a low table and couches, there was a high, square table and chairs with legs shaped like the forelimbs of horses. Lord Theoton sat on one side and Lady Phyllis on the other. It seemed surprising to see a man and woman dine together. Then again, there were no kinsmen to join Theoton in this household. Vasy wouldn't be permitted at table until he was thirteen. That is, if he survived until he came of age.

They both drank Naxos wine, but this time Lady Phyllis reminded Nerissa to make sure hers was watered well. She made a point of saying it when Theoton was listening. Maybe he didn't know about the freely flowing Chian of the ladies' gatherings.

Nerissa sensed that there was little love between them. They didn't even speak about their son. With Aunt Melissa and Uncle Clemon, for instance, they'd seldom agreed on anything, but could speak cordially about their children. She'd seen this with other warring couples. It seemed the only thing holding many marriages together was a mutual love for their offspring. But these two spoke as if they were partners in a trading venture. And perhaps that's largely what they were. She gathered that Lady Phyllis's family money had financed an expansion at the workshop owned by Theoton. It enabled him to export his shields and armor to mainland cities.

Throughout the meal, Theoton shot glances at Nerissa, but only when Lady Phyllis wasn't looking. It must be true that she'd kept control of her wealth, allowing her to influence his behavior. Since when did powerful men care what their wives thought about them bedding serving wenches?

Still, Theoton took little effort to disguise his lust for Nerissa. He didn't seem to mind her swollen and discolored jaw. In fact, he winked at her when she brought a final dish of roasted pigeon. He was looking directly at the injured side of her face. And each time Nerissa poured wine, he'd peer into the neckline of her peplos. Though she'd regained much of the weight lost on the voyage, thanks to constant extra helpings from Thea, the kind-hearted cook's borrowed garment still was loose. Sweet Athena, she hoped Lord Theoton couldn't see her ugly,

weeping scabs.

When Nerissa brought a tray of fruit to end the meal, Theoton asked her to hand him a pear. He said his hands were slick from pigeon grease, and he had no bread left to wipe them. Theoton intentionally let his fingers brush over hers as she gave him the pear. Lady Phyllis saw it this time. Her scowl said that Nerissa would suffer a harsh punishment later.

“Is it true what I’ve heard about the Master?” she asked Dora once they were alone.

“Does he bed all the serving girls?”

“Not Aglaia. She pouts about it all the time.”

“But all the other young ones?”

“I can’t speak for them all. Some like Rinea never talked about it. But many girls have come and gone.”

“What about you? I take it he’s never forced you, since you’re still here.”

“What makes you say that? You think I’m not pretty enough to interest him?”

Dora’s pupils glinted with red light from the braziers. Nerissa couldn’t see her attracting a handsome man like Theoton. She bore a close resemblance to a fox, in truth. With her brick red hair, close set vixen eyes, sharply pointed nose, and narrow chin, Dora only needed whiskers to make the image complete. Then again, Theoton had probably paid little attention to her face. Dora’s tight peplos showed off large, firm breasts. Nerissa fought back a smile, imagining a brushy tail behind her sinuous hips.

“No, of course you’re pretty,” said Nerissa. “I meant that Lady Phyllis seems to sell off any girl the Master pulls into his bed.”

“He didn’t have to pull me there. I enjoyed it very much. I’ve gone back to him on every opportunity. The Master didn’t have to order me or give me presents. Just take a look at the size of his hands, if you’d like to know why.”

Nerissa had a good idea of what she meant, but that’s not what interested her.

“What if you quicken, Dora? Wouldn’t Lady Phyllis sell you off?”

Nerissa had already learned that owners didn’t want their female slaves becoming pregnant, although they’d own the offspring. There was too much risk of death during childbirth. Besides, it was cheaper to buy new slaves than to feed young ones until they were old enough to earn their keep. That’s why the male and female slaves were required to sleep in separate dormitories.

“It’s safe,” Dora answered, “I only lay with him after I’ve been visited by Selene for the month.”

“Still, Lady Phyllis isn’t a stupid woman. Why hasn’t she sent you to the mine?”

“She doesn't know, does she? We only do it when she's visiting her sister. And I know how to keep my mouth shut. Well, shut as far as talking, anyway. As for Lord Theoton's delicious xiphon, now that's a different matter.”

“But you just told me about it. And the Mistress is right out there in the courtyard. Aren't you afraid she'll hear? If you don't mind me saying so, your voice is very loud.”

“Not half as loud as when I lay with Theoton.” Dora's little pink tongue actually darted through her toothy grin. “Oh, don't look so scandalized. You're no virgin, either. I can guess from those bruises what happened to you on the ship. But it would go much better for you, if you learn how to please a man. There's two ways to submit, the hard way and the way that's much more fun. Actually, there are many ways. I'll show you, if you like.”

“Uh, thank you, Dora. Maybe another time.”

“Stop being such a child. I didn't mean right here on the table.”

She laughed, so loud Nerissa glanced nervously toward the courtyard.

“Quit worrying about the Mistress. She doesn't listen to a word we say. We're no more than furniture to her. Which reminds me, you'd better be as silent as this table. If I have to scrub the dirt out of your mouth, I won't be nearly as gentle.”

“Why would I say a word? Last thing I want is to bring trouble down on any of us. I'd only like to know how to keep away from Theoton.”

“Yes, I saw the way he ogled you. Face it, he won't wait for the Mistress to visit relatives. Which means she'll quickly learn you've been the Master's latest bedmate. It's one thing if he has a mistress in the sailors' quarter. But in this house, Lady Phyllis won't stand for him dipping his sword in someone else's scabbard.”

“Then what should I do? Please be a friend and give me your good counsel, Dora.”

“I advise you to build up your endurance.”

“Why, because I'll need it with the Master?”

“Sure, there's that. But what I meant is that you'll need it in the mine.”



The next morning, Nerissa rose at daybreak, used the privy, washed, joined the other slaves for prayers at the family altar, then quickly ate her barley bread. Until waking Vasy at the second hour of daylight, she was expected to weave on a handloom. The serving duties, and then the extra laundering had put Nerissa behind on the daily quota of fabric she was required to produce.

This was a slave's life -- work, punishment, and enough food to start again the next day, according to the old Smyrnan adage. But meals were often withheld for misbehavior. At the moment, Aglaia was on short rations for speaking to the Mistress unbidden. And Thea, afraid that she'd be punished, too, didn't dare sneak Aglaia more than her one daily bowl of pottage. Meanwhile, Praegon had given Eustace the gardener a blood-streaked back. His crime was trimming the Mistress's rosebushes too closely. He wouldn't be allowed to wear a chiton all month, despite the strong sun of late spring. And the Phrygian porter -- Nerissa hadn't learned his name or his offense -- looked like a wraith, because he was permitted only two hours of sleep a night.

"It's the Mistress's favorite punishment," explained Thea. "Beat a man, and he'll work slower, like a mule. Starve him, and he'll be too weak. Take away his sleep, she says, then he'll do anything to earn it back."

"But we're not animals," Nerissa said. "We only sleep six hours as it is. Take that from us, and we can't help making mistake after mistake. She should treat us better. After all, we're humans, too."

"Not to Lady Phyllis. She believes in handling her slaves exactly as a drover treats his oxen. She punishes even the most trivial infractions at once, to prevent future disobedience. I heard her argue with Lord Theoton about it one time. He says we're more like children, capable of understanding right and wrong. He's willing to explain our mistakes the first time, before letting Praegon use the lash. He says we also must be rewarded for good behavior."

"What did the Mistress say to that?"

"She says we *are* rewarded. We eat her food, sleep under her roof, dress in clothes that she provides. That's why we can't have these rewards when we do wrong."

"I have a feeling that everything we do is wrong to her."

Lady Phyllis reminded Nerissa of her exacting mother, though not of course with Mother's innate virtue.

"You're learning, dear," said Thea, as Nerissa rose to start another long day of weaving, laundering, and taking care of Vasy.

She didn't mind the work, especially helping the boy learn his letters. But spending so much time in this room allowed grief to flood her mind like the inexorable wash of tides. It wasn't so much the things she'd suffered on the Thallia, or even her loss of freedom. She knew that she deserved all this and so much more. But until Olympus had passed judgment on her monstrous soul, she'd been surrounded by a large and loving clan. She missed each one of them with pain so fierce, it felt as if a knife edge cut her from inside.

Nerissa couldn't even soothe the ache by imagining she'd see them again some day once she escaped. No, she'd have to live through a long life locked up in this house, or a short life in the mine, before they all could clasp each other close. But even this was far from guaranteed. It depended on redeeming her tainted life, so she might join them in the favored reaches of the underworld.

That evening after deipnon, as she tucked Vasy into bed, the nursery's door opened suddenly. She thought that it was Praegon, come to beat her for attracting Theoton's leer the day before, but it was Lady Phyllis. Surely she wouldn't administer the punishment, herself. Or bother to inform Nerissa that she was being leased out to the mine.

"My Lord Husband's agreed to the swimming lessons," she said to Nerissa. She didn't greet Vasy, though he stared at her from his bed. "You may take my son to the natatorium tomorrow. The porter will accompany you. The tall one, not the Phrygian. He looks disgraceful. I won't have my household shamed. That goes for you, too. See that you comport yourself with all due modesty."

"Yes, Lady Phyllis."

"You're to go there during the women's swimming session, directly before ariston. Small boys are permitted during this hour, too. You'll return straight back. Don't think of going anywhere else. I'll expect a report immediately when your return. If all goes well, you may take him every day."

"I understand, my lady."

"Very well. Good night, Vasiledes."

That's all Lady Phyllis said to her son. Without stopping by his bed, she left the room.

"Good night, Revered and Noble Mother," Vasy called after her.

This woman's colder than Hera, thought Nerissa. Not a kiss, not an embrace. Imagine, not even touching your child after more than a week apart. Worse yet, the name by which she'd taught him to address her. Nerissa could picture the bitch striking Vasy the first time he'd uttered "Mama" as a toddler.

As Nerissa dressed the next morning, the door opened again. Odd, because she hadn't heard the scrape of Praegon's key. He never knocked, but always made plenty of noise. More to spare himself the distaste of seeing her naked than any concern about her privacy, Nerissa suspected.

But this wasn't Praegon. She barely had time to clutch her peplos to her front before Lord Theoton swept into the room. She blushed so red, she could feel the heat on her face and neck.

She hadn't thought he'd come so soon. Not with Lady Phyllis in the house. Dora said his habit was to wait until his wife was away. She'd added that the Mistress only learned about her last nursemaid Rinea because she'd gotten pregnant.

But Theoton barely waited a day after he first saw me. And he's come straight to the nursery.

She thought he'd summon her into his library or bedchamber. Then she could go to Praegon instead, as Lady Phyllis had instructed. Who'd go to the Mistress, who'd deter her husband somehow.

Now Lady Phyllis would learn about this right away. Theoton probably thought that he was being clever by coming so early while his wife still slept, but someone would have seen him entering. The whole staff was awake, and the Mistress made them spy upon each other. It was very effective, because not reporting an infraction got you the same punishment as committing it.

Theoton stood there with an amused smile stretching his prominent jaw. Nerissa felt humiliated, rooted to the spot. She didn't know what to say or do. Worst of all, he must have seen her wounded breasts. They still had crusted lines beneath both nipples. But even if she'd gotten the peplos up in time, he'd see them soon enough. He'd fling aside her robe before he raped her.

The only blessing was that Vasy had remained asleep. She hoped his father wasn't a grunter or a bellower, as most of the sailors on the Thallia had been. Theoton wouldn't care about noise reaching his wife, because her quarters were upstairs on the other side of the house. Maybe if she coaxed him to the pillar in the nursery's far corner, they wouldn't make much noise. Leaning against it would be much better than her creaky bed.

"Go ahead and dress," Theoton said in a pleasant tone. "Don't let me stop you from your duties. I'm only here to see my son."

"You are? It's very early, lord. He usually sleeps for two more hours. But I'll wake him for you right away. It's just, he hardly talks until he's had something to eat."

"That's all right, I'll get him up. Does he still like music? I used to sing to Vasy as a babe."

"I'm sure he'd like that very much."

Nerissa still held the robe against her body, but her blush was fading now. She felt grateful that Theoton hadn't come to bed her. And surprised that he seemed to love his son.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Put on your peplos and whatever else it is girls wear. I won't watch, I promise."

But Theoton said it with a grin. He might be nicer than his wife, but he was still the

master. She had no choice but obey him. She turned her back, feeling his eyes fondle her buttocks and her thighs until she pulled the peplos over them. Then there was the tricky matter of twisting it at the waist and arranging its folds while the Master watched. She wouldn't be able to put on her undergarment until he left.

Nerissa managed to dress without further comment from Theoton. Then she worked at her loom while Theoton sang to his son. It was a marching song, a soldier's ballad, but he had a fine, deep voice. As Vasy came awake, Theoton stroked his hair. Nerissa concentrated on her weaving, determined that he wouldn't notice her smile. In truth, her opinion of Theoton had risen a great deal.

"Papa!" said the boy, coming awake. "You're home."

"Yes, and I brought you a present. I had a very successful trip."

"You did? I dreamed about you."

"Don't you want to see your present? It's a helmet just your size. My groom is polishing it with sand right now."

"Is it like yours? You wore it on my ship."

"I did?"

"Yes, Papa. In my dream. You were on my ship with many troops."

"I see. So you were the commander? Vasy the great general, and I one of your officers?"

"No, not a general. A naukleros. The troops were yours. You ordered me to take them across the channel. You were going to a battle."

"Ah, much better. You want to have a merchant ship? I didn't know that, Vasy."

"I want to sail to faraway lands. I want to see them all."

"A fine ambition. And once you prove your skill with trading ventures, we'll make you a great admiral some day. A whole fleet of warships will report to you."

"No, only one ship. Like Iason and his men on the Argo."

"You remember me telling you that story? That must have been a year ago."

"Of course, Papa. It was wonderful. I pretend I'm Iason all the time. Or some days, I'm a trader. Nessa played pirates with me yesterday, and I threw her from my ship. She showed me how to make one out of chairs."

"She did? You like her, then?"

"Oh, yes. Nessa's very nice to me. And she's teaching me my letters. I practice every day, just like you told me. I can write some words now, too."

"Which ones?"

"Ocean and oar and wind and mast and sail. Oh, and captain, too."

"Very good. Come, get your tablet and show me."

"I need to pee first."

"Ah, just like me. I always do that first, when I get up. I'll walk you to the privy, then we'll get the helmet. Or do you need akratismos first?"

"I don't like akratismos. I always wait for ariston."

"But you must breakfast, son. All soldiers do. It makes them much stronger for battle. That's why we eat three meals in this household, even slaves."

"Okay, Papa. But I'm going to be a merchant captain, not a soldier. I told you that. Did you forget?"

"No, I remembered. But akratismos is a good idea for sailors, too. It keeps them strong for rowing and for climbing ropes."

"And for swimming? Nessa said she'll teach me."

"I know. And I approve. I'm going to let her take you to the natatorium. Starting today."

"You are? I love you, Papa!"

Vasy threw his arms around his father and kissed him on the mouth. It startled Theoton for an instant. Nerissa saw his eyes go wide with surprise. But he recovered very quickly and returned the embrace. This time, his smile was full of warmth. Anything but the leer she'd seen before. It made him seem even more attractive.

"Come on, I really have to pee," said Vasy.



After a busy morning, Nerissa walked hand in hand with an excited Vasy to the natatorium. They were led by Lyconas, the tall porter. The day was splendid, the air warm and scented from the cypress trees along this street. There were no flies, she noticed. In Smyrna as the days grew hot, swarms infested the city and outlying villages, attracted to the privies, tanneries, and stockyards. Either Polis didn't have this problem or the offshore breeze had blown all flying insects out to sea.

"Last night, my dream was very scary," Vasy spoke up once they'd turned the corner. "It was Rinea, coughing blood down in the mine. I heard Praegon say that's where they sent her."

"He only said that to give me a shock," Nerissa answered. "Stewards always tell new slaves we'll be sent to the mines if we don't behave. Anyway, mines are only for men. I'm sure Rinea went somewhere nice."

"No, here on Ithaca, women work in the lead mine, too," said Lyconas. "Stenarch takes what he can get."

"You've seen it for yourself?" asked Vasy. "Did you used to work there, Lyconas?"

"Not likely. No mine slave ever leaves that place alive. But I've carried messages to Stenarch, because he's on the council with your father."

"What's it like at the mine?"

"The men and stronger women break the ore. The weaker ones cart it to the surface. There's children, too, who stoke the smelting fires. They all work night and day, with little sleep. They're chained and nearly naked. They crawl through tunnels not even tall enough to crouch in. They each carry an oil lamp, because there are no torches. And it's true that they cough blood. It dribbles down their chins."

"I'm sure Rinea wasn't really sent there," Nerissa hurried to add.

"Either there or the brothel," said Lyconas.

"What's a brothel?" Vasy asked.

"It's, well, a happy place, where people dance and sing," said Nerissa.

"Happy for men," said Lyconas with a gruff laugh. "They like the kind of singing and dancing that women do in brothels."

"That's quite enough about brothels," said Nerissa with a sharp look at Lyconas. She liked the earthy porter, but he had no idea what was proper to say in front of children. "Let's talk about swimming now. Vasy, do you know how dolphins swim so fast?"

"No. Are you going to teach me?"

"Today, I'll show you how to kick. And if you're good at that, maybe we'll swim underwater. Do you know how to hold your breath?"

"Like this?" Vasy drew in a long gulp of air, then held it as he walked, with his little cheeks puffed out.

"Exactly! That was very good. You're going to be a fine swimmer. And someday a great captain."

They continued past the Temple of Poseidon and the agora. It was much less busy than the last she'd seen it. They turned at the bouleterion, a handsome marble building where the council and the court were held. They came to the palaestra, a colonnaded hall where men of standing took their exercise. The natatorium was attached to it behind.

The hour was just starting when women and small children were allowed to swim. Lyconas said he'd meet Nerissa outside when she left. He pointed to the plane tree where he'd wait. Nerissa saw fine ladies and maidens entering, their attendants left outside. She felt

embarrassed, because she seemed to be the only slave passing through the open doorway. But no one questioned her presence. It would be unthinkable for her to be here if she didn't have permission.

The other thing was that all the girls and women were stripping off their clothes, both the peplos and the undergarment. She'd never swum in a natatorium before, so she hadn't expected that this would be the custom. Not that she was shy, ordinarily. As a young girl, she'd swum naked in the sea with her cousins and her brothers. But now she was no child and her breasts had ugly scabs across them.

Ah well, there was nothing for it. She quickly stripped and jumped into the water. It was deep enough to come up to her shoulders. The water was very clear, and when she glanced down, she could see the ugly wounds, but none of the women paid her the slightest attention.

Vasy shed his clothes, too. When Nerissa held out her arms to him, he had no fear about jumping in the water. She taught him how to hold the side and kick. When he was confident at this, she demonstrated how to plow the water with ones arms. Then how to use both arms and legs at the same time. She held her hands under his stomach as he "swam" out into the middle. Next, she had him do it on his back, gently supporting his legs and shoulders, then letting him swim for a second on his own, then nudging him up as he started to drift lower.

Vasy took to swimming like a sprat hatched in the sea. Within half an hour, he was swimming underwater with Nerissa. He could hold his breath a surprisingly long time.

"Wait until your father sees this!" Nerissa said. "Tomorrow, I'll teach you swimming on the top all by yourself. You can do it on your front or back, just like when I helped you. There's also one with a dolphin kick I'll show you."

"What kind do captains do?"

"They try to keep from swimming, if you want to know the truth. For repair jobs that require jumping in the water, they'll send a sailor. For a captain, swimming means your ship's been sunk. I know that this will never happen to you, Vasy. But if it's absolutely necessary, a good captain should know how to swim. He might rescue a crewman, for instance. You'd be surprised how many sailors never learn to stay afloat."

When it was time to leave the water, Nerissa felt ashamed again. But as she pulled her clothes on, she noticed that all the other women were busy chatting. No one looked her way. Slaves were practically invisible, it seemed.

They went outside and found Lyconas napping with his back against the plane tree. Instead of waking him immediately, Nerissa led Vasy into a field that grew behind the natatorium. Here, she found two of the three plants that she wanted, the common herbs of

plantain and wild garlic. Sap from the plantain's leaves would ease the itch and redness of her gashes. The garlic would fight off infection, though she wished she'd had it days ago.

She couldn't find any of the plants that Mother used for reducing pain and swelling. Her jaw was much better now, but still extremely sore. She'd also like some lanolin to mix with the plantain and garlic as a salve, but she'd need a fresh fleece for that. The agora's apothecary might sell lanolin, along with herbs for pain and swelling, but she had no money.

She was careful not to let Vasy get dirty in the field. The Mistress would be very angry. But Nerissa didn't want to ask him to say nothing, so she pretended that the purpose was to catch a cricket for him. Many of the kind called Melolanthe were about, named for the apple blossoms that also emerged this time of year. She caught two, handed them to Vasy and told him to hold them carefully until they got home. She'd tie long linen threads to their feet, then he could play with them. As a girl, it had been a favorite game to watch them tracing spirals as they leapt about.

She returned with Vasy to the plane tree, woke Lyconas, and started walking back. The swimming had given her a good appetite. She looked forward to a bowl of Thea's hearty pottage for apteron. Lyconas must be hungry, too, because she heard his stomach growl.

"Nerissa!" a loud voice from across the agora startled her. Not an angry voice, but not exactly friendly, either.

It surprised her, since no one knew her here in Polis. Except for those in the household of Theoton. The slaves would all be busy with their work, and the Mistress certainly wouldn't greet her. The feminine voice called her name again. She couldn't see who it was, but she'd definitely heard that voice before.

Not Berenice. It would be wonderful to see her friend, but the man who'd bought her was a farmer, not a townsman. Besides, Berenice's voice was gentle. This one was loud and lusty.

Dzunga dodged around a miller's cart. The Scythian slave was very nicely dressed. If Nerissa hadn't known better, she'd say this was a rich man's daughter. Her peplos was made of the finest linen. Silver threads glinted where it twisted at the waist. The fold gathered over her shoulder was bound by a large garnet. As Dzunga swayed closer, Nerissa saw this gem was carved with the profile of Artemis the Huntress. At the auction that first day, she'd attracted higher bids than anyone, including one Cypriot who was a skilled woodcarver. Obviously, a rich man had bought her for his bed slave, but Nerissa hadn't expected that he'd cover her in finery.

"Dzunga," she said. "You look beautiful."

"And you looking... wet."

"I know. We were in the natatorium. I'm teaching my master's son to swim. Next time, I'll remember to bring a drying cloth." They were speaking in Ionic, which Dzunga must have picked up from Captain Hycron during the long voyage. "Your peplos is absolutely gorgeous. Your master must be very good to you."

"Good and being rich. Aetes have most money of Ithaca. You do okay, too. Theoton get much gold for armor. He give you many gift?"

"No. Why should he?"

"You know." Dzunga made the crude gesture with her right index finger going through a circle made by her left hand. "What sailors do free, now you getting pretties."

"I'm not his bed slave. I take care of his son."

"Take care of him son-maker soon. You will seeing."

"It's not like that." But it was. "His wife is very jealous."

"All wives jealous."

"Yes, but this one has power over him. She sent the last girl... away." Nerissa glanced at Vasy, but he wasn't paying attention. He was busy trying to feed his crickets grain that had trickled from the miller's cart. Lyconas was watching them, especially the ripe curves of Dzunga, but he didn't understand Ionic. "I'm trying to avoid trouble from now on."

"Trouble is when not get any. Or man take without present. But man like Aetes, not trouble, is good feeling in... What word, uh--"

"Pleasure. In your body."

"Yes, in body. Many place." Dzunga finished in a long string of Scythian, touching the parts that she described.

"Must be nice."

"Is very. Forget Master wife. Trick is easy. Dzunga see you want he. Thinking it all time."

"No, I don't." But she did. "Nice seeing you, Dzunga. I have to get little Vasiledes home. I hope we run into each other again soon."

"Maybe. But you seeing Aetes this night. See how rich him be. Old and ugly, but very rich. He come you master house, talk council things. Other big mens, too. Need many girl for serving." Dzunga's expression changed suddenly to suspicion. "Theoton share slave girl with friend?"

"Does he share us? You mean-- No, he seems a cultured man. He wouldn't do that, would he?"

"What you think? That what we being for. You stay away my Aetes. Touch he, and I

come cut you throat.”

Nerissa grabbed Vasy's little hand and walked away without another word. Dzunga's sudden vehemence unsettled her. Of course she had no designs on the Scythian's rich, old, ugly master. Or on Theoton, no matter what Dzunga implied.

Still, Dzunga was right about one thing. She did think about sex a lot. First the poet imagined from his voice alone, and now her virile master. Ever since last night, Theoton hardly left her thoughts for a bare minute. As soon as she managed to clear the unsettling image of them together, he jumped back in. Despite her wounds, he made no secret of wanting her. His looks were far more rough than handsome to her taste, but there was something terribly attractive about his face. Though experience had taught her wealth and power rarely bespoke good character, Theoton's air of supreme confidence was seductive. Far more to his credit, Theoton seemed a loving father, warm-hearted and kind. At least when the press of his many responsibilities allowed.

She imagined him returning to the nursery that night. Now that she knew all the ways that men could take a woman, all of the mechanical possibilities, that is, in all their brutal forms, Nerissa longed to know if lying with a man could bring joy, too. Everybody said so. The urge to copulate filled every beast and human. It sang through all the epics, as heroes carried off their women. She suspected very much that with a man she didn't loath, she might enjoy it, too. Her body almost sensed what it would feel like. Certainly, her fingers had told her many things last night.

No, these thoughts must stop! Nerissa checked that Vasy and Lyconas weren't looking, then pinched her breast to drive away these thoughts of pleasure. They were wrong. She loved only one man, and she must stay faithful to him. In mind, if not in body. Theoton might take her, but it would be as a master raping a slave who had no choice. She was his chattel, not his lover. She was a captive in his household, no willing bedmate. Nerissa pinched herself even harder, to make sure her heart understood the difference. A small gasp escaped her lips.

“What happened, Nessa?” asked Vasy. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine. Just stubbed my toe. These sandals, they're too big for me, and my foot slides around sometimes. But it was nice of you to ask.”



That afternoon, Praegon told Nerissa she was required as a serving maid again. The steward didn't elaborate, but Nerissa knew the reason. Dzunga had already told her that Theoton

was hosting several of his allies from the council. Praegon didn't bother asking how it went for Vasy at the natatorium. He simply glanced at the boy, observed he was unharmed, then left.

It didn't surprise her that Praegon's manner was extremely stiff. She'd spoken out of place the last they'd talked. Both as a female and the youngest slave in this household. But Nerissa wondered if there was another reason besides her insolence. It couldn't be that she'd gone around him to gain permission for the swimming lessons. The Mistress had easily approved, and Praegon was very much her creature.

No, it must be that this evening's feast would bring her into contact with Theoton again. Lady Phyllis had done nothing yet about her husband's admiring looks at deipnon. Now, Praegon's displeasure seemed a clear reflection that trouble from the Mistress would be coming soon.

But what else can I do? Nerissa wondered. She'd been summoned and she must obey. If Lady Phyllis wanted someone else to serve, supervision of the household slaves was normally her province.

She must have chosen me, herself. Theoton wouldn't have risked irritating her by requesting me by name. I doubt he even knows my name. So what game is the Mistress up to? Accuse me of flirting with Theoton, then sell me off? No, she could do that anyway, without setting up a special chance. More likely, she wants to dangle me in front of Theoton, then catch him in the act.

Either way, there was no possibility of refusing to serve. She'd just be very careful to act with thorough modesty. Nerissa decided to bind her hair in a very unflattering style, coiled in a severe ring round and round her head. Mother used to do this when she visited the Temple of Apollo. It always made her look both chaste and stern. On Nerissa, it also had the effect of depriving her swollen jaw of any cover. Usually, she arranged curls to fall over it. They didn't hide the ugly bruise completely, but they softened the effect. But now, she knew that it looked thick and yellow. Though she had no silvered glass, she'd seen it this morning reflected in the pool.

After Vasy ate deipnon and went to sleep, Nerissa prepared a salve from the plantain, garlic, and a jar of olive oil borrowed from Thea. Mother had taught her many healing properties of olives. Among them, its oil was very good at soaking into human skin. The salve smelled strongly of garlic as she spread it on her breasts, but that was a good thing. She'd used it now just for this reason. If oils of jasmine or lotus had the power to attract a man, she reasoned that the pungent garlic would have the opposite effect.

Next, she changed into the clean peplos she'd scrubbed and hung out in the sun that

afternoon. She made sure that its folds were perfectly arranged. She wanted to look unattractive, not careless. Earlier, she'd wound the linen's hem around a long, straight stick. This ensured that it would dry with perfect pleats. Not strictly proper, since she was no longer a marriageable maiden, but here in Ithaca, they wouldn't know the difference. She gathered in the kitchen along with Dora and the two serving girls Arsinoe and Demitria. Arsinoe still looked feverish, and Demitria a little bloated, but they'd had all the convalescence that Lady Phyllis would allow.

When they carried in the first trays of honey cakes, hardboiled eggs, roasted chestnuts, and cured olives, Nerissa saw four men reclining on the banquet hall's couches. Along with Theoton, there was a fat old man who must be Dzunga's master Aetes, and two other men she hadn't seen before. One wore a purple-hemmed chiton, marking him as a member of the aristocracy. There were six jeweled pins on each sleeve, arranging his chiton into precisely layered folds. The other guest had a blunt face, huge hands, and a barrel chest. He looked like someone who didn't think himself above hard work.

Four men and four serving girls, Nerissa thought as she took around the trays. One girl could have easily served the food and wine. Two at the most. Maybe Dzunga was right. After the feast and council business, she'd hardly be surprised if Theoton invited each man to choose a girl.

By all the Gods, she hoped it wasn't Aetes. Not that she feared Dzunga's promise of revenge. But he had to be the ugliest man she'd ever seen. Great rolls of fat slopped over his couch. All across his face, spots that looked like squashed bugs glinted dully in the braziers' light. Hairs sprouted from his ears, but trailed the competition with his nose. This was so flat it looked like two black holes in the earth strewn with dead weeds.

Dzunga can have him, thought Nerissa. There was nothing Aetes could give her that would ever make her want to touch him. *Then again, that garnet Dzunga wore could easily finance an escape and voyage home.*

They spent the next three hours bringing many platters and the finest Bibline wine. The guests ate well, but drank in moderation. They didn't want to become intoxicated as they talked. Later, there'd be serious drinking. No feast of men would be complete without it. Maybe they'd play kottabos, Uncle Xolon's favorite drinking game. Even Father would get very silly when he'd join his brothers, grown nephews, and her oldest brothers Kestides and Nikos shooting jets of wine out of their mouths. She wondered if this game was played on Ithaca. If so, what targets would these men use? Even roaring drunk, Uncle Xolon could knock over a large olpe across the room or fill a tiny cup exactly to its rim.

Nerissa heard scraps of the men's conversation as she poured from a handsome oenochoe. She wished that she could sit and listen to everything they said, because their subject was very interesting. From what she gathered, Theoton thought it time that Ithaca move beyond a council of leading citizens. He favored a system where every free man had a voice. There was a new idea called *demokratia*. He'd heard about it during his visit to the mainland. In Korinthos and in Athens, scholars were debating reforms that would remove absolute power from the aristocracy. Strange as this philosophy might sound, *demokratia* really meant just what the name implied -- the people ruled.

"Look," Theoton said as she brought out a tray of dried figs and dates. "Our ancestors got rid of the king for the same reason. He had too much power. It's not right for one person to control everything. There's too much danger of greed or spite. Not to mention lack of sense. Too often in those days, rash decisions cost our island dearly. Same with the *turannoi* who replaced our kings. Why should a privileged group decide every law and trial?"

"Are you implying the *turannoi* didn't have Ithaca's best interests at heart?" said Aetes. "Remember, you're speaking of my family. Now, I know it's fashionable to give tyrants a bad name, to use the very word as some sort of malediction, but my ancestors spread our power throughout the Ionian Sea and even to the mainland. They kept this island free of invasion for generations."

"I know they did. We honor your lineage for that great service. But this is a modern era when warfare doesn't threaten us. Every freeborn man should have his say."

"And so they do," said the man in the purple bordered chiton. "We allow any man to speak before our court."

"That's true, Telander, but we still make all of the decisions. What some Athenian scholars are saying is that every citizen is equally qualified for office."

"Are you speaking of an open contest to fill council seats?" asked the brawny man. "The way champions at the games are crowned by acclamation?"

"No, Anapater. In politics, the term for that is 'election.' But wealthy men like us would have a great advantage in winning seats. What would stop us from simply buying votes?"

"That could be banned. We'd make a law."

"But there'd still be too much risk of hidden bribes or threats. Wouldn't it be much better to appoint councilmen by lot? We could have a large assembly, a *boule* of one hundred, say, instead of our present ten. And juries would come from these men, too, instead of only us."

"But that's absurd!" objected Aetes. "We govern because our breeding gives us the ability to lead. If common men were meant to rule, don't you think this would have happened

already? And yet, it never has, not here or anywhere in the civilized world.”

You're wrong, Nerissa thought, just stopping herself in time before she corrected him aloud.

Father had once managed to borrow a copy of the ancient scroll called Gilgamesh. Almost 2000 years ago, this Sumerian king had shared power in a kind of demokratia. The scroll said he'd consulted "the elders of Uruk" and "the men of the town" before deciding to war on King Agga of Kish. He went to these councils not only for advice but for approval. It meant he recognized his citizens as having the final say.

She wondered what Theoton would think if she told him about this later... No, he might want her for a bed mate, but he'd hardly welcome her opinion on these weighty matters. Besides, she must avoid being alone with him.

“Just because it hasn't been tried before, that doesn't make it wrong,” insisted Theoton. “We'll still be looked to for advice. But if we can't convince a majority of citizens that our preference is the right choice, then maybe we haven't thought out the best course.”

“You might have something,” agreed Anapater. “Like at my yard. I always listen to the shipwrights. Often, they'll know more than me about what works.”

“Yes, but a man's trade is one thing and good governance is another,” said Aetes. “I listen to my plowmen and my drovers, too. That's why my lands flourish. But if I listened to every tosspot at the tavern, I'd quickly lose my fortune.”

“But that's the beauty of a large assembly,” said Theoton. “One or two fools hold no sway.”

“I suppose you'd give everyone a vote,” said Aetes with a sneer. “These wenches who slop wine, for instance.”

“My serving girls?” Theoton looked genuinely surprised at the absurdity of Aetes' jibe. “Don't be ridiculous. They're slaves.”

“Which is exactly what Stenarch and his faction will say. If you give citizens a vote, what's to stop you from including bondsmen next? Or why not free them all?”

“I know you like to battle wits, Aetes, but let's be reasonable. I'm hardly suggesting either enfranchising the slaves or manumitting them. Still, for the sake of argument, suppose we were to go so far as giving slaves a vote.” Theoton paused to smile cleverly at Aetes. “You may have noticed that the ones who serve us tonight are female.”

He gave an approving pat to Nerissa's behind, as she happened to be near. While Anapater and Telander laughed good-naturedly, Aetes only scowled. He didn't appreciate the implication that he couldn't tell a woman from a boy.

Nerissa didn't try to dodge her master's hand. In fact, she liked its feel. She understood the joke hadn't been at her expense. Theoton had molded his palm against her bottom to indicate it was an obvious example of femininity. But realizing the danger, she didn't linger. Instead, she moved along to pour more wine for the shipyard owner Anapater.

As she passed Dora, she noticed the older girl's lips were very tight. But at least her jealousy didn't blaze with promised murder as had been the case with Dzunga. Nerissa smiled softly in apology. Later, she'd tell Dora there was nothing to fear. She had no intention of encouraging their master.

"Not even the most wild-eyed philosopher has ever suggested that women take a part in politics," Theoton continued. "It isn't natural. Zeus gave them beautiful bodies, not powerful minds."

This time, Dora was closest, and he traced the outline of her flank. Now, there was a vulpine grin on Dora's mouth. She walked with an extra sway as she cleared off a plate of candied fruits.

"Exactly my point," said Aetes. "Women and slaves don't have developed minds any more than the hoi polloi. And yet, you'd give them the power to make important decisions."

"Yes, but in a large assembly, well reasoned policy will always win. Convince fifty men out of a hundred to join you in a vote, only by the merit of your arguments, without bribe or threat, and everyone will see you must be right. Not only that, but those who voted with you feel that it's their own plan. They'll work hard to make it a success. Then everybody wins."

"Stenarch and his bunch don't give a fig about *everybody*." Aetes flung one of the dried fruits from his plate. It happened to hit Arsinoe, who quickly picked it up. She didn't seem embarrassed by it. Likely, she'd served men like Aetes before. She put it on the tray that she was clearing, filled it with more dishes, then left the banquet hall.

"I might agree to this kind of boule," said Telander, "so long as we retained the right to dissolve it or overrule its juries. These men will have no experience at governing. Inevitably, they'll make mistakes."

"No," said Theoton. "Setting ourselves over them is the one thing that we must not do. Don't you see? That's just another form of oligarchy. Better to do nothing, than to give the people power, then snatch it away."



Though there was much ribaldry and many drinking games after the men finished their

discussion, Nerissa was relieved to learn that Theoton didn't end his feasts with orgies. At least, not this time. Maybe he was waiting until Lady Phyllis went away again. The men were very free with their hands and comments as the girls poured wine, but they did it in a jovial spirit. The bluff shipyard owner Anapater had pulled Nerissa close and smelled her neck with pleasure.

"Your scent's intoxicating," he said. "What is it?"

Nerissa felt too embarrassed to tell him it was garlic. She'd thought that she smelled worse than Captain Hycron on the Thallia. But when Anapater plunged in for another sniff, Nerissa had to wriggle free.

"I'm sorry, sir. I'll go change now. I was splattered in the kitchen by one of Thea's sauces."

"Thea should sell it for a love potion. She'll get rich."

When Anapater took her wrist and moved in for a third sample, this one lower, Nerissa poked him in the ribs. She smiled playfully, but the jab was hard enough to break his grasp. With a grin she'd seen her older cousin Chloe use many times successfully on men, Nerissa dodged one of his bearish hands and whirled away. Instead of anger, Anapater roared with laughter.

It was anything but the brutality she'd endured on the Thallia. Yes, all four serving girls had been pulled onto an open lap, and they'd all shared wine when offered, but no one made them bend over the couches.

Not that some of the girls would have minded. Nerissa had seen Dora eagerly stroking Theoton's leg. And Arsinoe's musical laughter filled the room every time Telander pulled at her sash. But the banquet ended with all the girls still fully clothed.

Theoton bid goodnight to his friends, reciting the ancient proverb with a chuckle:

"Three bowls of wine are perfect - the first for health, the second for pleasure, and the third for sleep. After this, the wise guest will go home."

"But we've had many more than three," Telander said.

"Yes, and no one here can claim he's wise. We all must leave that to philosophers, those self-named lovers of knowledge. Now go home, friends, and get some sleep."

After they'd left, Theoton was kind enough to say the girls could wait until morning to scrub wine stains from the room. Except that Dora begged leave to stay up so that she might clean the table.

"Red wine soaks into cedar wood," she told him. "It has such a beautiful surface, lord. I'd hate to see it marred."

Theoton readily acceded. Nerissa went straight past the courtyard to the back quarter of

the house, exhausted after her long day. After she used the privy and washed her face in a basin of cold water from the spring, Praegon unlocked the nursery for her. He'd remained awake to inspect everything taken from the kitchen. She said goodnight to Szeta, who'd babysat with Vasy. Nerissa surprised the old woman by bidding her good night in Etruscan. It was a phrase that she'd picked up along her travels. This drew a toothless smile before Szeta left.

Nerissa brushed a soft kiss on Vasy's temple, changed out of her peplos, then lay down on her straw mattress. Though very tired, she felt happy with her day. First the swimming and the chance to walk beneath Apollo's sky, knowing she could do this every morning from now on, then finding the ingredients for her salve, then the interesting things the men discussed that night. She might be a slave, bereft of family, far from home, but life had improved so much since the Thallia. Best of all, she'd begun to admire Theoton. If she must live without freedom, she couldn't imagine a better master.

Far from the social climber she'd first imagined, he was intelligent, well liked by his friends, a respected leader in this country. His ideas were unique, his view of common men entirely refreshing in an oligarch. He was a loving father, generous, and kind. He'd built a thriving business, whether or not his wife's money had launched it. And he didn't mistreat his slaves. Nerissa doubted he'd ever forced himself upon a girl.

The truth was that he didn't have to. With his admirable character, handsome features, and a body hard as sculpted marble when his chiton stretched against it, any girl would feel lucky to bring his notice. For perhaps the hundredth time that day, Nerissa imagined what might happen the next time he stepped into nursery. He'd check that Vasy was asleep, lay a soft kiss on his son's forehead, then cross the room. He'd peel back her thin blanket, find that she slept naked, touch her in the place that could bring so much pleasure. Her own hand went to it now.

Except, she knew that he was probably with Dora. Was there any doubt that's why the girl had stayed behind? With the banquet lasting so late into the night, Lady Phyllis would be sleeping in her quarters. No one would ever know. Praegon wouldn't have to let her into the female dormitory, because it didn't have a door. If anybody noticed how late she crept into her bed, Dora could simply explain about scrubbing the banquet table.

Good, Nerissa told herself. She deserves whatever happiness a slave can find. I have no reason to be jealous. I love Andrastus as much as ever. Whether he's alive or dead. I'd never be unfaithful to him. Not willingly. Men might force me, but I'd never let one in my heart. Besides, Dora's already the Master's lover. I'd be mad to seek her place. She won't dodge pregnancy forever. Or Praegon's notice, which means a sure word in the Mistress's wide ear. Why would I want to risk taking Dora's place in a dark mine where life is cruel and short. I'm lucky that the

Master has a willing girl already.

But it didn't feel that way. She knew exactly why Dora's lips went white with anger when she'd seen Theoton pat her bottom. Now, Nerissa felt the same jealousy. Her fingers stopped what they'd been doing. She didn't want to now. She'd lost the mood completely. She turned on her side and tried to sleep. But she just kept picturing Dora and Theoton together.

It was no good. She couldn't sleep. Nerissa rose and put on the patched tunic that she used when cleaning in the nursery. Though there was no torch or brazier lit, enough moonlight came through the high window to see around the room. She looked for something to do until weariness drew her back to bed.

Just then, the lock clicked and the door came open.

Nerissa was surprised to see Theoton enter. But not very much. He still was dressed in the white chiton that he'd worn to the feast. She knew it was the same, because there were a few spots of wine on it. So he hadn't bedded Dora. He'd come for her instead!

Nerissa blushed happily. Despite everything she'd been thinking, she felt very flattered that Theoton preferred her.

Or maybe it was just that she was the nursemaid. He'd feel safe to come in here, because it had a door that locked. With any other servant, he'd risk Lady Phyllis discovering his infidelity.

"Lord Theoton," she said. "I was asleep. I just rose because... because I heard a noise."

"That was me dropping the key out in the hallway."

"Good thing you did. You would have surprised me in bed, and I sleep--"

"Without a night dress?" He smiled gently. He didn't try to make the words sound lewd. "I would have turned away while you put on your clothes, just as I did before."

"I'm glad you came..." But she didn't know what to say after this. "I enjoyed serving at the feast."

"You did? Which part?"

"The new law you proposed was very interesting. A large boule open to all citizens. Can you really make that happen, lord?"

"No, of course not. Its much too radical an idea for our hidebound council. But it's worth considering. You prove my point exactly, Nessa. Even a female can see the sense of this idea."

"My name's Nerissa, lord." She knew better than to challenge him about the worth of female minds.

"Oh? I thought I heard Vasy call you that."

"Nessa's only a nickname he likes to use."

"Ah, but it's a pretty one. I think I'll use it, too."

"If it pleases you, my lord."

"It does." He smiled again, then changed the subject suddenly. "How go the swimming lessons?"

"We've only had the first this morning. But you should've seen Vasy, lord. He learned everything so fast. If I had a drachma to my name, I'd wager he'll swim all alone tomorrow. I wouldn't be surprised if he has some of the Sea God's blood. Your ancestry wouldn't stem from Poseidon, would it?"

"Not on my side. But I seem to recall my wife's great-aunt making such a claim. At any rate, it's good to hear the boy's a natural. I'd wondered where his talents lie. Does he really want to be a ship captain, or was that just a passing thing?"

"No, it's all he ever talks about. That, and you. Vasy adores you, lord."

"He does? But I'm hardly ever home when he's awake."

"Oh, I could easily wake him any time you'd care to visit the nursery. I promise you, Vasy would love to see you much more often."

"What in particular does he find so admirable about me?"

"I'm sure you know, my lord. You're kind and wise and highly principled. Not to mention very handsome."

"Oh, you think so, do you?"

"Yes, lord. I think you know I do."

"Good, I also like the way you look. Especially, your hair tonight. Before you took it down, that is."

"My hair? But I tried to fix it in the most austere style."

"That's hardly the word I'd use. I'd call it regal. For a slave girl, you remind me of a queen."

"Lord Theoton, you're far too kind. It's you who look like royalty. I think you're very splendid."

"In that case..."

He reached out and caressed her face. But he did it gently, careful not to touch her jaw. Still, Nerissa felt her body clench with dread.

"Could we maybe wait a bit, Lord Theoton? I'd like to very much, but--"

She didn't know how to explain what she was feeling. She'd thought that she desired

him, but when he'd touched her, all she could think of were the rapes she'd suffered on the Thallia. Her eyes knew he was as handsome as ever, her heart still held its warmth for all his many qualities, but her blood felt cold as sea water in the heart of winter. She feared she'd never be able to welcome a man's touch again. Even that of Andrastus. But she couldn't explain that to Theoton, either. That her love was promised to a man who was very likely dead.

"It's just, I've only been off the Thallia two weeks. It's not my place to tell you woeful stories, but they hurt me on that ship."

"I thought as much. I can see that someone struck your jaw. But I'm a patient man. If your face is sore, I can wait for it to heal."

"They hurt me other places, lord."

"Ah, I see. You mean they forced you. The sad truth is, that's not uncommon. I'm sorry that you suffered from the slavers. Please take as much time as you need. But when your sorrow lifts, I hope my company is welcome."

"It always is, my lord. I didn't mean I'd rather that you stay away. My heart lifts every time I see you. I love to hear you talk."

"In that case, I can't seem to sleep, either. What would you like to talk about?"

"Why, anything at all... Er, have you ever heard of a Sumerian king called Gilgamesh?"

"No. What makes him come into your pretty head?"

"It's just, my father had a passion for collecting ancient manuscripts. And when you were debating demokratia with Aetes, I thought of a precedent for giving common men a vote. You see, two thousand years ago, Gilgamesh had councils both of elders and of townsmen. He asked for their approval before he went to war."

"He did? That long ago? You really are a clever girl. I think you'd better tell me all about this Gilgamesh."

Gamma

The next month brought numerous visits from Theoton. They only talked. He went so far as to leave the door open. No one could question what went on inside the nursery. Sometimes, if Vasy was awake, Theoton played games with his son. Other times, if Vasy was drowsy, he read or sang to the boy. If Vasy was already asleep by the time Theoton was through with business and dining, he'd come into the nursery, kiss his son's cheek tenderly, then turn his attention to Nerissa.

In addition to Vasy's progress, they spoke of many things. She learned a great deal about the history of Ithaca. Also, the manufacture of shields and armor. She asked him to explain the details of negotiating contracts. With a bemused smile, Theoton obliged. He was convinced she only asked out of politeness. Insisting that he couldn't bear to bore her, he kept his answer short. He quickly changed the subject to the sights he'd seen during his recent trip to Stratos.

Then Theoton asked about her family. He had no way of knowing this was a very painful subject, but Nerissa calmly related the events leading to her family's exile. Surprisingly, it helped to say these things aloud. Without a tear, she continued on, describing every disastrous turn that took away her loved ones like a farmer's scythe cuts corn.

"But how did you become enslaved?" asked Theoton three hours later. It was so late into the night, gray light had begun to creep in through the nursery's high window. "I mean, I understand that you were orphaned. And stripped of every kinsman who could shield you. Still, you're a beautiful and fascinating girl. Of course, a dowry's essential to marry well, but it's hard to believe there wasn't some patron who'd take you for a concubine. You would have been free and treated well. Why was it necessary to sell yourself into slavery?"

"What makes you think I sold myself?"

"I just assumed. Nothing you've told me suggests that you were taken captive. Or was it pirates?"

"It was neither."

"Then what?"

"It was jealousy, my lord."

"Jealousy? I don't understand. Who was jealous of you?"

"My cousin Chloe. But I was jealous of her, too. And if you aren't sore from sitting here so long, I'll tell you what we did."

"Why not? It will soon be light outside. There's no sense trying to get an hour's sleep before it's time to rise. My andron faces east, you know. I can never fall off when the birds are singing. So go ahead. I'd like to hear all about this Chloe."



I hated death. I also hated every God. Where once I'd venerated the entire Pantheon, now they'd forced me to detest them. They'd taken all my family, except for Chloe. I suspected that they'd picked my spiteful cousin as a further test. I could almost hear them laughing as they diced.

Would I slit Chloe's throat today, or would I persevere in honoring my duty? Would I ease Chloe's delirium as I'd done for half a month since hauling her onto this raft? Would I shade her with my own blistered back? Would I drip most of our precious stock of water onto Chloe's lips? Or would Eris prevail, convincing me to throw myself into the flat and empty sea.

But then, that would be killing Chloe, too. I wondered which of the immortals had wagered I'd destroy two lives as my final act. In addition to the grief I'd sown among the wives and children of slain foemen. And all my many kinsmen who might remain alive, had my resolve been strong enough to shun the vanity of virtue.

If my eating knife's dull blade could bring back even one of those who'd died, I would have gladly sawed through Chloe's throat. Yes, I'd have to live on with the knowledge that I was a murderess, but could it be any worse than knowing that I was reviled on Olympus? It seemed impossible that the callous Fates could spin anything more onerous than what I'd borne already.

But no, I resisted taking on the burden of hauling Chloe's soul upon my back. Nothing remained inside my spirit but an abhorrence of death. It wasn't that relentless Helios had driven feeling from my mind. There wasn't a moment when I could stop seeing all my loved ones' deaths at once.

The only way I'd kept my sanity was by compressing all my sorrow into a drop of gall so bitter, it would have burned clean through forged iron. Every second since I'd swallowed this

malignant bolus, I felt it eating through my entrails like a heated dagger. At least I'd ensured a lengthy route before it could worm up to my heart and gorge itself on my last will to survive.

In truth, I would have considered it miraculous if this had finally occurred. Through all the ordeals since our banishment from Smyrna, death rejected me time after time. The Gods couldn't have provided clearer proof that they'd disowned me. Their hatred was so great that they wouldn't even allow me to join the foulest criminals in Tartarus, where triple-banded night's walled with impenetrable bronze. I knew exactly why even a place amid Earth's murky roots would be denied. It started on that day I'd failed to save Euredon, the kindest, bravest, and most generous of brothers ever granted to a girl.

I was amazed to feel a tear slide down my cheek. Never mind the fact I'd taken in no water for a day. I hadn't thought that I could ever cry again. I opened my parched lips and caught the fat tear on my tongue. It tasted holy in a way, like embracing Euredon's noble shade... I didn't feel forgiven, but maybe, just maybe, there might be some way to gain redemption.

I don't know how long I stared out at a puff of cloud low in the sky. It grew no larger, but my leg cramped in sudden agony as if I'd sat motionless for hours. It felt as if my femur ground into the socket of my hip. I had to reach over Chloe's head and knead my thigh until the pain became an ache that I could bear. While doing this, I noticed that Helios had drawn level with the little cloud. Another cheerless day was coming to an end.

And then I saw the owl. It must be a very large one, because I could see its feathers rustle as it passed the cloud. Even at this distance, I plainly saw its talons beckon. The hot air shimmered across the glassy water. I was wondering, could this really be a herald from Athena? Or was my mind slipping into death at last?

As gently as possible, I slid out from under Chloe. I set her head down on a barely damp sail cloth that I'd wadded up. Three days earlier, I'd spread it out to catch fresh water during the one brief squall of rain. Now kneeling on our raft, a section of deck planks that was the only piece still floating from Father's boat, I used my hands to paddle toward the cloud. I tried to watch the owl, but soon lost sight of it.

I feared that it had only been a product of my fading psyche, after all. What would an owl be doing far out to sea? Though I'd often accompanied Father in his boat throughout my childhood, I'd never seen an owl hunt for fish. And after everything I'd done to earn Athena's scorn, after all the misery that I allowed to happen, why would the Gleaming-eyed Virgin finally take me back into her heart?

But I felt the giant owl grasp me gently in its talons. I paddled on for hours, until it was

more a motion of my fingers than my numb shoulders. I don't remember landing, but woke at first light on a rocky shore. The place Athena guided us was a narrow strip of shingle, where a sluggish stream emptied in the sea.

Chloe lay beside me, breathing shallowly. There was no sign of our raft, but the sail cloth was spread over Chloe's body. We both were naked, since our clothing had been torn from us while escaping Laestrygon. Chloe's skin was much fairer than mine, so she needed to be covered. While I was now as brown as a yearling fawn, Chloe might have died if I'd allowed Helios to fondle her throughout our voyage.

It didn't bother me that I was naked. Which might seem curious to you. As you know, despite the many things I'd seen, I was still a modest maiden. But this appeared to be a deserted coast. There were no footprints in the sand, no ships in sight, no sign of man's inhabitation. Gannets nested in jagged rocks nearby, as if they had no reason to be wary. Two squirrels ran out from the trees to chase each other, not half a dozen stadia away. The land behind this beach was thickly forested. Whether we'd come to an island or the mainland of Hellas, I knew the nearest settlement must be far away. Otherwise, the wildlife would never be so fearless. I had to wonder if we'd be stranded here, with little hope of rescue.

Happily, there was no shortage of fresh water. And the gannets' eggs would provide a much needed meal. Light-headed, I struggled to my knees. I used a sharp rock to cut off a large piece of the sail cloth, stood, breathed heavily until I'd gained my balance, then labored past my dizziness to stumble toward the stream.

I knelt down by its bank and had a look. The water seemed all right. Alive with tiny fish and shrimp. A little brackish when I tasted it, but fit to drink. I allowed myself small sips, and then a larger swallow from cupped hands. Then I soaked the piece of sail cloth and brought it back to Chloe. After coaxing my sleeping cousin to swallow a mouthful, I went to gather eggs. I chased off the gannets, ate three eggs raw, then brought back more for later.

My strength somewhat recovered, I searched the forest for herbs. Mother had taught me a great many that have healing power. I found the daisy-like pyrethrum to bring down Chloe's fever, valerian root to induce a deeper sleep so she might recover quickly, and a bee's nest full of honey to treat the sores afflicting both of us.

Exhausted by these chores, I slept until Apollo's chariot had drawn Helios far across the sky. I woke to sounds of laughter. They were girlish voices, coming from the forest. I was astonished. This coastland must be settled, after all.

I checked Chloe, whose breathing now was easier. I dripped some water into her mouth. I wrapped myself in the piece of sailcloth that I'd cut off before, then picked up the four

remaining eggs. If I was to find a welcome here, Mother had always said it was good manners for guests to bring a gift of food.

Following the stream, I stepped into the trees. I soon approached a place where the banks widened into a pond. Through the last few boughs of myrtle, I saw three maidens plashing in the shallow water. They appeared to be two or three years older than me. All were very shapely, which was easy to see, because they all were naked.

Then I saw they'd hung fine robes of green and blue and yellow on nearby branches. They must have washed their clothes and were enjoying the warm weather while their garments dried. In that case, I thought it best to drop my sailcloth before I stepped into the clearing. I wrapped the eggs in it. If the maidens were hungry, there'd be one egg for each of us.

They seemed to be in a very happy mood, laughing as they tossed a wooden ball. When one of them missed, the others would tease her merrily. They'd splash water at her as the girl retrieved their floating orb.

"Hello," I called as I stepped into the sunlight. "I hope you don't mind me joining you. My cousin Chloe and I landed on your beach last night, after Athena directed our raft here. I heard your laughter, so I followed its sound. I wanted to ask what place this is."

The maidens stopped their game and turned to face me. They looked puzzled, as if they didn't understand Ionic.

I tried again in Aeolian, then in the Egyptian dialect spoken on Crete. They still didn't answer, but smiled at me in a friendly way. I'd noticed that these girls were quite bronze in complexion, about as dark as my skin after Helios had baked it. Finally, the tallest of the three nodded with understanding when I used Phoenician. Though I'd never conversed in it before, one of Father's cherished scrolls was in this southern language. He had a copy of the same epic in Ionic. From reading both of them, I'd learned enough Phoenician to get by.

"You say you came here on a raft?" said the tall maiden. "Were you the victim of a shipwreck?"

"No, wild men on Laestrygon attacked my family. They smashed our ship, and they... they--"

I couldn't say the rest.

"We've heard of Laestrygon. A captain once came here who said they're cannibals."

"It's true." I shuddered as the loathsome stench from their soup pots came back to me. "You aren't near them, are you?"

"We're not near anyone. Visitors are rare on Scheria."

"My name's Nerissa. My father was Asclemeleon of Smyrna."

"I'm Nausicaa, daughter of Alcinous. He's the Basileus of Scheria, or some people would say 'king.' You must come up to my father's hall, and tell your story. Though they're busy now preparing for the contests where my husband will be picked, everyone will be pleased to see you. We get so weary of the same old stories. Oh, and did you mention that you came here with a cousin?"

"Yes, but she's suffering from fever. I've found herbs to treat her, though. I think she'll live."

"We'll help you carry her up to the hall. Come on, girls, get dressed."

We brought Chloe to the oikos of King Alcinous. His household dwelt in a sprawling palace, with many columns and towering doors of cedar studded in bright metal. On closer inspection, I saw these bolts were made of gold. Nausicaa had servants carry Chloe into an airy chamber paneled with ash wood. Its arched windows overlooked a narrow bay. Its polished floors gleamed brilliantly. When I'd done all I could for Chloe, the princess Nausicaa gave me a beautiful white gown of silk. Once I'd bathed and used a borrowed strigil to scrape my skin, I changed from my wrapped sail cloth, and dressed my hair. Then I was led into the hall and introduced to Nausicaa's parents.

King Alcinous looked very wise, with understanding eyes. He'd been well-named, for Alcinous means strong-minded in their language. Still, I could see his queen was the shrewd power here on Scheria. Her name, Arete, means steadfast. She looked me up and down, then asked me how I'd come to wear her daughter's pearl white gown.

I explained about my shredded clothes. Queen Arete accepted my story readily, commenting that my bearing and my educated way of speaking proved me to be well-born. I started to disabuse her of this error, but quickly reconsidered. After all, my parentage is as good as any girl's, whether she's the daughter of a king or some great hero's bride.

"I'll be glad to tell you the whole tale," I promised. "But since it will take hours, perhaps you'd rather I waited until the palace isn't quite so busy."

The story of my travels proved to be the highlight of their festival. Despite much wine, they all listened with close attention. Queen Arete interrupted several times, requesting greater detail on the battles that I'd seen, but no one doubted my honesty.

Unlike the other maidens who served at the feast, I was given an honored position alongside Nausicaa on a couch at the chief table. Though I was a stranger, destitute, and halting in their language, they treated me extremely well, almost like a visitor from Mount Olympus.

Earlier, they'd sacrificed an all-white ox to Zeus, then held athletic contests. There were no events for orators or poets, as we Hellenes favor at our festivals. The Scherians weren't a particularly artistic people. Their concept of excellence was far more physical than ours. To them, the only criteria were fighting prowess and athletic skill.

I've hardly mentioned these contests, but the Scherians themselves had paid them little mind. The reason was that Nausicaa's brother Vorous won all of the events. Discus, javelin, wrestling, pankration, running, chariot racing, and jumping. As I soon learned, this had been the case for five years straight. There'd be no marriage for Nausicaa until someone could defeat him at any of these contests. No wonder she hadn't been more excited about the courtship games.

As for Vorous, he was a striking youth of twenty years or so. With merry hazel eyes, a beaming grin, and a body so well built, it must have made Ares seethe with envy, Vorous was the darling of every girl on Scheria. But he wasn't expected to marry until he was much older. It turned out to be a very minor island, far from trade routes. The population that its arable land could support was small. Moreover, they were a notably healthy people, who often lived to a prodigious age. They had no enemies, and thus no battles. Therefore, it was the custom for Scherian men to delay marriage into their middle years, in order to limit the number of newborns.

I learned all this from Nausicaa, as we talked late into the night. If she was saddened by the failure of her suitors for another year, she made no mention of it. Rather, she questioned me intently about the medicines I'd used on Chloe. While we sat up in my cousin's room, I took hours to explain the many properties of plants I'd learned from Mother.

Soon, everyone at the palace knew of my herbal skills. They came to me with pains and sores, complaints of baldness, gout, and toothache. Not that they lacked healers on Scheria. There was a midwife and a very elderly physician. He wasn't jealous of my popularity. He adopted several of my cures, and taught me many things that Mother hadn't known. But remember, this was an extremely isolated place. They relished gaining information.

Even Queen Arete and Prince Vorous came to me with problems. I was able to ease the queen's excessive flatulence. Grateful that I mentioned it to no one, she promptly rewarded me with the promise of a fast ship to take me home once Chloe was recovered. Vorous also had an embarrassing problem. He asked for a remedy that might lend iron to his-- Forgive me, I can't say it to you, lord. Suffice to tell, it's why older men chew mastic resin. And I don't mean to sweeten their breath or clean their teeth. Though these bushes only grow on Chios, I knew of a common herb with a similar effect. I was able to find some near the palace. Vorous returned the

next day to present me with an elegant string of pink-tinged pearls. I think his current lover was very grateful, too.

That evening, Chloe sat up unaided for the first time on Scheria. Her eyes were clear, her fever gone. Her voice was weak, but she was able to hold down some broth that I made. Her blisters had healed, and by the next day, she was able to walk with me in the garden. I told her everything that had happened on Scheria during her delirium.

"Those pearls are gorgeous," she said suddenly. Who gave them to you?"

"Prince Vorous," I said.

"Are you promised to him now?"

"No, not at all. He spends time with many girls, each one far more beautiful than me."

"Then why such a generous gift?"

"I did him a service. No, not what you're thinking. It was medical, you understand. I've won a surprisingly honored place on Scheria."

"Oh? What was this service?"

"I can't tell you. I promised him."

"So it's like that? I wonder, what could be so private?"

"That's between me and Vorous."

"Vorous, is it, not, 'the Prince?' I think there's something else between you that you're not telling me."

"No, nothing, Cousin. He's as handsome as a god, and any maiden would want him, so I'd be lying if I said he stirs no feelings in me. But it's not like that. I'm just his sister's little foundling in his eyes. A young stranger with some healing knowledge."

"Oh, come off it. You can admit the truth. You want him, just like you wanted Andrastus. I can see it in your blushing face."

"Drop it, would you? The only thing I want is to get home and build a shrine for all our loved ones. Have you forgotten everything that's happened?"

"Of course not... I merely thought it healthier if you admitted your true feelings. I could have helped you with the Prince. Wouldn't you like to be a princess?"

"That's the last thing on my mind. But if you'd like to have a go, don't worry about me. I'm not your rival, Chloe."

"Maybe not intentionally. But Prince Vorous wouldn't have given you those beautiful pearls if he didn't desire you."

"As a matter of fact, I think it's you he desires. He saw you sleeping while I was tending you. He gazed at you and asked me what your name was. He even returned with a question

about the treatment that I'd already twice explained. I'm pretty sure it was to look at you some more."

Satisfied with my answer, Chloe went back to her chamber. She said it was to rest, but she emerged an hour later wearing a silvery gown that Nausicaa had left for her. It was diaphanous, intended to be worn over a linen sheath. Chloe, of course, had neglected to wear the undergarment. She looked radiant, her fair skin recovered in its luster. Her upswept hair was bound with silver thread that Nausicaa's maids provided. I'd given her some perfume that I'm made from essence of sea roses.

When she entered the court, every pair of eyes followed Chloe's graceful stride. Still, I could see Chloe's disappointment that Vorous wasn't present. She carried it off well, introducing herself to the king and queen as I translated. She politely answered their questions about her health and added some details of our journey that I hadn't known.

But as soon as possible, Chloe excused herself, saying that she must lie down. I was hardly surprised to learn later that she'd gone to find Prince Vorous. Naturally, she couldn't speak Phoenician with him, but I don't suppose that talk was necessary. She didn't return to her room that night.

The next evening, Chloe asked to borrow my pearl necklace. I gladly gave it to her, but then she decided it didn't look right with her silver gown. I think it was a test, to see if I'd lend it. Chloe wouldn't have wanted to wear it, even with a gown of complementary shade like mine, since Vorous would know it was the gift he'd given me. Chloe still thought I was her rival, just as I'd been for Andrastus. Or wanted to be, that is, if he'd ever noticed I wasn't his little playmate any more. But Chloe had certainly noticed the womanly shape I'd started to acquire. She hardly wanted to remind Vorous of me.

She came back soon, however. It seemed that Vorous was otherwise occupied. Chloe was furious. She didn't speak to me all night. As if it were my fault that Vorous hadn't fallen in love with her to the exclusion of all other girls. You could hardly blame him, could you? They weren't even able to converse. Then again, this point was probably in Chloe's favor. If he ever talked with her, it wouldn't take long to learn Chloe's true character.

I felt a little pleased, but hid it well. I liked Vorous, so I'd never wish him saddled with my viper of a cousin. Aphrodite may have blessed her with an exquisite face and a body men found irresistible, but her heart was poisonous. Those who didn't shun her, they did so at their peril.

The next morning, I went to Chloe's chamber with the tonic she still needed to rebuild her strength. She wasn't there, but when I saw her again that afternoon, she seemed in a much

better mood. She took me by the hands and smiled joyfully.

"Nerissa, I've had wonderful news," she said.

"Vorous loves you, after all?" I asked.

"No, it's much better than that. I've learned Andrastus is alive!"

"He is?" I felt like all my blood and breath had turned to joy. I could have risen up to Mount Olympus on a cloud of gratitude. "I've prayed so many times for this, but I never thought the Gods would listen to me."

"I wouldn't say so if I hadn't seen the proof."

"But how did you find out? This island gets no visitors. You've seen how much they make of us... Unless-- Don't tell me that he's washed up on its shore?"

"No. The news is better. Andrastus didn't come to Scheria half drowned. His ship is anchored at the same cove where we landed. He must have traced us here."

"I don't understand how he could do that. We left no message anywhere. No one knows what happened to us... Oh, never mind. You say he's at the cove? But why didn't you lead him to the palace?"

"I told him he should come, but Andrastus thought he should stay with his ship. After all, this is a strange place, and we've known many enemies. He doesn't speak their language, so how could he be sure of his reception? It's one thing for maidens like us, but he's a warrior who's come here in a war ship."

"That's true. He's right to practice caution. Andrastus has no way of knowing these are the most benevolent of people. You'd better lead me to him. I'll explain."

And Chloe did. She took me to the cove, where a sleek bireme was waiting. As a fisherman's daughter, I had an eye for nautical lines -- I could see this was a very fine example. Strong enough to resist the fiercest storms, yet built so light it could be hauled overland. Shallow enough to row up rivers or maneuver along dangerous coastlines. It had a pair of cables strung from bow to stern, providing a taut construction without adding weight. This made the bireme virtually waterproof. And unlike most long-boats, this one had an anchor, so it rested easily there in the cove. It was so beautiful, I thought it must have been designed by Athena, Herself, She who'd invented ships.

We rowed out in the little skiff that Chloe had left on the beach, and then we climbed aboard. But my joy at finding Andrastus alive turned to outrage when two sailors seized my arms. They bound me with tight lashings as Chloe left.

I quickly learned this ship had nothing to do with Andrastus. He was nowhere near Scheria, if indeed he was alive. Still convinced I was the reason she couldn't ensnare Prince

Vorous, Chloe had taken advantage of a merchant's yearly visit. She'd arranged to sell me to its captain. I'd been so desperate to hear Andrastus was alive, I'd foolishly ignored all the gaping flaws in Chloe's ruse. When we reached Tyre, the merchant captain sold me to the slaver Hycron.



After hearing Nerissa's story, Theoton began to visit every evening. Lady Phyllis never accompanied her husband into the nursery. In all this time, she summoned Vasiledes only once. And this occasion was because her neighbor Rhialete happened to visit with her little boy. It disturbed Nerissa, who knew a thing or two about the longing children feel for a mother's love. But she could also see that there was an advantage.

Lady Phyllis's lack of maternal sympathy kept Nerissa away from the woman's disapproving eye. Now that Arsinoe and Demitria served at all meals in the banquet hall and family dining room, she rarely came into contact with the Mistress. In this large house, they passed in hallways only twice. Both times, Lady Phyllis was with friends. Naturally, she didn't deign to notice Nerissa's presence.

But the threat of being sold to Stenarch remained strong. Nerissa could feel it every time Praegon's cold eyes swept over her. The steward always represented Lady Phyllis's views. Clearly, she had a full report of her husband's visits to the nursery. She knew that Theoton wasn't bedding their son's gerula. It would count for little with her, since she'd also know that Theoton had never paid nearly this much attention to his son.

Praegon's iciness said that Lady Phyllis was far past suspicion. She knew it wouldn't be long before Theoton shamed her with a new bedmate right in her home. *That she hasn't sold me off at once, Nerissa realized, or even invented excuses to punish me, means she fears Theoton's reaction.* They seemed to have a very complicated relationship, each cautious of the other's anger.

Praegon, too, was obviously afraid of Theoton. Acid tongued with the other slave girls, he never said anything insulting to Nerissa. But Dora still looked at her with hostility. At meals, she took far more pleasure in catty remarks than in the food. At the spring, she'd purposely slop water on Nerissa. Now that her strength was restored, Nerissa knew she could easily beat Dora in a fight -- after all, she'd defeated many warriors, including women, during her clan's travels -- but Dora's jealous behavior didn't rile her. In fact, it was reassuring. She took it to mean that Theoton wasn't sleeping with Dora, either.

She wondered where he looked for pleasure. That day at the women's banquet, Dora had mentioned that the Master kept a courtesan in town. She'd like to ask him about this, but she couldn't find the words. Every day as she walked with Vasy and Lyconas to the natatorium, she wondered where this woman lived. She'd find excuses to walk through the sailors' quarter, imagining the sort of dwelling where a courtesan would entertain her patron.

She pictured what the woman looked like. Was her hair a sleek black like Dzunga's or golden like her own? The image that formed in her mind was a voluptuous beauty with red tinged tresses like the flowing mane of a roan horse. They were so long and full, when the courtesan unwrapped them, she could envelop Theoton. Nerissa envied the woman this imagined screen. Then again, Theoton had praised the style when she'd twined her hair into a braided ring encircling her head.

She wondered if she paled in beauty next to the courtesan. Her face had healed and she'd recovered much of the lost weight, enough that pale Selene had resumed her monthly visit. In fact, her breasts were full and tender now. Of course, they still were badly scarred. She worried that Theoton would be disgusted when he finally saw them. A well-made face or not, he'd see her as hideous. A monster to be shunned, not caressed. She could never heal enough that he'd desire her. Even if she claimed shyness, begged him to put out his lamp before she disrobed, he'd feel the ugly scars.

The solution was the same as in her impasse over Andrastus. She couldn't wrong her lost love if she didn't give in to temptation. And she wouldn't risk facing revulsion in the eyes of Theoton if they didn't become intimate. She must put away all thoughts of happiness with him.

The next evening when Theoton came into the nursery, Nerissa busied herself with sewing as he read to Vasy. After the boy fell asleep, she pretended that she was tired, too. She gave Theoton only the briefest answers when he spoke to her.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "You don't seem yourself tonight. I hope you aren't feeling ill."

"I'm fine, my lord, but if you don't mind, I've had a very long day. I'll be asleep the second I lie down."

"Then I won't keep you up. But there is one thing I wanted to discuss."

"What's that, my lord?"

"I have need of your services. Outside the house, that is."

"You mean--?" Suddenly, Nerissa felt extremely flustered. "But I thought you already have a courtesan in town."

Theoton laughed. His grin was very wide.

"Ah, but can't a man have two?" he said

"Yes, of course, my lord. It's just--"

"Calm yourself. I was only jesting, Nessa. The service I referred to involves your mind rather than your body."

"Oh."

Despite her resolve to stay chaste, Nerissa felt disheartened. Without even knowing about her scars, Theoton didn't want her for a lover, after all.

"What is it I can do for you?" She made a conscious effort to keep emotion from her voice.

"A man's been murdered. It's my turn to be one of the jurors."

"I'm sorry, lord. My mind's not working well right now. I don't see what that has to do with me."

"The accused is from Samos. He doesn't speak our language. I'd like you to translate at the trial."

"But you must have others who could do this. Do your laws even allow women in the court?"

"Sometimes. If the accused is female, for instance, then her kinswomen are permitted to attend. Or if a woman witnessed the crime, then naturally we call her to give testimony."

"Yes, but those are very different circumstances. Wouldn't you be criticized for this?"

"No. Why should I be? We've had females provide expert services before. A priestess from the Temple of Artemis last year, for instance. We needed to hear about their rituals."

"Still, why me? Wouldn't a man be better? Any number of your sailors or merchants or slaves will speak Ionic."

"That's true, but they don't know the accused. We questioned him for three days, but his only answers were claims of innocence. Our translator wasn't able to advise me if the prisoner was lying."

"And I will? Who is this man?"

"His name's Evander. He's the slave of Peiton the Surveyor. At least he was until Peiton's death. According to Antechron's records, you came here on the same ship as Evander. Did you know him?"

"Not exactly. I don't think that we ever spoke." How could she explain that Evander the Samite was the slave who always leered when sailors raped her? "But he was chained across from me on the bottom tier, so I saw him constantly throughout our voyage."

"Good. Then you'll know how he usually acts. His normal expressions. The way he sits,

the way he stands. I find a man's demeanor can tell a lot about his truthfulness."

"I'm sure you're right, my lord. If you need me, I'll translate what Evander says. And tell you if I think he's lying. But you should know one thing. I do not like this man."

"All the better. I wouldn't want anyone saying my slave favored him in her translations. This will be a very important trial."

"Why's that, my lord?"

"Because the murdered man came from one of our most prominent families. A large crowd will come out to watch."

"And you'll decide Evander's fate?"

"That's right, along with two other jurors. One will be Aetes, whom you saw here last month. The other's Stenarch, who owns the mine."

"In Smyrna, the baron of each district judges major trials. Or sometimes the king, if it's especially important."

"Our king once did this, too. And then the turannoi. Now that we have an oligarchy, it's the leaders of our ten foremost families who serve on the council and rotate as jurors."

"Why ten? That seems a small number."

"Ithaca's a small island. We have ten wealthy families. In other places, there might be many more. The Eupatridiae, for instance. That's what they call the well-born families of Athens. Or the Bacchiadai of Korinthos."

"So it's always a question of wealth?"

"No, it depends on each country's history. It might be those families descended from the ancient royal line. Or those that distinguished themselves in war. In colonies, it's often the descendants of original settlers. Or in Megara, only those families that rose against the domination of Korinthos may serve on their council."

"I see. But I still like your idea about extending participation to all citizens. That seems a much fairer system to me."

"To me, as well." Theoton sat down on the table that Nerissa used for sewing. "What's more, it would bring a great new pool of talent into government. Who knows what fresh insights are out there in our populace? But don't expect a change to happen soon. Even my friends on the council think I propose such things only for the sake of a good argument. The rest are far more like Aetes than like Anapater. They think the hoi polloi have mush for brains. They'd laugh about your ancient Gilgamesh. They'd call it a much exaggerated legend. Imagine, kings asking common men their leave to go to war! Or judging murderers. We might as well ask little girls to lead us."

"As you say, my lord. But if it ever does come up for serious discussion, I've thought of a more recent example you could use."

"What's that?"

"The Trojan Hector regretted that his people didn't choose to stone Paris to death. It shows their demos had the right to punish even royalty who'd bring misfortune on the land."

"How do you know this?"

"During your trip to Stratos, the Mistress invited a poet to recite. I don't recall Hector's speech entirely, but these lines stand out in my mind: "And now can you not dare face Menelaus and learn what manner of man he is whose wife you've stolen? Where indeed would be your lyre and your love-tricks, your comely locks and your fair favor, when you were lying in the dust before him? The Trojans are a weak-kneed people, or ere this you would have had a shirt of stones for the wrongs you've done them."

"I've heard this poem recited elsewhere. It's called the Iliad." Theoton looked at Nerissa, his full lips pressed in thought. He appeared to be wondering how such a young person, a slave and a female one at that, could have such an active mind. "Now that you mention it, there's an even better example of demokratia later on. When they hold a trial on Achilles' shield, the common laoi listen, then shout approval for the party whom they favor. Afterwards, each elder speaks his mind."

"Then why not try the same here, lord? No one could question the fairness of this plan."

"It would make a start. In practice, the people often do shout out, either for or against the accused. We pretend to pay them no mind, but of course we do. No one wants to be unpopular. But giving citizens this limited voice is far less than what I'd like to see us put into our laws. In the Iliad, the king retained the final say, after elders deliver their opinions. On Ithaca, we've eliminated kings and tyrants, yet the oligarchy still decides... But we're getting far afield from tomorrow's trial. I thought that you were feeling tired."

"I am."

She looked down. Not from shyness, or because Theoton was her master, but if she looked into his eyes, Nerissa knew that she'd be lost. Another problem presented itself immediately. Lowering her gaze put Nerissa's line of view directly at his lap. She intentionally dropped her needle, and when she straightened from retrieving it, she looked only at her sewing.

"It's true I've had an exhausting day, my lord. I only stayed up because I had to mend this chiton. But talking to you is so interesting, my mind's alive with thoughts again."

"I'm glad. I always enjoy our conversations, too. Still, you should get some sleep. I want you to be very alert tomorrow."

"Yes, lord."

"Oh, and remember to arrange for someone to stay with Vasy. We don't allow small children at capital trials. After all, the prisoner will be executed at once if he's found guilty."

"Really?" Nerissa paled. "I hope Evander didn't do it, then."

"I thought you said that you disliked him."

"I do. But I've seen more death already in the last two years than many veteran warriors in their whole lives. I have no wish to see any more, even for a man as unpleasant as Evander."

"Then for your sake, I hope he's innocent. However, I must tell you, there are strong witnesses against him. You should prepare yourself to expect a death sentence."

"I'll be up all night imagining what you'll do to him. In Smyrna, they hung murderers, then left them to rot outside our city gates. I can't even tell you what they did to special cases like my brother Euredon."

"Then I won't ask. But if you'd like to know what we do here, its nothing terribly grotesque."

"What is it, my lord?"

"Ordinary prisoners are beheaded. Or if the condemned man has a noble lineage, he's permitted to take poison. Unless it's a case of treason."

"What do you do then?"

"We open his gut, pull out his entrails, bind him with them, then throw him from a cliff."

"Blessed breath! That does sound gory."

"Not really. There's surprisingly little blood if its done right. We have a surgeon cut him open, then extract the entrails carefully. The idea's to keep our prisoner alive. Long enough, that is, so he can see his death approaching as he plummets."

"Yes, and I'm sure there's plenty of blood as he splatters on the rocks... Now I'll never sleep."

"I apologize. Sometimes a military man like me forgets what might upset a girl."

Theoton laid his big hand over hers. Nerissa fought off the urge to turn her palm and lace her fingers into his. It was the first time they'd touched since she'd asked him to be patient with her. Now, it was all she could do to keep from pressing against his body. But Theoton merely patted her hand. He'd only meant the gesture to be comforting.

"This is no case of treason," he reassured her. "Only an ordinary murder. If your shipmate's guilty, he'll get a swift death. It needn't plague your dreams."

"It won't," she lied. "Good night, my lord. I'll do my best for you tomorrow."

"I'm sure you will. And I wish you a restful night."



There was such great interest in Evander's trial, Ithaca's boule decided to hold it in the amphitheater rather than inside the council chamber. After Theoton posted an announcement outside the bouleterion that morning, those who were literate read it to other townspeople. The word soon spread and throngs collected at the theater on the hillside east of Polis.

Nerissa counted twenty rows of tiered benches, filling rapidly with spectators. The sky was clear, the weather warm with a pleasant breeze. This theater was about the same size as the one at Smyrna, though her city was a much larger place. Here, the benches were arranged in a semi-circle around an open central ground. Nerissa knew this area was called the orchestra, from the Ionian word that meant "to dance." In the theater at Smyrna, she'd seen dramas performed on feast days, both comedy and tragedy, but never dance. In her part of the world, theaters were also used for religious ceremonies that required open air. She wondered if this were true here, too.

Theoton, Stenarch, and Aetes assembled in a small building behind the orchestra called the skene. During performances, it was the actors' dressing room. Its exterior could also be decorated as a backdrop to the comedies and tragedies. Nerissa saw that many props and costumes were stored inside. These Ithacans must really love their drama.

The prisoner Evander was also being held here prior to his trial. He was in chains, while two burly guards kept hold of his arms. He appeared to have been beaten severely, either during his capture or during interrogation. This morning, Theoton had explained that the testimony of an accused slave was considered unreliable, except for that extracted under torture.

She stared at Evander, her gaze equally direct as his had been during the sailors' rapes. Evander's eyes were fixed in her direction, but it didn't seem he realized she was present. Was Evander seeing death already? Was it because he knew that he was guilty of Peiton's murder? Or had he resigned himself to the jury's condemnation, despite his innocence? Most likely, he was no longer capable of rational thought. She'd guess the torture had broken Evander's mind.

The testimony went badly against him from the start. The first guardsman summoned to the crime scene described a very gory corpse. He said the expression frozen for eternity on Peiton's face seemed torn between agony and shock at this betrayal.

As the amphitheater rumbled with hostile voices, the guardsman left the orchestra. His captain Polymelchus took his place, gave a very similar description, but added that he'd found a wide spray of blood around the central pool. While people shouted angrily for Evander's

execution, Polymelchus produced the murder weapon. As the three jurors examined it, Nerissa saw it was a long-handled axe stained dark brown on its head.

Then Buchos the Physician testified he'd examined its placement in the victim's body before it was removed. Buchos said that only a powerful man could have imbedded it so deeply into Peiton's back with only a single blow. He added that the murderer must have been tall, judging from the downward angle of the gash. He gestured toward Evander, a man well above average height. And though his frame was still thin from the voyage, everyone could see that Evander's arms were thickly corded with muscle.

Next, Peiton's steward testified that the axe was used in their household for chopping firewood. Since his arrival, Evander was the only slave assigned this duty. The steward also said that Evander had been trouble from the moment of his purchase. He fought with other slaves, he complained bitterly about his work, he stole food, he leered at serving girls. He even mocked the household gods, though Peiton was good enough to include his slaves in family prayers. In little more than a month of service, Evander had brought beatings on himself six times.

Two male slaves testified that Evander swore revenge against their master. In the dormitory where they slept, he'd try to enlist others into an escape plot. He planned to kill Peiton, his wife and children, steal their jewels and silver, then flee from Ithaca.

Throughout the orchestra, men stood to shout at Evander. A man from the first row pelted him with eggs. Theoton stood and glared at him. Knowing the danger of a lynch mob, he demanded that everyone sit down. The angry noise continued, but they obeyed. Fortunately, Ithacan law forbade bringing weapons to a trial.

When the noise finally died away, Nerissa translated the steward's testimony for Evander. Her tone remained as even as it had throughout the trial. Her presence wasn't only for the jury's benefit. Theoton had said it was a prisoner's right to hear all witnesses against him. This wasn't the first time an Ithacan court had interpreted this law to mean that accused foreigners must have translators provided. Evander showed no reaction to the damning evidence. He seemed quite ready to enter the next world. He gave no sign of recognizing Nerissa as the woman he'd ogled on the Thallia.

When she finished her translation, a slave with shoulder-length blond curls was brought into the orchestra. At first, Nerissa thought this witness was a woman. But though the face was very delicate, on closer inspection she saw a prominent Pear of Hermes in his throat. He said his name was Prochus and that he'd been Peiton's bath attendant for six years. Prochus testified that he'd been present at the moment of Peiton's death.

"I heard the weapon's thunk," he said. "I'll never forget it if I live a thousand years. Its sound was almost identical to an axehead sunk into soft wood. There was a moment's pause, and then it echoed from the forest while my master screamed."

"And would you please point to the man who gave Peiton this death strike?" said Stenarch.

Prochus hesitated, then pointed to Evander. Nerissa could see his arm tremble. She also noticed it was slanted down. He didn't point at Evander's chest, but at his feet. Theoton must have noticed this, too, because he spoke up right away.

"You're certain that it was the prisoner? You needn't fear his retribution. No harm will come to you, I promise."

"I'm not afraid, my lord... It's just, we faced the other way. That's why my master and I didn't see Evander sneaking up. We didn't hear him either, because that field has soft, short grass."

"How do you know it was this prisoner if you were turned away?" asked Theoton. "Did you see his face as he fled?"

"No, lord. That was impossible."

"How so?"

"I, er, because I was knocked down in the dirt."

"Did he attack you, too? I see no injuries on you."

"No, lord. It was my master who knocked me down as he fell dying."

"And you didn't have time to rise and look around before the murderer was gone?"

"No, lord."

"I find this hard to understand. Anyone would do so, whether brave or not. You'd want to know what danger faced you."

"I did look back. But I couldn't rise."

"Why not?"

"I was completely pinned by my master's body."

"You were standing that close when Peiton was attacked?" asked Aetes. "What for? My slaves know better than to approach more than a stadion away when I call for their presence."

"We were... That is to say--"

"You were lovers," put in Stenarch. "Don't be shy. It's no secret that my nephew had these tastes."

Nerissa tried to keep the shock out of her voice as she translated for Evander. Not about what Peiton had been doing with the slight, blond slave. This had been rather obvious to the

entire crowd. But she hadn't known that one of the jurors was closely related to the victim. No wonder Theoton was so concerned about this trial. From what she'd gathered, Stenarch was his leading opponent for power on the council.

"Yes, lord," answered Prochus. "We didn't try to hide our love. But out of respect to Lady Eunice, my master never touched me in the house."

"So Peiton was screwing you at the moment of his death. His bulk pinned you down, but you looked back and recognized the prisoner. Is that an accurate summary of your testimony?"

"Mostly, lord. Except, I didn't see his face."

"Then how do you know that it was the accused?"

"I saw his sandals and the bottom of his chiton. Both were of the coarse quality that most slaves wear."

"That's hardly enough to identify a man," said Theoton. "That could describe any male slave through all the lands of Hellas."

"Yes, lord, but I heard what he said. It was in Ionic, which I know well, since my mother was from Patmos."

"And what was it he said?"

"You faithless son of Priapus! You should be ramming it in me!"

"That's a foul lie!" shouted Evander the moment that he heard Nerissa's translation.

As the crowd roared and stood again, he rushed at the slight slave. The two guards jerked back on Evander's chains just before he reached Prochus. They wrestled him to the ground. More eggs and rotten vegetables rained out of the stands. The guards and Evander all were struck repeatedly. As he continued shouting, one of the guards was ready with a cloth that he stuffed into Evander's mouth.

Theoton rose again. In a booming voice, he threatened arrest and prosecution for any further disruption from the spectators.

"Evander says, 'I've bedded hundreds of women in my life,' Nerissa told the jurors as they quieted, "but never slept with any man. And if I had, I'd be the swordsman, not the scabbard."

There was a burst of noise from the crowd, and another glare from Theoton. Once the theater quieted, he turned to face the witness.

"Did you recognize the murderer's voice as Evander's?"

"I think so, lord. But in all honesty, I hardly knew the brute. In the house, and especially the dormitory, we all tried hard to keep out of his way."

"Did his voice just now sound like the murderer's?" pressed Theoton.

"Very much, my lord. Deep and terribly angry."

"But what of the tone? What of the accent and the pace?"

"I couldn't say. I was half out of my wits. The man I loved was gasping for breath. His blood was pouring down on me. I thought that I'd be murdered next."

"Very well. If you have nothing else to add?"

"That's all I know, my lord."

"And if my colleagues have no further questions... No? Then we thank you for your honesty. You may be excused."

"That's the last witness, isn't it?" said Aetes. "Good. I'm sure we all have other business today. High time we gave our verdict."

"We haven't heard from the prisoner yet," said Theoton. "Apart from his outburst, that is. Which I warn you, Evander, another such display, and you'll quickly be condemned. This court won't tolerate violent behavior. But you do have the right to speak in your defense. You may also present witnesses, if any can come forward to offer exculpatory evidence. Do you wish to take advantage of these rights?"

"Yes," grunted Evander through his gag, after Nerissa translated.

"He said yes, lord," said Nerissa.

"He said yes without the lord," stuck in Stenarch.

"That's right, but I said lord. I was speaking to my master, sir. I wouldn't try to change Evander's words."

"See that you don't," said Stenarch.

"Well, do you have witnesses or don't you?" Aetes said to Evander with Nerissa's help. He pointed his chained hands at his mouth, then stood defiantly as if to say he was a better man than those who'd gag him, then offer him a chance to speak.

"You may remove it," Theoton said to the guards.

"I have only my own word," Evander said once the cloth was pulled out of his mouth. "There were no witnesses, because I wasn't there. I was at my work, clearing stones from the north field. Whether anyone saw me there, I couldn't say. Men pass on the road from time to time, but nobody acknowledges a slave. That's all I know about this matter."

"Then stand prepared to hear our verdict," said Stenarch.

"It's true I wanted to escape," Evander shouted before Stenarch could continue. "What slave who's beaten doesn't wish to flee? And I may have said harsh things about Peiton, but that's only how I let my anger cool. I wouldn't have really killed him or his family before I ran. What better way is there to bring a maximum effort from the slave hunters? And did I run? Of

course not. I still was in the north field when guardsmen came to seize me.”

Theoton exchanged a glance with Nerissa. He was asking if she'd found Evander's account believable, she knew. She nodded very slightly at him.

“Do you have anything else to say?” Theoton asked Evander and Nerissa translated again.

“That's all. I know that Ithacans won't give me a just hearing, but I speak the truth for Zeus's ears. In the next life, he'll judge the honor of my shade once you destroy my body.”

“As He'll judge us all. But let me say, you do your case no good with calumny. There are many good men on Ithaca. Compared to other lands I've seen, we value justice a great deal... Now let the jury deliberate.”

“There's nothing to deliberate,” said Stenarch. “This man's a lying viper. And the witnesses we've heard had every reason to be truthful. I vote for death.”

“I do, as well,” said Aetes. “You guards, hold him firmly. Jeremos, come down here now.”

In the back row of the theater, Nerissa saw a huge man rise. She recognized him as the oaf who'd brawled with the swineherd on her first day in Polis. Apparently, he served as executioner on Ithaca. It must pay little, or there were few capital trials, because he seemed practically a pauper. His dress was shabby and she remembered him running off with embarrassment when his nearly empty purse spilled open during the auction.

Nerissa spoke rapidly to Evander. He looked at her with surprise, then gave a short, firm nod as he said something in agreement. Nerissa stood to address the court.

“My lords, if it's not too late, Evander says he has a witness.”

“Who?” demanded Stenarch.

“Me, if you'll permit my testimony.”

Nerissa detested Evander, but she couldn't allow him to be executed for something that he hadn't done. She'd have to disgrace herself in front of everyone, but she had the power to prove this murder wasn't in Evander's nature.

“You? What could you know of this? She's your slave, Theoton. Was she anywhere near Peiton's field yesterday?”

“No, I wouldn't think so. She takes my son to the natatorium each morning, but one of my porters escorts them. What about this, Nerissa? You didn't slip off from Lyconas, did you?”

“No, my lord. I didn't mean that I was a direct witness to Peiton's death. My testimony is about Evander's character. Because we voyaged on the same slave ship, I know something about him that makes it impossible for him to be the murderer.”

"Triton's salty piss!" scoffed Stenarch. "Unless you claim an ability to see distant events unfold, there's no way you could know about the condemned man's future actions. Don't waste this court's time, or you'll be severely punished. Come down here, Jeremos, and do your duty."

"Let her speak," said Theoton. "Evander isn't condemned until we've heard all the testimony. I haven't voted yet."

"Your vote can't change the result. Should you be foolish enough to listen to this girl, the verdict would still be two to one in favor of execution."

"Not necessarily. She might convince Aetes, or even you."

"Yes, and you might turn into a bull like Zeus. This all is nonsense. Anything this girl says will be worthless. She's obviously become enamored of the prisoner. I've seen it before. Women, and especially weak-minded slaves, they melt with pity when this kind of defiant man's condemned."

"That's not the case here, Stenarch. I happen to know she loathes the prisoner. And I must remind you, he isn't yet condemned. Whatever the final count, our law is clear. The vote must be completed first."

"He's right," agreed Aetes. "We can't execute the prisoner until all of us have voted. So I say, let the slave girl speak. Unless you intend to drag this out with a whole string of questionable witnesses, Theoton?"

"Of course not. Why would you say that? I'm hardly inclined to favor the accused. Everything I've heard so far points to his guilt. But I think it's important to hear Nerissa's testimony before I vote. During the time she's worked in my household, I've found her to be an uncompromisingly honest servant. If she says she knows something crucial about Evander's character, then it can be accepted as reliable."

"So be it, then," said Aetes. "If you vouch for her on your reputation, I'm willing to hear her out."

"Fine," said Stenarch. "Go ahead and speak."

As plainly as possible, Nerissa told the court everything that happened to her on the Thallia.

"That's why it's impossible that Evander murdered Peiton out of jealousy," she concluded. "If you believe Prochus about what the murderer shouted, and I think his honesty was very evident..."

The crowd murmured its agreement.

"...then the murderer must have been another lover of Peiton. When it comes to sexual taste, Evander's very much a man who enjoys women."

“What does enjoyment have to do with it?” said Stenarch. “The condemned man was Peiton’s slave. If Peiton wanted him to bend over and take it, that’s fully in a master’s rights.”

“I understand that, lord. But isn’t submission a far cry from desire?”

“I fail to see your point. Not that you have one. It seems that I was right. You’re an empty-headed female wasting the court’s time.”

“I’m sorry if I didn’t make myself clear, my lord. I was trying to demonstrate that the murder would make sense if Evander had been raped by Peiton. I think we all can agree that Evander is an ill-tempered and a vengeful man. I have more cause than anyone here to know his character’s unsavory. But remember the murderer’s words: ‘You faithless son of Priapus! You should be ramming it in me!’ He was outraged that Peiton wasn’t being faithful to him. Does that sound like a man who’s been raped by his master?”

“You’re assuming he was raped.”

“No, my lord. I’m not trying to offend you, but what I said was it would be believable for Evander to do this *had* he been raped. And had the murderer shouted out resentment for a master who’d defiled him.”

“That’s quite enough of your gibberish. You may sit down.”

“She’s right,” said Theoton.

The crowd began to rumble again. Some were shaking their heads in agreement.

“It proves nothing,” insisted Stenarch. “My nephew took many bedmates. Everyone knows this. Some of his conquests did it for pleasure, others for his gifts. Peiton was extremely generous. His preferment could make life easy for a slave. This condemned man may have enjoyed women, but that would hardly stop him from accepting Peiton’s favor. We’re all adults here. It shouldn’t surprise any of us that there are men who take male lovers as well as female.”

“Evander wasn’t one, my lord,” Nerissa said. “I’m really not trying to be difficult, but the way he used to stare at me, I know.”

“I told you to sit down. We’ve heard your testimony and that’s that. So he stared your way when you spread your legs for sailors. What of it, girl? Did it ever occur to you that he was staring at the men? When they raised their tunics to poke you, his direct view would have been their loins.” Pleased with his superior logic, Stenarch spread his hands and grinned. “There, I’m glad we’ve cleared this up. I wouldn’t want there to be any doubt about our just verdict. It’s perfectly obvious that your fellow slave was leering at the sailors’ buttocks as they pumped away.”

“No, lord. He wasn’t.” Nerissa burned with humiliation, but her limbs and voice held firm. “Evander took great enjoyment from imagining himself in the sailors’ place as they raped

me.”

“Ah, I see that I was wrong about your powers,” mocked Stenarch. “It isn't the future you claim to see. It's the ability to look into men's minds.”

“No, my lord, I've never experienced anything like that. But there was no need to be an oracle, since Evander called out everything he'd like to do to me.”

“And I suppose the sailors simply let him? Speaking as a man who owns many slaves, I'd punish such insolence immediately.”

“The sailors thought Evander very funny. They encouraged him every time he'd stroke himself.”

“You mean he didn't only shout?” asked Aetes. “He pleased himself, too?”

“That's right, my lord,” said Nerissa. “He had no shame. He'd spit into his hands and thrust away while shouting the most disgusting things.”

“Like what?” demanded Stenarch. He scowled at Nerissa, daring her to humiliate herself further. “Come now, girl. Theoton has sworn to your honesty. So tell us what the condemned man shouted.”

Nerissa glanced at Theoton. The last thing she wanted was for him to hear this. But she knew if she refused, Stenarch could construe her silence as the action of an unreliable witness. He was locked in a power struggle with her master. She couldn't let down Theoton.

“Evander said many things, my lords. Each time was different, and I was raped hundreds of times. His words are all a clash of screeching harpies in my head. But if you wish, I'll summarize what I recall.”

She proceeded to recite the vilest phrases she remembered. Evander had called out fantasies of what he did to her in every conceivable position. And turned her into scores of women from his past.

“That isn't good enough!” shouted Stenarch as murmurs of sympathy began to grow among the crowd. “A witness may not pick and choose. If you can't tell us exactly what he said, then the jury won't consider any of these doubtful claims.”

“I don't know what doubt you refer to, lord. There's none at all Evander said these things. Any slave within that hold could tell you. The sailors, too. But if your law requires a direct quote, I'll never forget the worst of it. One day when Chymides Eight-Fingers was taking me--”

“Who?” said Stenarch.

“A sailor named Chymides. A vicious Cypriot who was the crew's foreman. Everyone called him Eight-fingers because he had no pinkies. I think that they'd been severed long ago,

but I don't know what the punishment was for."

"It doesn't matter," Theoton said gently. "Please continue."

"Yes, my lord. Anyway, Chymides was taking me front-wise, that's what he liked, though most of the others turned me over. And Evander was leaning as close as his chains allowed. Past Chymides's shoulder, I could see spittle flying from Evander's tongue as his excitement grew.

"And what is it he said?" asked Theoton. "I'm sorry to make you do this in front of everyone, but we must hear the full account."

"I understand, my lord. Evander's exact words were, 'Feel me stick it to you, ungh! Yeah, squirm beneath me, girl, there's plenty more. Beg me, that's right, darling. You want it harder? Here comes my thick sword. Plunge it in that juicy quim. Thrust and parry, thrust and parry, just like the drillmaster taught us soldiers. Oh, Triton's mighty rod, oh slick ichor shooting out, yeah, you sultry cow, here I come deep into your meat. You love it, don't you? The biggest bull you've ever seen is riding you. Bounce those tits wide open. And ungh! That's me piercing home into them. Ungh, yes! You want that, girl, admit it. Any clod can wrap two bloated sacks of milk around his prick. But it takes genius to stick it right inside. First the left one, then the right. Scream with pleasure, girl! Aren't you glad the captain slit them open?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Stenarch. As if the whole amphitheater didn't understand.

"It means Evander is obsessed with screwing women." Nerissa was mortified, but she couldn't let Stenarch win. She had no choice but press on. "Everything about our bodies excites his lust, even our deformities. He'd stick his phallus into any hole we have."

"You mean what he said about your tits is true?"

"You don't have to answer that," said Theoton. "It has no relevance."

"None of this has any relevance," said Stenarch. "The whole thing's rot invented by a slattern to save a filthy slave. For all I know, this whore stretched her chain and gave herself to him whenever they had the chance. As I understand it, that's entirely possible, the way they pack maximum numbers into a slave ship's hold."

"No, lord, by the Blessed Virgin's shield, I swear we didn't."

"You leave Athena out of this. She happens to be my mother's patroness... It's clear this witness is a liar. Otherwise, she'd answer."

"I have no objection to answering, my lords. Captain Hycron slashed my breasts because I wouldn't be his willing bedmate. His knife was very sharp and the wounds went deep. They were slow to heal because of how the sailors pawed me. Evander was accurate when he said a

man could--"

"I think we all have a clear image," Theoton cut her off. "You needn't finish. You've been very brave to tell us all of this. I for one am thoroughly convinced that you've been truthful. Can there be any doubt?"

Theoton looked up at the crowd, turning slowly so he faced every section of the amphitheater. Shouts of acclamation supported him. Nerissa saw a few women among the spectators who'd risen. Silent until now, as was only proper behavior in mixed company, some even shouted their approval for Nerissa's honesty.

"I'm ready to vote," said Theoton. "This man is contemptible, but he isn't guilty of Peiton's murder. The witness has proven that Evander lusts for women. Even if he sought Peiton's favor by indulging him sexually, Evander's self-image as a master cocksman never would have allowed him to take the subordinate position. So we know from what the murderer called out, it must have been someone who enjoyed receiving pederasty. My vote is innocent. What do you say now, Aetes?"

"I say this testimony's very interesting, but..."

Nerissa could see cold calculation in the old man's eyes. His vote was the decider. Evander's life was nothing to him. He had no concept that slaves deserved justice, the same as free men. The question was, which faction should he support? Was it more profitable to stick with Stenarch, or throw his weight behind Theoton? It didn't take Aetes long to decide.

"I'm not saying that the girl is lying, but her testimony means little to this case. I have to put more weight into the other witnesses. And remember, some of them were citizens, not addle-headed slaves. My vote remains guilty. Stenarch, do you still agree?"

"Of course he's guilty. This court should have listened to me in the first place. We needn't have wasted our time listening to such a sordid story. Jeremos, you may proceed."

"Stop right there," said Theoton. "Let's all hold on a minute. Aetes, isn't it possible you haven't thought this through? I know you're a man who holds our laws to be a sacred trust. Yes, this prisoner disgusts us all. But he's been badly punished already. Not only the beatings for his various offenses while in Peiton's service, but he's endured three days of our harshest questioning. If the council executes an innocent man, it undermines us."

"I see no difficulty," said Aetes. "The fact is that he isn't innocent. Our vote's determined that he's guilty."

"Yes, but if executed men aren't seen as guilty by the majority of citizens, won't that inevitably weaken our authority?"

Men stood and shouted their support. Women did, as well. Nerissa saw that nearly half

the crowd was standing.

"I propose we take a count of those who believe Evander's innocent," said Theoton.

Nerissa saw Stenarch go red with anger. He gaped at Theoton, as if his fellow juror must be mad.

"You dare to offer us such offal?" he shouted. "What does this jury care who stands and shouts? They do the same thing for a dancing bear. Or jeer at jugglers who drop their balls. Next, you'll suggest they should replace us on the council."

More people stood and shouted now. A few rose in support of Stenarch, but Nerissa could see the crowd was turning overwhelmingly in favor of Theoton.

"Free the prisoner!" shouted a fat man with a particularly loud voice.

"He's innocent!" called out a well-born woman. Nerissa recognized her from the natatorium. "Change your vote, Aetes. Stenarch has reason to be biased, but you don't. We won't accept flawed justice on Ithaca."

"She's right!" many called out to support the woman.

"If Philomena's right," shot back Aetes, "show me who really murdered Peiton. You can't, can you? Where's this powerfully built, Ionic speaking, effeminate slave who just happened to have access to the axe on Peiton's property? And who was never missed by his own master while he went to Peiton's field, slew the man, and then returned unbloodied and unnoticed. It's ludicrous."

"The accused isn't responsible for proving who else might have done this," said Theoton. "That's never been part of our law. He must only prove a likelihood of innocence. Which he's done, through the commendable testimony of his witness. And these good people all agree."

A loud roar went up from the crowd. Now, no one tried to shout them down.

"Fine," said Aetes, changing his calculations quickly. "It makes no difference to me. This slave will soon come to a bad end, one way or the other. But I can see the wisdom of sparing prisoners when we aren't certain of their guilt. The girl's testimony has created a sufficiently strong doubt. I change my vote to innocent. Guards, you may release the prisoner. Lady Eunice, your steward may return the slave Evander to your farm."

"Just a moment," called Stenarch to the widow. "I'll give you two hundred drachmai for him."

"You'll what?" asked Theoton.

"You heard me. Lady Eunice, I'm sure you have no wish to keep such a troublesome slave."

"But why would you buy him?" she asked.

“That’s not the question. I see that Peiton never told you about commerce. The seller needn’t worry why the buyer perceives a particular value, only that he does. Two hundred not enough? Just name your price. I’m a generous man, just as my nephew was. How’s this? I’ll give you half a talent. That’s more than any slave has ever brought in all of Hellas.”

“Half a talent? But that’s--” Eunice looked lost.

“Don’t strain your mind, my dear. I realize that females have no ability to comprehend mathematics. A talent is worth sixty minai. And a mina is one hundred drachmai. That comes to, let’s see...”

Stenarch calculated on his fingers. Nerissa had the number first. Half a talent was three thousand drachmai. This was, of course, a fortune to pay for a slave. Skilled craftsmen were worth a tenth this much.

“It’s three thousand drachmai,” Aetes said after half a minute. If anyone here has an abacus, we could confirm that figure.”

“That’s all right, Aetes, I believe you. Still, I don’t know what to say. I may not know anything of commerce, but even I know half a talent’s far too much.”

“With Peiton gone, you’ll need the silver, if I may be so blunt.”

“It’s... it’s very kind of you. I accept. And may Evander give you better service than he gave us.”

“Oh, he will. Believe me, I’ll squeeze every drop of vigor from his hide. I’ve seen slaves last a long time in my mine. Who knows, maybe this one will set the record. It’s currently at sixteen months.”



The household had a noticeably frosty air when Nerissa returned. The gateman didn’t greet her, though he was usually a pleasant fellow. The gardeners worked in silence, though they ordinarily bantered with each other. In the kitchen, Aglaia was sullen, though all week she’d been very happy since her short rations ended. There was a red mark on her greasy face, in the shape of a very angry slap. Dora looked slyly pleased, however.

Nerissa wished she could ask Thea what had happened, but the cook was busy with Praegon. The steward, looking prim as ever, was relaying Lady Phyllis’s instructions for deipnon. When he’d finished, Nerissa didn’t have a chance to talk with Thea, because Praegon escorted her straight to the nursery. She’d missed ariston, not that she had much appetite after the ordeal of her testimony.

As they walked down the hallway, it occurred to Nerissa that she'd missed the women's session at the natatorium, too. She knew how much Vasy enjoyed his swimming lessons. He'd be disappointed that the trial took so long. And she'd find it very difficult to sit inside with so many roiled thoughts. What's worse, it was such a pretty day outside. She needed to walk off her agitation, then let the water soothe her fears.

She asked Praegon if it might be possible to take Vasy somewhere other than the natatorium for exercise. The gymnasium, for example, next to the palaestra. Boys had been excused from training, so their tutors could attend the trial. It should be empty now. Vasy would be old enough to begin there in a year. Why not get him started early?

"Are you out of your mind?" snapped Praegon. "Lady Phyllis is furious already. Now you want me to ask her this?"

"The Mistress is upset?"

Nerissa already knew, of course, given the household's tenseness. It meant that Lady Phyllis had quickly heard about the trial's outcome. And Nerissa knew the source. She'd noticed Lady Rhialete passing in her litter at the speed of a trotting horse. This gossip loving woman had urged the slaves who carried her to run. She must have hurried here to tell the news.

But Lady Phyllis's anger seemed very odd. She should be elated at her husband's triumph. He'd outwitted Stenarch, gaining even greater respect from the townspeople. Surely the Mistress knew that Stenarch was Theoton's chief opponent on the council. And he'd solidified support from Aetes. This put Theoton in an excellent position to emerge as the council's leading voice. Which should delight Lady Phyllis. Her family would become the most prominent on Ithaca.

"Of course she's upset," said Praegon. He snapped the keys around his iron ring so vehemently, they struck each other with the sound of clashing swords. "And don't pretend you can't guess why."

"No, Honored Keys... You mean her anger is at me?"

"Who else? You've brought shame on this household."

"By telling the truth? That's what the Master asked from me."

"You had no place being at that trial."

"What choice did I have? Or was it really that I saved Evander? Allowed him to keep his head at least, and live another wretched year. Is Lady Phyllis related to Stenarch? Or was she particularly fond of Peiton?"

"Watch your mouth. You know what you did. You may think you've found a clever way to humiliate the Mistress, but she's on to your game."

Now Nerissa understood. The neighbor woman Rhialete had filled her ears not with news of Theoton's triumph, but something else entirely. The important news wasn't Evander's fate, but that Theoton had publicly praised Nerissa.

Lady Phyllis must have already known they were attracted to each another. She would have resented Theoton raising Nerissa's status by giving her an official capacity in front of the court. A damaged slave whom she'd picked to replace the former object of his lust. And now, it seemed that Theoton was determined to bed this one, as well. But instead of going about it in the normal way -- tip the girl onto her backside, and get it done -- he was romancing her with public compliments and honors. Now everyone would know he desired a mutilated wench far more than his wife!

So yes, from the perspective of Lady Phyllis, she was rightfully furious about any gain this trial brought her husband's political career. He'd done it not through her connections, but from the sordid testimony of a whoring slave. Now, worst of all, she'd have to hear innuendo from her friends about Theoton ramming his member into the gerula's damaged tits.

Nerissa said nothing more to Praegon. He opened the door, let Szeta out, then left. Nerissa's mood sank even lower as the door slammed shut behind her. She heard a key turn in the lock, then Praegon's assiduously even footsteps. She put a falsely cheerful smile on for Vasy as she turned.

He had many questions about the trial. Nerissa did her best to answer honestly, while omitting the crude details. When she'd finished, Vasy seemed satisfied that an accused man had been proven innocent. No matter if the man was foul, Vasy was glad that his father had managed to spare Evander.

Children have a much purer view of justice than adults, Nerissa thought. To them, chastisement should only happen for something you've actually done. There's never a good enough reason to punish the innocent. I wonder how this idea gets lost so quickly.

When he heard there'd be no swimming, Vasy contained his disappointment well. For such a little boy, he was remarkably level headed. For the rest of the day, Nerissa played with him and told him stories. She taught Vasy how to do a somersault, and other skills she thought the tutors at the gymnasium might expect of him next year. After deipnon, she helped him wash, then tucked him into bed. Once he'd fallen asleep, she sat up worrying about what punishment the Mistress would have Praegon deliver.

She hadn't been summoned yet, and Thea knew nothing at deipnon. From Dora's smirk, it was obvious she thought that Nerissa would be sold. Then Dora would have a much better chance of regaining the Master's attention.

Maybe it would be better if I am sold off. I'm growing much too fond of Theoton. I cannot fall in love with him. I owe that to Andrastus. And what would Mother say? My whole clan slain one after another, their bodies rotting where they fell, and all I can think of is this aristocrat who owns me. Have I lost all decency, or was it ever in me? How can I let my thoughts fill with the power of his arms, his noble voice, his commanding face, his piercing mind?

At last, Nerissa fell asleep. But she thrashed with dreams about her family's bitter journey. Each one more terrifying than the last. Especially the battle in a narrow, tide-torn strait after a strong gale blew them far to the west. If anything, reliving that shattering battle was more horrific than the first time, because she knew how it would end. In those grievous times of famine, war, and death, this land had been notable in horror. Its inhabitants' hostility to strangers was the fiercest yet. They hadn't even landed before they were attacked.



Nerissa slipped on the deck's blood-sodden planks. Catching herself against the bulkhead, she braced her legs. But it was impossible to avoid sliding as she hurled her stones. It made her shots inaccurate.

With Father straining at the helm to keep their ship from smashing against sheer walls of granite, Nerissa flung stone after stone. Though she gained some accuracy by standing on a coiled rope, Nerissa's missiles had no effect. At the summit of the cliff, their foemen all wore armor. They held shields to protect their heads. Their captain had a golden helmet, from which poured a long flowing mane of nearly the same color. The abundant contour of her breast plate showed that she was female. Perhaps she was their Queen.

Andrastus fought alongside Nerissa, but his arrows stuck into their lime-wood shields or bounced harmlessly off their iron greaves below. Impervious to attack, the enemy threw thick flights of spears. One had already struck Father in his right calf. Another had pierced the cabin where Mother, Aunt Melissa, cousins Aristides and Chloe, little Geneia, and baby Mavros huddled. Nerissa heard a high pitched scream, but couldn't know which of her loved ones had been struck. At a shout from their Queen, the enemy launched another rain of death.

Three spears descended simultaneously at Nerissa, each an arm's width apart. She had no shield and no cover. Her back was to the cabin's wall. Her only escape was to dive into the crashing waves. She'd have to risk the strong chance of being swept toward the cliff. Only a miracle would prevent her from being dashed against sharp rocks at its base. Nerissa jumped,

but didn't reach the sea.

She looked up, shocked to stare into the exquisite eyes of Andrastus. He'd hurtled into her, and dove toward the boat's capstan. With his arms wrapped tight around her, he'd rolled midair, so she wouldn't strike the anchor. Instead, he took the blow, himself.

Before another second passed, Andrastus climbed the mast, then leaped for a tall column of granite that had split off from the cliff. It seemed an impossible distance, but he reached its pinnacle with both hands. High enough for the bare rock to be free of spray, Andrastus was able to hold on. He hauled himself onto its crest, then leapt toward a small beach protected by the tower. As Nerissa covered him with a rapid volley, Andrastus began climbing the cliff hand over hand.

The enemy tried to shred him with a fresh barrage. Fortunately, the cliff had a slight overhang and they couldn't lean out far enough to hit Andrastus. Setting down their shields so they could hold onto the edge, they jabbed at Andrastus as he neared the top.

Nerissa launched stone after stone as they exposed their heads. She struck down four of the warriors, two of whom plunged screaming into the sea. Hearing this noise, young Aristides limped out of the cabin. Chloe tried to pull him back, but he struggled free and grabbed the bow that Andrastus had left behind. Nerissa flushed with pride at her young cousin's bravery, then paled with horror when she realized Aunt Melissa must be dead or gravely wounded. Otherwise, it would have been her and not Chloe trying to hold back Aristides.

Why couldn't the spear have found Chloe instead? the thought passed through her mind. Immediately, Nerissa felt disgusted with herself. She hurled stones in a blur, unable to relieve her guilt.

And though Aristides was very brave, he still wasn't strong enough to fully bend the bow. His arrows fell well short of their targets. Realizing he couldn't help this way, Aristides brought the bow to Father and relieved him at the wheel. Father took down three more of the foemen, while Andrastus gained the top.

Nerissa saw him seize a spear from one of the wounded enemy, then throw himself against their remaining phalanx. They battled in a square, their long spears thrust between interlocking shields. Fearless Andrastus was a terror, driving back the knot of warriors until Nerissa couldn't see their battle anymore.

They returned to the cliff top seconds later. But now, they'd become a six-headed, twelve-legged monster. It had the body of a giant dog and a tail that twitched with pleasure like a cat that's caught a mouse. All the heads were lupine, all female, all with gaping, wolfish mouths full of teeth the size of grindstones. Andrastus stabbed his spear into their necks, but

they didn't bleed. They mocked him with their ugly laughter. One bent her long neck down and seized his spear with her sharp teeth.

"Hah, what fools!" she shrieked, as her sister nymphai crunched the weapon, blade and all. "Don't you know that Scylla can't be killed?"

Andrastus charged at them, driving against their scaly body. They might be immortal, but if he could push them into the sea, they might sink and the vessel might be saved.

They didn't move a dactylos. Andrastus was a lion in his valor, strong as a full grown ox, brimming with lusty manhood, but they were infinitely powerful. The Queen simply extended her head down and sunk her teeth into his chest.

Andrastus fought on, stabbing his spear into her ear. And maybe this had some effect, because instead of biting through him, she flung him from the cliff.



Nerissa woke in a cold sweat. She wrapped the blanket around herself and paced the room. An hour later, when she was able to lie down again, kinsmen's shades repeatedly disturbed her sleep. Their deaths this time were just as painful as they'd been originally.

When she awoke again, it was to a gentle hand. In Nerissa's dream, it had pulled her from the endless tunnel of Erebus. She blinked as Theoton set his candle in the stand. She hadn't heard his key turn in the door. He sat close against her on the mattress. Through the thin blanket, she could feel his thigh against her naked hip.

"Lord Theoton," she said. "Are you sure it's wise to come here now?"

"I wanted to thank you," he said. "It doesn't matter if anyone knows. I have a perfect right to be inside my nursery. I would have come sooner, but there was a council meeting that dragged late into the night."

"Was it about Evander's trial?" Now Nerissa sat up, clutching the blanket to her chest. She breathed deep to clear her mind. "Forgive me, but you don't look pleased. Hasn't this tipped the balance in your favor?"

"Anything but. Stenarch proposed a charge of treason against me."

"Treason?" Nerissa blanched. She remembered his description of the fearsome penalty. "But how could Stenarch say that? What you did was good for everyone. You insisted that an innocent man get a fair trial."

"That wasn't the grounds that Stenarch cited. He said my call to count people in favor of sparing Evander was treason against the oligarchy. He said I tried to take away the council's

right to vote. He said I'd give our leadership to men who'd piss away Ithaca's prosperity like cheap wine an hour later."

"But that's outrageous. I've never known a man who had his nation's interests more at heart. You were helping Ithaca by allowing the people to be heard. You even convinced Aetes you were right."

"Not for long. He voted with Stenarch tonight."

"He'd do that to you? I thought he was a friend."

"Hardly. I only include him as a guest among my real friends because the council's balance is so critical. Aetes sees himself as king. But if he can't have that, he wants to be the kingmaker. Tonight, he saw a chance to disgrace me, so he pounced."

"That's terrible! What are you going to do?"

"Nothing, for now. The treason charges failed. Stenarch only has four votes."

"He might bribe his way to more. Isn't he the richest man on Ithaca?"

"That's right. But don't worry, Nessa. If he tries to buy votes on the council, we define that as a capital crime, too. So he won't take the chance... Anyway, that's hardly what I came to talk about."

"But if it's on your mind, lord, maybe I can help."

"It's politics. We have these battles every year. Not that I wouldn't value your opinion. I've learned you have a most remarkable intellect. But another time. Tonight, I only wanted to thank you. Your testimony this morning was the most courageous act I've ever seen."

"I wasn't being brave. I wanted to run into the skene and hide."

"Then it was even braver to continue. I want you to know I feel honored that you've come into my life."

Theoton took her hand and cradled it between his palms. She looked into his dark gray eyes, now speckled red from the candle's dancing flame. If he'd pulled her close against his chest, she wouldn't have been able to resist. She would have melted into Theoton with heat. Mother be damned, and all the others, she would have kissed his mouth, his eyes, the indentations at his temples.

But he didn't pull her close. He waited for her to move toward him. An honorable man, Theoton kept in mind her earlier plea for patience.

"No, my lord, we can't," she said at last. As gently as possible, she extracted her hand from Theoton's grasp. "I want to very much, but we both know it will make trouble for you. The Mistress is furious at me already. She thinks my testimony shames the household."

Nerissa didn't mention that his public praise was counted as an even greater sin.

“Shames us? By the hammer of Hephaestus, it's a source of crowning pride.”

“You weren't disgusted to hear about my injuries?”

She couldn't help asking. She needed to know this. Even now, if he took her hand again and pulled her close, she would have dropped the blanket. And she wouldn't ask him to blow out the candle... And still he didn't move.

“I was filled with admiration that you haven't let any of the outrages committed against your person stain your spirit. I vowed silently to Ares that if this Captain Hycron ever comes to Ithaca again, I'll repay the insult, but not necessarily in the same part of his body.”

“Please don't do that, my lord. Then Stenarch can lodge real charges against you. You're destined for great things, I know. I'd suffer far worse than any blade could cut me if this hateful man manages to stop you. As I said this morning, I'm no oracle, but I see you bringing marvelous reforms to Ithaca.”

“Thank you, Nessa. And I hope that when I do, I can celebrate them in your banquet hall.”

“What do you mean my 'banquet hall?' I'm just a slave. I don't own a hut, let alone a grand residence.”

“I think you know what I'm proposing.”

“Do you mean to free me, lord?”

Suddenly, Nerissa's heart beat fast with hope.

“I'd like to, but I can't.”

““But I know it's possible on Ithaca. The Illyrian who delivers wood to Thea is a freedman. And I heard you mention manumission at the banquet when I served.”

“It's true we have this practice, but I'd have to own you, Nessa. Unfortunately, my wife holds title to you. She bought you with her personal funds. Our law permits women of noble birth to retain family bequests. And she refuses to sell you to me.”

“She plans to sell me off to Stenarch. I know it, my lord. All the slaves think so.”

“She won't. She knows that I'd divorce her if that happens.”

“But what about Rinea? That's exactly what happened to her.”

“Yes, and it grieves me every day. Lady Phyllis did this while I was in Korinthos. I didn't know yet that Rinea was with child. My wife made a point of selling Rinea to Stenarch, instead of leasing her. That way, she knew I couldn't fix the damage. I tried to buy Rinea back, the gateman Zephilon, too, I offered even more than Stenarch gave Eunice today. But he refused a talent for the pair. He saw it as the perfect opportunity to hurt me. He boasted to his friends that he'd stolen away my lover.”

“But if you loved Rinea, why didn't you ever set her up in her own house?”

“I never said I loved the girl. I liked her well enough, and we enjoyed each other in the dark. But what I felt for Rinea was nothing like the esteem I hold for you.”

“Oh... Would you really make me your courtesan? Can you do that if Lady Phyllis owns me?”

“Of course I can. A man controls his household, no matter that his wife holds title to various slaves. She won't dare sell you off to Stenarch, since she fears the scandal of divorce more than any other thing.”

Nerissa wanted to say yes. Still, how could she let herself think that Theoton's desire for her would last? He was a man accustomed to bedding beautiful women. He might say that he was drawn to her courage and her mind, he might swear he didn't care about her damaged body, but the first time he saw her breasts, the slightest twitch in those proud eyes would give Theoton away.

Yes, he'd still visit out of pity, but more and more, Theoton would spend his free evenings with his other courtesan. In time, he'd replace her altogether with an undamaged maiden. Nerissa was tempted to show him her breasts now, and have it over... No, despite everything Theoton thought, she didn't have that kind of courage.

“I don't expect an answer tonight,” Theoton said to her continued silence. “But please think about this soon. I burn with feeling for you, Nessa.”

“Yes, I promise,” she told him. “I'll think about it very hard. I doubt I'll sleep again.”

After Theoton left, Nerissa's thoughts veered back to optimism. She had a hard time thinking of any valid reason why she shouldn't accept his offer. In truth, this was a stroke of extraordinary luck. At last, it seemed she was restored into Athena's favor. Gazing through her high window, Nerissa said a prayer of gratitude.

Of all the men the Blessed Virgin might have caused to claim her, Theoton was the strongest, the most moral, and the one to make her breath catch in her throat. What's more, becoming his courtesan would remove her from Lady Phyllis's spiteful reach.

Though she'd still be a slave with little choice, it wouldn't bring her yet more misery if she wanted the man, would it? And it wouldn't be unfaithful to Andrastus if it earned her the chance to be with him one day. Nerissa knew she'd have a far greater degree of freedom as a courtesan. And in time, maybe freedom, despite Lady Phyllis. There always was a way.

Delta

After Praegon unlocked the nursery early the next morning, Nerissa used the privy, then washed with water from a bucket. The household was in an especially desirable location, because a spring seeped from the ledge behind. Anywhere else throughout this neighborhood, slaves had to carry water from the central well in Polis.

When she entered the kitchen, a rough-dressed man was talking to Praegon. His back was turned, so Nerissa couldn't see who it was. She went to the hearth to warm her hands. From there, she recognized the man in profile. Without his huge friend swamping him, he wasn't nearly as short as he'd seemed at the auction. He was about average in height, with a wiry build. His hair was newly cropped, but just as unevenly as before.

"What's the swineherd doing here?" she asked Thea.

"Who?" said Thea, looking up from a loaf of barley bread that she was cutting.

"The man with Praegon. He tried to buy me at the auction. Lady Phyllis outbid him. I thought he was a swineherd because of his stench."

"You're right, he stinks just like a boar. But he's no swineherd. We buy his cheese. It's very good, despite his filthy ways. Fortunately, he leaves all the work to his slave Hesper. And usually, she's the one to deliver it."

"Nerissa, get over here!" ordered Praegon. He'd never spoken so sharply to her before.

She looked at him, surprised. But then she thought of Theoton. She'd say yes to him tonight. She'd never have to bear Praegon's scorn again. Or fear what Lady Phyllis would do to her. Instead, she'd live in her own house. Theoton would treat her very well. Her fears of the bleak night had scattered like dank mist at dawn.

She'd leave this place as soon as possible. She'd miss Vasy, but she could ask Theoton to bring him by. Lady Phyllis would have no power to stop him. A father could take his son anywhere he wanted, as often as he liked. They'd be almost like a family. And on those times

that Theoton came to her house alone, they'd be like newlyweds. A soft smile of anticipation crept onto Nerissa's lips.

"You have nothing to grin about, you slut," said Praegon as she approached. He shoved her hard. "This is your new master. Don't expect a fraction of the tolerance we gave you here."

The weedy man grabbed her arm and dragged her through the door. Nerissa was so shocked, it didn't occur to her to struggle free and run for Theoton's bedchamber.

"Told you I'd get you for a song," her new owner said when they stood outside on the portico. He smirked with pleasure, delighted with the craftiness of his transaction. "This time, it didn't even cost me eighty."

Nerissa's thoughts spun with confusion. She couldn't understand how this had happened. Why had Lady Phyllis risked Theoton's threat of divorce? And much closer to her heart, why had Theoton allowed this?

She knew she'd sinned repeatedly in her short life, by abandoning Euredon, by resenting Mother, by letting desire for Andrastus cloud her judgment, by feeling joy rather than regret when she'd orphaned the children of opposing warriors, by failing to adequately honor the Gods... but must they hate her so completely? Wasn't the loss of all her family punishment enough? And then the rapes and mutilation she'd accepted on the Thallia.

And now she'd have to bear this, too? Was it possible that Theoton had betrayed her? She'd imagined that Lady Phyllis might succeed in sending her to Stenarch's mine someday, but that sentence, though cruel, would be mercifully brief. She might have to endure this new, repulsive master for many, many years.

"What do I call you, sir?" she asked as the weedy man groped her body with his shifting eyes.

Her answer was a crunching backhand to the jaw. It landed on the same place that Chymides had struck her. Though almost two months had passed, there must have been an unhealed crack beneath the bruise, and now she felt it snap completely.

"Shut it!" said the weedy man. "No slave of mine may speak unless I bid an answer. And then be sure to give it quick."

He picked up a length of chain that he'd left by the door. Swinging it, he made a leg iron at its end whistle through the air. A clear demonstration of the punishment if answers weren't prompt. His eyes unable to hold steady, he tossed the chain to Nerissa. With a motion of his hand, he indicated that she should fasten the leg iron. Nerissa did this without delay, then caught the lock he tossed at her and snapped it shut. As she returned the loose end of the chain to him, she noticed that he smelled as bad as ever.

He tugged Nerissa down the tiled walk, then marched up the street at a brisk pace. She stumbled on a rut, causing the chain to jerk out of her owner's hand. He wheeled at this resistance, fury blossoming across his narrow face.

"Forgive me," said Nerissa. "I'm dizzy from your blow."

He brought his staff down with a resounding thwack across her shoulder. Townsfolk up and down the street turned at this sharp noise. He glared at them, daring them to interfere. But he must have feared that someone would. This neighborhood was full of Ithaca's most important citizens. Nerissa recognized Lady Philomena step through her gate. She was the woman who'd spoken out for justice at Evander's trial. The weedy man's arm froze where he'd cocked it for a second strike.

"Not another word," he said in a low tone. "Last warning. I won't be soft on you next time. I'll tolerate no talk and no excuses."

He led Nerissa through the northern side of town. A more optimistic possibility occurred to her. Just because Stenarch wasn't the buyer, that wouldn't stop Theoton from retaliating. In fact, it was much better that a poor man had bought her. He'd certainly accept a sizeable profit to sell her back.

But how long would it take? Maybe the Mistress had struck now because she knew that Theoton was leaving on another trip abroad. He hadn't mentioned a voyage to Nerissa, but then, he was convinced that the mundane details of his business couldn't be of interest to a woman. She said a silent prayer to see him soon, and Vasy, too. Praegon hadn't even given her a chance to say goodbye to the boy.

They headed up a dusty lane until they reached a brook of greenish water. After crossing at a pebbled ford, they wound through rocky fields. Half an hour later, they came to a wooden farm house topped with thatch. Not much different in construction from the fishermen's humble homes outside Smyrna's walls. But there, all similarities ended. Not one upstanding man among the fleet would have let his house fall into such disrepair.

The thatch gave off a reek long past musty, the walls sagged inward, and the lintel above the door had cracked in two. An outbuilding that Nerissa guessed to be the ewe shed leaned against a pile of manure that almost reached its roof. The sloping fields were stripped of fodder. Meanwhile, sheep were loose among a grove of lemon trees on the steep slope behind. Their branches should be full of green fruit at this time of year, but Nerissa saw only bare limbs with few leaves.

Her new master pulled Nerissa into the ewe shed. Without a word, he clubbed her shoulders five more times.

“That’s for defying me in Polis. You don’t deserve an explanation, but I want you to understand me well. My father always said a smart man beats his women every day. If you don’t know why, she will... But I’m a better man than that old sot. Give me no cause to beat you, and I won’t. Is that clear?”

“Yes, lord.”

“Yes, *Master*. I’m no leeching toff. It’s the right form of address for a common citizen. But I wouldn’t expect a barbarian to know, so it won’t earn you another beating. See, I told you I’m a fair man.”

“Yes, *Master*.”

She’d like to say, *I’m no barbarian. Do my words all sound like bar bar bar? I come from Hellene stock through countless generations -- can you claim the same thing?* But she didn’t dare. One more beating and she might be unable to rise. A man like this wouldn’t feed her if she couldn’t work. And she must stay alive until Theoton learned of this.

For that matter, Nerissa wondered what kind of work he wanted. This man didn’t look like he could afford the luxury of a slave used only in the bedchamber. Blessed Olympus! She hoped he didn’t intend to rent her out at some low wine shop. She’d heard all about such things from Berenice.

As a girl, she’d also overheard much of Aunt Cythera’s anecdotes about her work. Mother’s older sister was a *hetaera* -- they’d decided that Geneia showed great promise of acquiring the sacred calling, too. Had the drought not struck, Geneia would have begun her training in another year. Now, that would have been a great honor. But the difference between a temple courtesan and a tavern whore was like the sparkling Elysian Fields compared to the darkest corner of Erebus.

Her new master didn’t explain what Nerissa’s work would be, merely chained her to a post and left. When she felt certain that he wasn’t coming back, Nerissa sank down to the muck. The pain from her jaw was more severe than anything she’d ever felt. It was worse than when Captain Hycron slashed her breasts. A pulsing ache that seemed to throb with every heart beat. Because of it, she could hardly feel the deep bruises on her shoulders.

For the first time since her capture, Nerissa allowed herself to cry. She’d lived through misery that made this mild in comparison, but she’d never been so alone. She worried that Theoton wouldn’t buy her back. Lady Phyllis wouldn’t have risked his anger if she didn’t know something that prevented him from coming.

If I have to live out my days serving this foul swine, she thought, I’d just as soon bite into my veins right now.

Nerissa lay within the murky shed so long, she began to imagine the dripping of a water clock. Finally, an old woman came to leave water in a footed skyphos. Nerissa drank it gratefully, though the wine bowl wasn't clean. The old woman introduced herself as Hesper. She said she was the master's cook. Housekeeper, cheese maker, and mutton butcher, too.

"I served his father until I got too old to bed. Then he gave me to Tragus. Who wasn't so particular. Despite my age, he screwed me each night for the next five years. When he began suffering cold sweats, I told him that I'd passed my time of menses. It's a well-known sin to bed a woman after this. By Zeus's colossal balls, he feared I'd curse him for his lust! I let Tragus think that I'd become a witch. It's served me well. He's too stupid to realize I would have enchanted myself far away if I really had the power."

"Tragus is our master's name?"

It hurt to speak, but Nerissa found that she could do it if she opened only the right side of her mouth.

"For short. The whole name's Tragophagus, son of Tyrus. But instead of Goat-eater, people hereabouts all call him Sheep-fucker. Just don't let him hear you say it. He'll smear you with shit, and stake you by the cesspit where the beetles feed. Or chain you in the river's shallows soon after a rain. You'll scream when you see the surge of water coming. You'll gasp for air while higher and higher waves wash over you, but nobody will come. Or maybe he'll just screw you to death. Once, I saw him do that to a ewe."

"Does he really copulate with sheep?"

"He makes no secret of it. He claims it churns the milk before it even hits the air. Maybe there's something to it. The cheese I make is considered the creamiest around."

"He really prefers sheep to girls?"

"I didn't say that. Until this spring, he's had no funds to buy a girl. He must have stolen someone's purse."

"So I'm to be his bed slave?"

"You'll never see his bed. But yes, you'll serve him every night. And every day, your duty is to tend the flock. Plus while you watch them, you must pick apart tarred ropes. Tragus buys old ones at the port, then sells oakum to the shipyard. They pound it into seams for caulking, so they're a steady customer. He'll expect you to produce a barrel every day. That's what he demanded of the last girl."

"The last girl? What happened to her?"

"She died. Poor thing -- Lydia was only ten. She couldn't fill the barrels, so he beat her every day."

“Tragus beat her to death?”

“No, he raped her. It was legal, since Lydia was an early starter. The law says a master may sleep with any female slave, so long as she's begun her bleeding. But Tragus got her with child, and she had no hips to speak of. As Lydia grew big, anyone could see there'd be no room to let the baby pass. But he wouldn't let me give her Cyrene parsley to end the pregnancy. He wanted a live heir. They say he killed his wife because she couldn't give him one.”

“Tragus had a wife?”

“Yes, before he let this place go all to shit. He inherited some money from his mother. It passed down through her line, so old Tyrus couldn't touch it. The wife was a young beauty, looked a lot like you, in fact. Except for your bloated jaw. That doesn't look good, girl. You should put something on it.”

“I will. Soon as I can find plantain and wild garlic for a salve. I've done it before, and it worked well. This time, I'll have lanolin from the sheep, too... You were saying about his wife?”

“I hear he treated Daphne well at first. I didn't live here then, but that's what people say. They also say he poisoned her with sap from an oleander that grows behind the ram's pen. No one could prove it, though, so the law left him alone. All I know is that Daphne finally quickened, then the next thing we hear, she's fallen ill and died. What I think is that Tragus had stopped sleeping with her months before. He'd gone back to his ewes, so he knew the baby was another man's. When a rage gets hold of Sheep-fucker's mind, there's no stopping him. Cross him and you're dead.”



Nerissa woke at the first pale crack of light before dawn split night's shell. She heard chickens scratching in the dirt outside. Cock's-crow hadn't sounded yet, but fishermen's children learn to be light sleepers. To catch outflowing tides, it's often necessary to rise before the sun. A race to best Apollo's chariot, Father used to say. She didn't really believe it pulled Helios across the sky, but still, the story might be true. In the last two years, she'd seen far stranger things.

She felt sad that Theoton hadn't come for her yet, but not terribly surprised. Her guess must have been correct. Lady Phyllis had waited until she knew her husband would be traveling abroad. Still, Nerissa thought it strange that this had come so soon after he'd offered to make her his courtesan. If Theoton knew that he was leaving Ithaca on an extended journey, why wouldn't

he have told her? But one way or the other, all she could do was bear up for as long as it took for him to find her. She must give Tragus no reason to abuse her further.

Chained to the post, Nerissa had to stretch to reach a heavily chipped basin sitting by the doorframe. Last night, Hesper had said her first duty every day would be to bring Tragus milk to break his fast. She hadn't explained how Nerissa was to do this while shackled in the byre. The best she could do was stretch her chain toward the nearest ewe, kneel by its side, and set to work filling the basin.

The large ewe was cooperative, eager to have her full udders relieved. She was a placid, doe-eyed creature. In need of a good washing, true, but very gentle. Nerissa doubted that Tragus had bothered to give them names, so she decided to call this one Geneia, after her lost sister.

She'd never milked before -- fishermen's families rarely kept cows or sheep or goats. They were often gone at sea for days or even weeks on end. But Andrastus had grown up on a farm before his widowed mother's death. Among the countless things they'd talked about while clinging to a mast from Father's ship, she remembered Andrastus describing how to coax milk out of udders. Though she still felt dizzy from Tragus's blow, it proved to be an easy chore. Even limited in motion by her bruised shoulders and the chain, she quickly found the rhythm.

After Geneia's milk filled half the basin, Nerissa coaxed two more ewes within reach. By the time she finished with them, it was full light outside. She stretched her chain as far as it would go, then peered through the doorframe. There was no sign from the house that either Tragus or Hesper had risen. She heard no noise -- she doubted Tragus was capable of silence while awake. He'd be bashing something, berating Hesper, or cursing his ill luck. Meanwhile, Nerissa saw no smoke curling from the cracked chimney. No light from an oil lamp or brazier shone through the windows. Tragus had probably gotten drunk last night. It wouldn't surprise her if he slept past noon.

Now what was she supposed to do? He'd beat her if she followed his example. No, he'd expect her to get the flock out to pasture. And fill a barrel with picked oakum, though she had no idea where Tragus kept the ropes. He'd beat her also if she didn't bring the milk up to the house before he woke. And milk the other ewes, so Hesper could make cheese.

How was she supposed to do any of this while chained to the post? It didn't matter. Tragus wouldn't consider it a good excuse. After collecting her from Praegon, he'd used the first mistake to beat her.

It must have started when I stared at him haggling with the fishmonger's daughter. He's stoked his rage ever since Lady Phyllis stymied him at the auction. Now that he owns me, the backhand to my jaw and the six strokes with his staff were only a foretaste of my life here in this

foul place. But Tragus wants to prove he's, no despot like his father. When he finds a satisfying cause for punishment, he seems the sort who'll thrash me within a dactylos of my life.

Hesper didn't shuffle across the yard until Helios had climbed high into His cloud-streaked vault. The old woman's careful step told Nerissa that she was unsteady. Last night, she'd likely guzzled whatever wine Tragus left unfinished when he passed out. Nerissa didn't call out loudly, for fear of irritating Hesper. She'd rarely seen Father drink, and Mother never, but Uncle Clemon had a great taste for barley beer. He was famed among the fleet for all-day hangovers. Many mornings, he'd roar if one of his sons so much as spoke above a whisper.

Nerissa waited until Hesper reached the ewe shed before she spoke.

"I've filled this basin for the Master's akratismos. But that was hours ago. Should I do it over?"

"Yes, he likes it warm with his wine bread."

"He soaks his bread in wine?"

"Right, to cure his aching head. I'll use this batch of milk for cheese."

"But it's been sitting out. Doesn't that make milk turn sour?"

"No, except in summer. The rest of the year, I leave it out to cool off slowly. Cheese tastes much better this way. Just pick out whatever flies have drowned in it."

"There aren't any. I haven't let them land."

"You needn't have bothered." Hesper eyed her with a cynical expression. "He'll beat you one way or the other."

"If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not give him additional excuses. Will you unchain me, so I can attend my duties?"

"Can't help you there. Sheep-fucker keeps the keys."

"And let me guess. You don't dare to ask for them."

"I haven't lived this long by being a fool. He may fear my 'witchcraft,' but he'll stake me in the cesspit if I wake him from a drunk."

Hesper took the milk and shuffled off. Nerissa couldn't replenish the Master's breakfast milk, because Hesper had neglected to leave an empty basin. The untended ewes bleated piteously, their udders bursting now. Nerissa suspected it would mean her life if she did them the favor of emptying their bags onto the filthy straw. So she waited another two hours in the byre's stench, surrounded by the ewes' nerve-shredding cries. It was like having twenty babies wailing, unable to help any of them.

Except for one. Nerissa eased a small ewe's pain by squirting its milk into her own mouth. She drank her fill. It was warm and rich and very good. At least, she wouldn't starve

here. She remembered the gruel they used to scoop directly into her hands aboard the Thallia. The slaves felt lucky if they got a clump of maggots, because it was the only way their meager portions provided enough energy.

She wondered if the small ewe was a first-time mother. It looked not much bigger than a yearling. She stroked its flank. This one was a little cleaner than the others and its wool was surprisingly soft. She wondered what had happened to its baby. Usually, male lambs were sold for meat. Female ones, once weaned, were separated from their mothers and allowed to live. From the forlorn look in the young ewe's eyes, Nerissa sensed its lamb had been a boy. She decided to name it Irene after her youngest aunt, who'd lost her first son, too.

It was two more hours before Hesper returned with the chipped basin. Nerissa filled it again, but still couldn't relieve most of the ewes. Then shortly before dusk, Tragus finally appeared.

He ignored the basin full of milk. The look across his sallow face told her that he had a sour stomach. But his eyes held steadily on her for once. In them, Nerissa saw he had a different hunger. Without a word, Tragus shoved her down. He thrust both hands under her stomach and pulled Nerissa to her knees. He raised her long chiton, grunted with satisfaction to see she wore no undergarment. At the household of Theoton, her habit had been to finish dressing after her morning wash and meal. Tragus spat on his hand, wet Nerissa with his fingers, then mounted her from behind.

The pain was so sharp, Nerissa gasped despite her determination to stay silent. Tragus was practicing the kind of perversion that men like Peiton did with boys. No one had ever told her there were deviants who'd do this to a girl. Even on the ship, no sailor had been such a demon that he'd subject her to this kind of degradation.

Nerissa felt moisture sliding down her legs. Since Tragus wasn't done and he'd only used a small amount of spit to start, she realized that it must be blood. But now she made no sound, refusing to cry out no matter how this hurt. She stayed as still as possible, though she'd learned aboard the Thallia that her assaulters finished quicker when she moved her hips.

It went on for so long, her knees began to add blood to the reddened straw. They hurt worse than her jaw. They were such agony, the pain throbbed more than where he raped her. Back there, Tragus felt enormous -- Nerissa thought that she'd be torn in two. But still she couldn't bring herself to press against him, even if the motion would have prompted him to finish.

Opening her eyes, she caught Geneia's steady gaze. The ewe told her this was bearable, even if Tragus did it every day. What did brute males matter? The only thing that counted was

survival. No matter how many days it took, Theoton would return, and then he'd punish Tragus.

When he'd finally finished, Tragus noticed the basin full of milk.

"What's this?" he demanded.

"Hesper told me that you like it for akratismos, Master. It's fresh. Still warm. Should I carry it up to the house for you?"

"It's far too much. Are you implying I'm a swine? You may as well have filled a trough."

"No, Master. Hesper didn't say how much. And the ewes' bags were very full. You can hear how they're still crying to be milked."

With a vicious kick, Tragus knocked the basin flying. Milk splattered over Nerissa, dripping down her hair and face and soiled robe.

"Now you've wasted half the day's profit. This will come out of your hide."

Tragus didn't have his staff, so he beat her with closed fists. He pounded Nerissa until she fell, then hauled her back by the chain still fastened to the shackle on her leg. He knocked her down again and again. She tried to count, but all of Father's numbers flew out of her head. Hesper had been right. He'd been looking for any excuse to thrash her thoroughly.

But Nerissa noticed something. Tragus beat her much harder when she landed with the good side of her face visible. It must be true that she resembled his dead wife. So she always tried to fall with her discolored, swollen profile facing Tragus.

Eventually, it worked. Tragus grew disgusted, knowing that he'd coupled with this ugly creature.

"I should stick to ewes," he muttered to himself like countless times before. "A filthy slave can never bring Daphne back to life."

He stamped out of the shed, then thought better of it and returned. After unlocking Nerissa's chain, he kicked the empty basin to her.

"Milk the black-face one," he ordered. "She gives the richest milk. Exactly one quarter full, mind you, not one drop more, then bring it to the house. After you leave it on the table, go find Hesper in the cheese shed. Ask for enough basins to finish milking, then get my flock up to the hillside. There'll be plenty of moonlight tonight, so they'll be safe. But you watch close. I'll make you regret it if any sheep are lost to wolves. And don't imagine you can fool me. You're not to bring them back until they've fed well. Then find Hesper again. She'll give you something to eat. I provide my slaves with deipnon, whether or not it comes at nightfall. Is all that understood?"

"Yes, Master."

By now, Nerissa had struggled to her feet. She faced him without anger. Though Olympus had ignored her while she'd lived in Polis, this was just another punishment. Tragus was no more responsible for it than a blown-down tree that crushes a sleeping family. She held a palm against one eye to keep it from leaking blood.

"Don't even dream about escape. Ithaca's a small island -- I'll search everywhere until I find you. You'll think this beating was a mother's soft caress."

Nerissa didn't answer, not sure if one was required, or if another word would start him up again. The last thing she could think of now was flight. She could hardly remain standing, let alone try to run.



The rapes and beatings continued every day. Theoton still didn't come. She heard no news from town. Tragus shackled Nerissa to the post each night. Entrusted with the key, Hesper came at daybreak to release her. Though Nerissa tended the sheep alone, there was no chance of escape. She was too sore to move at any speed greater than a hobble. What's more, Hesper had been ordered to come outside and scan the hillside every hour. This meant Nerissa couldn't get a large enough head start. The only opportunity would be if she somehow earned the privilege of sleeping unchained. Then the cover of darkness might give her enough time to reach Polis. If Theoton was still away, she'd have to sneak onto a ship.

That chance never came. Nerissa lost count of the days, but the moon had waxed and then eroded to a sliver. If she spent another month like this, Nerissa knew she'd waste away to nothing. She'd vanish like the white orb in the sky. But unlike far-winged Selene, she wouldn't begin anew. Death was a tempting thought. Which only gave Nerissa another reason to loathe herself. It meant she'd given up on Theoton. She couldn't let herself believe he knew of her condition and chose to leave her here. Besides, she'd vowed to stay alive and preserve her family's memory.

Late that night, Tragus staggered in, reeking of sour wine. Good. She hoped his pizzle would stay limp tonight. Maybe he'd leave her alone for once. Or maybe he'd fall down if he tried to beat her. Maybe he'd crack his head against the post.

Instead, Tragus sprawled over a sleeping ewe. His flagon of wine went flying and smashed against the wall. Tragus staggered to his feet, cursing drunkenly. He cornered the guilty ewe and gave it a savage thumping with his staff. When the ewe collapsed, Tragus added three vicious kicks in parting.

Still muttering about his wine, Tragus went off to search for more. He must have passed out in the house, because he never returned into the shed that night.

Far from feeling relief, Nerissa felt miserable about the ewe. Her respite from Tragus came from this helpless beast's suffering. It was Irene, the bereft little mother with the large, sad eyes. She lay on her side, panting in a rasp. She couldn't rise, or even pull her knees underneath, the way sheep do at rest.

Nerissa knelt beside her until dawn. But Irene's breathing only grew more ragged. And now there was a blood foam at her lips. Her face was clenched with pain. Her moans were soft, but full of terror. The ewe was dying. Nothing could save her, and yet, her passing would take hours, if not days.

There was only one thing to do. Nerissa hadn't been able to spare her little sister from the terrible unknown as Geneia swirled around that sucking monster called Charybdis. Or lessen brave Euredon's agonies by so much as a second. But here she had the power to end this creature's suffering. Nerissa took one of the shards from Tragus's smashed flagon. She tested its edge for sharpness on her finger. It drew blood at once, so she used it to slit Irene's throat.

The little ewe's eyes widened, then rapidly turned dull. Nerissa thought there might have been a moment when they'd shone with gratitude. She felt a peace she hadn't known since leaving Smyrna. But then Nerissa realized Tragus would blame her for the small ewe's loss. He'd give her the same treatment as Irene. Though Nerissa longed to rejoin her family, she didn't want to die on this muck-choked floor.

She dragged poor Irene to the darkest spot that she could reach. Then she piled straw over the carcass until there was enough to hide it. When Hesper came in to unchain Nerissa about an hour later, the old woman didn't notice. Nerissa helped her carry four large basins full of milk into the cheese shed. They didn't bring any to the house. They both knew Tragus wouldn't rise until late afternoon.

Nerissa headed out with the flock. From the hillside, she saw Hesper emerge into the farmyard. She waved, just like she always did. When Hesper returned inside, Nerissa climbed over the hilltop immediately. Since Tragus had left her alone last night, she could move a little quicker than her usual hobble. She'd swallowed her fill of milk, so she had a bit of energy. Though she ached as always, she forced herself into a trot. She needed to gain maximum distance from this place before Hesper came outside again.

The old woman will do whatever it takes to wake Tragus, Nerissa thought. She knows he'll punish her severely if I escape. And if he catches me, Tragus will do something far worse than he's ever done before.

Epsilon

Nerissa looped around the hill, then waded the greenish brook upstream from its ford. As she hurried on, Nerissa watched for any spot where she could hide. Before going to Polis, she needed to wait at least a month until her face recovered. If Theoton had returned to Ithaca, she didn't want him seeing her like this.

She knew she'd have to find a place near water and some source of food. But if she hid out in the countryside, Tragus wouldn't stop until he found her. Whether drunk or sober, his rage would make him kill her, but first he'd make her suffer terribly. She knew that she deserved it, and maybe this loathsome man was the Gods' instrument, but still, she could hear Father's wise voice urging that a mortal must do everything to stay alive.

She changed her mind about hiding and decided that her best chance lay in reaching Polis. She prayed that Theoton was there. He'd understand about her face. He'd seen it almost as badly damaged when she first entered his household. He was a patient, thoughtful man, and she trusted that he'd shelter her.

He'd wait until she healed, then honor his promise to make her his courtesan. He'd establish her where Lady Phyllis couldn't interfere. But if Theoton didn't want her now, she'd convince him to take her case before the council. She might have lasting scars, but their friendship had been genuine. She couldn't imagine him refusing to help. If only out of gratitude for her assistance at Evander's trial, he'd argue that she must be released from Tragus's bond. He'd tell the council that she was a freeborn woman of Hellene stock. Maybe even noble, if there was anything in what Smyrna's harbormaster once implied.

But as she crossed the brook, the bright sun showed Nerissa an ill omen. Her reflection in the greenish water looked far worse than she'd imagined. Even the good side of her face was heavily bruised. The side with the cracked jaw was badly swollen. Her eye was nearly closed, black blood crusted her thick lips, and her hair was densely matted. She took a precious minute

to scrub. Though the water felt like vinegar as it stung her lacerations, she couldn't bear looking like a wild ogress. Worse, no one would believe anything that such a monster claimed.

There was only so much Nerissa could do to improve her appearance. She cleaned and coiled her hair, but her chiton was still a rag. Her face looked only marginally better. And as she said a prayer to Athena the Wise, the Pure, the Never-wearying, the one Olympian who'd ever shown her favor, Nerissa couldn't keep her words from slurring. Her jaw, two broken teeth, and swollen tongue made it impossible to speak correctly. How could she ask Theoton to bring such a wreck before the council? Even if he agreed, its members would mock the garbled words she spoke. They'd look at her and see a girl whose wits had flown. If she couldn't get onto some ship unseen, Nerissa knew no one would help her.

But still, she had to try. It was disloyal to a man as principled as Theoton to believe he wouldn't help. There had to be some reason why he hadn't come for her, or told her that he'd be away for months. Nerissa straightened up as best she could, then hurried toward Polis. Had Father ever given up? Had valiant Andrastus? She saw an oxcart coming toward her. It made dust billow on the lane. She walked at a brisk pace, as if her master had sent her on an errand, warned her she'd be beaten even harder if she dawdled.

Nerissa kept her eyes averted as the oxcart passed. But she noticed that its driver gave her a long, suspicious stare. She recognized him as the fat man who'd shouted with a Stentorian voice at the trial. He'd know who she was. He'd wonder what she was doing out here in the countryside. Nerissa could do nothing but walk on. The fat man didn't stop her. He didn't say a word. He must have heard that she'd been sold, and wanted nothing to do with Tragus. If asked later, he'd just pretend that he never saw her on the lane. Tragus's unpopularity was one bit of luck, at least.

She passed no one else before coming into town. She hurried to the neighborhood of large homes where she used to work. She knew its turns precisely from her many visits to the natatorium. If she followed this sloping street of thick stone walls, she'd come to the cypress shaded one where Theoton lived.

Down at its end, Nerissa saw a well dressed man. His back was turned, but her pulse lurched at his black hair, curling at its tips, and his muscular physique. She knew that noble bearing, too. Not to mention that unique cape trimmed in long, black fur.

As she caught up across the street, Nerissa confirmed that it was Theoton walking with his wife. Three paces behind them, the Scythian beauty Dzunga carried two baskets. Nerissa was close enough to see that one contained produce, the other meat. The last they'd met, Dzunga had warned her not to flirt with Aetes. She'd boasted of her ugly master's gifts. And now it

seemed he'd sold her to Theoton.

Nerissa wondered what Dzunga had done to lose her master's favor. Maybe her sharp tongue had displeased Aetes. But why sell Dzunga to his rival? Most of all, Nerissa wondered why Lady Phyllis would tolerate such a lusty and attractive slave girl in her home. No doubt, Dzunga would follow her fortunate move into this household by a move into Theoton's bed.

He must have bought her with that talent of silver he'd once offered Stenarch for Rinea's rescue. Instead of reclaiming me from Tragus, he bought Dzunga instead. How long will it be until Lady Phyllis learns of this? Or is it possible that she approves?

Now that she could see them from the side, Nerissa noticed something very different about Dzunga. Instead of finery, she wore a plain woolen chiton now. Her eyes looked down dully at the street. She seemed to have lost all interest in life. And her step was nothing like before. She used to swing her hips with pride. Now she waddled like a duck, as if it gave her pain to let her thighs brush past each other.

Nerissa guessed the cause at once. She'd overheard Praegon threaten Dora with such a thing. Female slaves as well as male could be sterilized for sexual activity. From what she gathered, it wasn't even considered a punishment. Owners simply didn't want their slaves to breed. Either Praegon had caught Dzunga at it with another slave, or Lady Phyllis had insisted that she must be cut before Theoton could have her. Come to think of it, Thea once mentioned that Theoton's courtesan in town was beautiful, but barren. Poor girl, she'd said, but lucky for her, too.

And now Nerissa realized that Lady Phyllis didn't care if Theoton bedded slave girls. Her only concern was that one of them would give him a son. She feared that Vasy would die before his father. Then Theoton would name a different heir. And Lady Phyllis would lose everything.

Before Nerissa could gather her courage to approach Theoton, Lady Phyllis spotted her. She stopped walking and stared with narrow eyes. Nerissa felt surprised that the Mistress had recognized her in this state.

I'm filthy, dressed in rags, my face no better than the Gorgon that Tragus called me on the slave trader's platform.

Then Theoton noticed where his wife was staring. Behind her back, he made slight, but urgent signals for Nerissa to turn and leave at once. She wondered if he'd ever left Ithaca at all. Or if he'd even bothered to learn where Lady Phyllis sent her. There was no chance he'd tried to buy her back. A man as dissipated as Tragus would have jumped at any profit. Let alone a talent of silver.

Hideous or not, Nerissa had no choice. Theoton may have turned against her, he may have forgotten her entirely, but he still considered himself a moral man. Before Tragus reached Polis, she must secure Theoton's help. She crossed the street toward them. Theoton waved her off, his motions large and angry now, his face turned very hard. He stepped in front of Lady Phyllis, as if to protect her.

"I'll let no thieving slave girls near my wife!" he shouted. "Come one step closer and I'll beat you, myself."

Lady Phyllis must have told him that I stole something. But he wouldn't believe that, would he? And even if he had, would it really be enough to change his feelings for me?

As he turned his wife away with a protective arm around her shoulders, Theoton looked back at Nerissa. His expression was completely different. There was no courage on his broad face now. And certainly not anger. Instead, Nerissa saw a plea to walk on and say nothing. It said, "If my wife learns the truth about us, she'll destroy me."

This means that she controls him, after all. Theoton knew exactly what happened to me and didn't do a thing about it. No matter what hold Lady Phyllis has on him, could he really be such a self-serving coward? We genuinely admired each other. What threat did Lady Phyllis give that stopped him from retrieving me?

Nerissa's last few hopes collapsed. She had no friends on this island.

Well, there's Berenice, she realized. But even if I knew who bought her, how could Berenice persuade her master to help? There hasn't been enough time for her to learn much Ionian. And it wouldn't do any good for me to translate. No one will want to risk Lady Phyllis's malice to aid an ugly slave girl.

No, her only chance was to find a merchant ship about to leave the port. Maybe she could hide herself aboard. Maybe her luck would turn and it would be a pentecontor. With fifty oars, it would be fast. Even a triantacontor with thirty oars would do.

Leaving the wealthy neighborhood and hurrying as best she could, Nerissa made it to the port unchallenged. There were two vessels at the pier, a long-ship that sailors were refitting, and a sailing vessel making ready to depart.

Its two masts each had lateen sails. From its shallow draft, Nerissa knew it was a coastal freighter. And this was even better than a long ship. Built to be maneuverable in narrow channels, it would have far fewer crewmen. Without galley slaves and overseers, she might be able to make her way unnoticed into the hold.

Peering around the corner of a warehouse, Nerissa watched for a chance to slip aboard.

They were loading on the last few crates. The freighter's captain was shouting orders to seamen in the rigging.

Nerissa stepped out on the pier, hoping to lift one of the smaller crates onto her shoulder. If she could get up the gangway, it would shield her face from view. Her slender form might be mistaken for a boy's. And her ragged clothes could certainly belong to a dock slave.

After she took her crate into the hold, she'd find some nook where she could hide. But Nerissa didn't get the chance. The captain was too vigilant. He glared straight at her from the leeward rail before she could attempt her ruse. He marched down the gangway, his long legs covering it in three great strides. Jumping before he reached the end, he landed on the pier, then came at her. He shouted in Ionian, saying how he handled thieves by cutting off their hands.

Nerissa raised her head, attempted a smile. She raised her chiton's skirt as well. Though mottled with bruises, her legs still were very shapely. Maybe the captain would agree to let her serve as a galley wench. These Ionians didn't seem to think that women doomed a voyage to ill luck. While living in Polis, she'd learned it wasn't unusual for young women to assist the cook or serve the officers. Which meant she'd serve their bed needs, too. After what she'd already suffered, the prospect hardly bothered Nerissa.

But it was no good. Seeing her close up, the captain only scowled.

"Please, sir," she said, setting down the crate. "You'll find me very grateful. I know that I'm not pretty any more, but in the dark, I'm sure that I can please you."

He only laughed and waved her off. He turned on his heel, marched back on board, then shouted at a group of idling slaves to get the last crates sorted. Within ten minutes, the ship had sailed.

Nerissa retreated behind the warehouse. She felt lucky that the captain hadn't come after her. With none too friendly an expression, the dock foreman watched Nerissa leave. He'd been close enough to hear her offer to the captain. He probably thought she was a thief and harlot, too. She moved away as fast as possible, expecting he'd shout for the town watch to arrest her.

But no cry came and no one chased her. Come to think of it, she'd never seen an armed patrol in Polis. Ithaca must be a very civilized place, she thought, free from brigands or the threat of warfare.

She went up the wide road leading to the agora, the same climb she'd made chained two months ago. As she came into the square, Nerissa saw a man of noble bearing. His chlamys was a beautiful, rich purple. Though it was the product of a barrel full of rotting spiny murexes, Father said this dye was worth its weight in gold. The fibula that bound the old man's mantle also displayed his wealth, sparkling with wine-red glints. She'd guess the rubies on this brooch

were worth more than he'd paid for all his slaves.

The elder's hair was white, but his back erect. Though he must be at least forty years of age, his eyes were sharp with concentration. His face was stern, his attendants many. She didn't know him, but she'd seen him with Telander the day of the slave auction. A man this rich must be on the council. She didn't know which faction, but if he was Telander's friend, maybe he would save her.

"My lord, I call on you for help," Nerissa said in a loud voice, though it hurt her swollen lips and tongue. Her jaw's ache had become so familiar, it was almost like she couldn't feel it any more. "I've been sorely abused -- may I trouble you with my situation?"

"Be off!" His face pinched into an angry grimace. "How dare a filthy leper speak to me?"

"I'm not diseased, merely bloodied by a violent, dangerous man called Tragus." She knew that Tragus was widely disliked by the Ithacans. She'd seen the looks of distaste he'd inspired at the auction. And during her near month at his farm, not a single person had visited. So Tragus was considered a pariah. Surely he'd broken some law in the way he treated her. If not her, then the sheep. "If you're one of the council members as your lofty appearance suggests, isn't it your duty to hear me out? Crimes have been committed against me and the dignity of Ithaca."

At a curl of the elder's hand, two guardsmen ran at Nerissa with their pikes extended. She retreated as briskly as her injuries allowed. She collided with a woman selling stoppered phials of perfume from a handcart. The woman cursed at her, but Nerissa couldn't stop to help pick up the scattered wares. The elder snapped his fingers with impatience, so his escort didn't pursue. The noise drew stares, however. Nerissa left the square immediately.

In a few minutes, she reached a meaner quarter on the edge of town. It was largely deserted now that the heat of day was rising, except for dogs that bared their teeth. One charged at her, its curling tail held high above the ridgeline of its back. Nerissa ran again, her ribs aching, every breath producing a sharp pain in her side.

Turning the corner, she almost collided with a lanky man. When she dodged to avoid him, Nerissa tripped over the feet of an aged slave. The slave, though stooped and gaunt, extended an arm to help her up. He grunted with the effort, then his much-creased face erupted in a spate of wheezing.

His master stared at Nerissa the whole time without blinking. If this behavior wasn't odd enough, the solemn man showed no sign of distaste at her unsightliness. He was of middle years, perhaps as much as thirty. His chestnut curls were held back by a thin leather band. His beard

was of a moderate length, and though it was a rich brown, too, early flecks of silver were laced like veins of precious ore. His clothing was of fine material, very clean but unadorned. His presence in this shabby quarter seemed out of place.

His broad brow reminded Nerissa of Father's most prominent feature. Though he hadn't spoken, there was something else about this stern, aristocratic face that suggested deep intelligence. It wasn't his eyes, because they were the strangest that Nerissa had ever seen. They never blinked, but never focused on her, either.

"What's happening?" the tall man asked his slave. "Who knocked you down?"

"No one, sir. It was the other way around. A girl ran into me and tripped. I've helped her up, but she looks hurt. Battered around the face, her chiton torn, her arms and legs all bruised."

"That was from before," explained Nerissa. "Tragus gave me those injuries."

"What's the matter with your voice?" asked the man. His strange, pale eyes engulfed her. They seemed a place to drown. "I understood 'Tragus,' but little else."

"My lips are swollen, my tongue's cut, and I have broken teeth." Nerissa didn't mention that she had to clench them to minimize the pain from her cracked jaw. Speaking only through the right side of her mouth, she enunciated carefully. "I was captured into slavery, though I'm a freeborn citizen of Smyrna. Lady Phyllis bought me, then about a month ago, I was sold to Tragus. He's treated me with every cruelty you can imagine. If you're the man of principle you appear, I appeal to you for justice."

"You claim that you're of civilized descent? What does she look like, Philemon?"

Now Nerissa understood why his eyes looked so unworldly. And why he didn't bridle at her appearance, like so many others. This man was blind. The old slave was his guide.

"She's a maiden of about twelve years."

"I'm fifteen, sir," Nerissa said.

"Twelve or fifteen -- it's a negligible difference when you reach my years," said Philemon. "At any rate, I'd judge her to be truthful about her stock. She has a fair complexion and her eyes are light, the kind of smoky blue that one sees in a summer sky. Though hardly well coiffed at the moment, her hair is fine, the color of a flaxen field. I'd say her people came from the north, Thessaly perhaps, before becoming colonists in Asia Minor. Her lips, though bruised, remind me of the marble image of Aphrodite I once saw in Korinthos. Her graceful neck and classic profile are also like the Goddess if one looks from the right. But on the left side of her face, her eye is nearly shut and her jaw looks like it might be broken."

"That happened when Tragus struck me," said Nerissa. "I think he finished cracking an

injury I suffered on the slave ship. Its captain grew enraged when I wouldn't agree to be his bedmate."

"So now you're sold to Tragus," said the blind man. "It's his bed where you must serve."

"But can't you help me, lord?"

"Your master's foul, no one would dispute this, but I don't see what sort of succor you expect from me. I'm a poet, not an arbiter."

Now she recognized his voice. She'd thought it sounded familiar. This was the man she'd heard reciting in the courtyard after Lady Phyllis feasted with her friends. He was every bit as handsome as she'd imagined, but in a very different way. For one thing, he was a decade older than his ringing voice suggested, a man full in his prime.

"There's no law governing what's done to me? Tragus beats me daily without cause. He rapes me every night."

"No, nothing can be done. Unless you have proof of your citizenship. It's true we've never warred on Smyrna. And we don't allow victims of piracy to be sold at our slave market. If you have documents attesting your free birth at Smyrna, the council might rescind your bondage. Provided you've committed no crime against our laws, that is."

"I'm no criminal, I assure you. And I'm certain my birth status was recorded in our city annals. I remember my parents doing this on the day of both my little sister's and baby brother's birth feast. But proof would be impossible without returning to Smyrna. Who carries such a document with them?"

"In that case, I suggest you return to Tragus immediately. If I know that tosspot, he'll still be in a drunken sleep. He won't even realize you ran off."

"I can't go back. He beat a sheep nearly to death last night. I slit its throat to spare it further misery. In this heat, Tragus will soon discover where I hid the body. He'll make me suffer for it. He'll think of something even worse than what he's done already."

"Yes, I sympathize, but what would you have me do? Promise Tragus I'll thrash him if he touches you again? Maybe in a different life, without this..." The blind man flapped his long-fingered hand in the direction of his eyes. "It would please me to stomp that lout into the ground, but I can't even walk a straight lane unaided."

"Then let me be your eyes." Nerissa jumped on the opening immediately. "I imagine that good Philemon has given you many faithful years of service. My mother taught me never to speak out of place, but she'd also say he's earned the rest."

"Rest? That old reprobate takes far too much rest already. Most mornings, you wouldn't believe what I go through to rouse him from his bed. In any other household, it's the slaves who

get up first. But then, it's well known I'm a model of tolerance and generosity."

"I'm sure you are. I can read it in your kindly face... I'm also sure that Philemon doesn't like to worry you with his troubles, but you should know his feet look sore with gout. Let him stay in with domestic duties while I accompany you whenever you go out."

"Are you suggesting that I buy you?"

"Yes, lord. I promise that I'll please you well. I can do all of your errands. Though I'm injured now, I'll recover fast. I have great energy, you'll see. I'm resourceful and dependable."

"That may be so, but it's impossible. My companion not only serves as guide, but also as my scribe."

Nerissa noticed that he used the term *akalouthos*, literally meaning "follower" in Ionian, rather than *doulos* that meant "slave."

"I know about Philemon's gout," the blind man continued, feeling if not seeing Nerissa's frown. "Don't imagine he's ever resisted an opportunity to complain. He tells me that he looks as bent as the gnarled oak that Philemon's namesake became. He says I should provide him with a wife to twine against."

"And it needn't be some crone turned into a linden," Philemon added with a raspy laugh.

"Yes, very amusing. You do know that you've made this jest a dozen times before?" Homer turned back to Nerissa. "Look, I realize that he's old, but even if I were to relieve Philemon from outside duties, I need an educated person. I'm in the habit of composing new verse as I walk. I need someone who can write down my words. Just as often, I require Philemon to read back what he's recorded earlier."

"But lord," Nerissa said. "I *can* read and write."

"Don't be ridiculous. I may be blind, but I'm no fool."

"I offer no deception. I know that literacy is unusual in a girl, but my father Asclemeleon was a very educated man. He made sure all his children learned the classics."

"Is that so?" The poet's voice was full of skepticism. "Then recite something for me."

"Sing now of the tribe of women, sweet-voiced Olympian Muses, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus: those women who were the noblest, and slept with Gods."

"Ah, so you know Hesiod? Do you mock me with this choice?"

"No, of course not, lord."

"Don't tell me you were unaware that lovers of epic verse consider us great rivals."

"I didn't know that, lord." She didn't even know this blind man's name. "But *The Catalogue of Women* was one of my father's most cherished scrolls. He went to extraordinary lengths to secure a copy. They say that Hesiod comes from Boeotia -- it's where my ancestors

came from, too.”

“No doubt fleeing the stupidity of Boetian life.”

“What a thing to say!”

“That is its widespread reputation, after all. Probably stemming from the dullness of Hesiod's verse.”

“Father says our people left because the land was very poor. It was, ‘...a cursed place, cruel in winter, hard in summer, never pleasant,’ as my famed countryman has written.”

“All right, it's only Hesiod, but I'll grant you have a good memory for verse. But when I'm ready to take on a new scribe, I'll purchase a scholar. I've never known a female who reads well enough to do it.”

“We could set her a test,” said Philemon. “What if I get out your new work, sir? You could ask her to read from the first page.”

“What purpose would that serve? You know very well that I'm-”

“Please, lord, I'd love to know your verse,” said Nerissa. She suspected that he was susceptible to flattery. “From the timbre of your voice alone, I sense a wondrous skill.”

“Very well,” the poet said. He waved his hand at Philemon. “This should be amusing.”

Philemon handed a sheet of parchment to Nerissa. She took a deep breath to compose herself, ran her swollen tongue over her cut lips, then carefully began to read:

*“The man for wisdom's various arts renowned,
Long exercised in woes, O Muse! resound;
Who, when his arms had wrought the destined fall
Of sacred Troy, and razed her heaven-guided wall,
Wandering from clime to clime, observant strayed,
Their manners noted, and their states surveyed,
On stormy seas countless travails he bore,
Safe with his friends to gain his natal shore:
Vain toils! their impious folly dared to prey
On herds devoted to the god of day;
The god vindictive doomed them never more
(Ah, men unblest!) to touch that natal shore.
Oh, snatch some portion of these acts from fate,
Immortal Muse! and to our world relate.”*

When she'd finished, Nerissa waited motionless. As much from awe at these resounding lines as worry for her fate. There was no need to flatter him, it seemed. Indeed, these words

were touched with divine inspiration. She knew she'd read them well, because she felt as if their warm ambrosia now flowed through her veins.

After several seconds passed in silence, she looked up at the poet. She hoped that he could feel her homage. But he said nothing in return. He only gazed away, as if toward a distant line of sun-gilt hills. In actuality, he faced the broken wall of a hovel. Someone had filled the largest cleft in its mud bricks with shards of pottery. The upper half of a broken lamp wedged them in, its charred wick still present. But the poet only stared with reverence at some scene of majesty and power he'd projected from deep inside his mind.

Perhaps a word of praise was too much to expect, but he didn't even let his brooding lips turn up. Was he insulted that she'd failed to find some hidden rhythm? Or had she misread a word? Philemon's scrawl was none too steady. Nerissa glanced at his fingers. Yes -- as she'd suspected, their twisted shape spoke of painful rheumatism. But still, the way his master's words sang out, how could any of them be wrong?

"A learned man must admit his errors," said the poet finally. "I was wrong. An odd decision, but your father did teach you recitation."

"He wanted me to know the beauty of great art. And I found your verse magnificent. I'm honored that you let me share it, lord. Did I read well enough that I might see more?"

"It was too slow."

"Sir, she really has been beaten about the face most sorely," said Philemon.

"Considering the injuries to her mouth and jaw, shouldn't we commend the meticulous way she read?"

"It isn't just the pace that's deficient. Or her accent."

"I believe it's the classic form of Ionian, once spoken by the colonists who founded Smyrna. Before their language became Ionic, that is. Which is odd, when you think about it. That the distant colony of Ionia should have such a similar name as our Ionian Sea. Of course, we spell it with an omicron, whereas Ionia in Asia Minor has an omega. Which means there is a different stress."

"By the brimming gorge of Bacchus, what are you babbling about?"

"Sorry, sir. My point is that this bright young lady speaks Ionian better than most of those born here."

"Don't try my tolerance, old man. I make allowance for your age and long service, but you presume too much."

"Yes, sir. I'm very sorry that my opinion was unwelcome."

"It isn't that at all! Everyone knows I've never refused to consider opposing argument."

It's that her reading lacked the dignity I need. This is why women can never become scholars." He turned toward Nerissa. "I'm sorry, but you have no feeling for these affairs of men, for war and government and intrigue."

"My mother would have agreed with you. She was always adamant that women mustn't intrude themselves into a man's concerns. Still, I'd give anything to know the rest of your poem. In Smyrna, they tell tales of ancient Troy, you know. The ruins aren't far away. They're at the northern tip of our gulf, while Smyrna anchors the southern end. My father once saw Troy when he was young. He told us that the blocks used for its walls were so massive, only the immortals could have placed them. And only an immortal power could have torn them down in the great war five centuries ago."

"That reminds me, Philemon. Change my last line from 'Immortal' to 'Celestial' when I address the Muse. Now that I hear it in a voice more distant from the grave, 'Immortal' lacks the ring of truth."

"Yes, sir," said Philemon. "Er, young lady, could you please hand that back?"

Reluctantly, Nerissa returned the sheet of parchment. Nothing would convince this haughty poet that she'd make a fit scribe. In truth, she had more experience of war and peril than even the most adventurous of men could expect to gather in a lifetime. Her rare history mattered not at all, unfortunately. The fact that she'd been born female negated every argument that she could make.

"Sir, I've changed the line," said Philemon. "An excellent choice to join your Winged Words. 'Celestial' meets the quality of *Epea Pteroenta*, as you wrote in the Iliad. It still scans beautifully, and far better describes the Muse, I think."

"Yes -- 'Celestial Muse, and to our world relate.' Now the line is perfect... Get out the second verse. Let's hear how this flows into it. Maybe this will help me fix the problem."

"Is it about the cattle that men stole from Zeus?" asked Nerissa. "In Smyrna, our poets tell this story, too. Is this crime why your hero will be doomed?"

"Are you still here? I thought I made it clear, you should return to Tragus before he wakes. There's nothing I can do."

"But, lord. If you're having some difficulty with your poem, maybe the version told in Smyrna can be of help."

"The theft of Zeus's cattle happened on Thrinacia. And that's another thing. My scribe cannot be ignorant of geography. Thrinacia is nowhere near Smyrna."

"Yes, lord, I know where it is. I remember seeing it on one of Father's charts. But what I meant is I know things from personal experience that never have been told before."

"You're just a girl. What could you know of it?"

"My family suffered many trials before I was taken as a slave. If I could just tell you my story..."

"Impossible. It would only divert me from my work. These days, its hard enough to hear the Muse, without the chatter of a girl."

A groan from Philemon interrupted them. Glancing over, Nerissa saw he was having trouble finding the verse his master had requested. As Philemon's hand came out of his satchel, his fingers looked like the talons of a battle-scarred sea eagle as they failed to hang onto a fish.

"Here, sir, let me get that for you," Nerissa said to Philemon. Then she turned and added to the poet, "His hands look very swollen, lord. Not to mention, it obviously pains his feet a great deal to tramp alongside you. I know it's not my place to say, but if you value Philemon, you should really send him home to lie down."

"Is this true, old man? No one can say that I mistreat my retainers. Are you in need of rest?"

"Well, sir, I won't lie. My hands are aching. There's a storm coming tonight. And my feet are about to burst my sandals' straps. Every step's an agony."

"You should have said so before we set out. I need to fix the second verse. Now what am I supposed to do? Waste an entire day? You know I only do my best work when I walk. If you're right about the storm, tomorrow may be foul weather, too."

"I can be your guide today," Nerissa said. "I'll write down your every word exactly. Please believe me, I can do it."

"You again? The sooner you set off for your master's farm, the less chance there'll be of him discovering your absence."

"Sir, maybe you could walk her back?" said Philemon. "Didn't you once mention Tragus is related on your mother's side."

"Yes, my second cousin once removed. Or thereabouts."

"Then he owes you a kinsman's duty to be civil. You can speak with him about the responsibility of a master to protect his slaves from harm. It's equally great, is it not, as the duty toward guests? You described this with such stirring fervor yesterday, I'm certain you'll have little trouble convincing Tragus. He'll have to hear you out, at least."

"And I suppose you wish to be excused from *your* duties while I attend this matter?"

"If you don't mind, sir. I really could use a few hours to put up my feet."

"All right, if you must." The poet exhaled heavily, his broad brow deeply creased. "I'll speak to that lout Tragus. You, girl, lead me on. It isn't necessary to take my arm. Just walk

ahead -- your footsteps' noise will be my guide."

"Yes, lord. And how do you prefer that I address you?"

"I'm called Homeros, but you needn't--"

"*Homeros*, the word that means blind in Ionian? Have you been blind since birth?"

"What concern of yours is that? Did your father not drill prudence into you along with Hesiod's dreary ethics?"

"I only meant--"

"I know what you meant! What sort of parents would give that name to an infant? If they didn't set me out on some lonely mountaintop, that is, a feast for wolves and eagles... The fact is, Homeros is an appellation given to me later."

Not by friends, judging from the grimace that curled briefly on his lips. What his original name might be, the poet didn't offer.

"What I started to say is that you needn't speak to me at all. Despite this disturbance to my morning's work, I still hope to put the time to useful thought."

"Yes, lord. I'm sorry that I interrupted."

"Never mind. I'm well acquainted with the inability of young women to hold their tongues. If you must speak, you're old enough to know the proper form to call your betters."

"Very sorry, but I haven't been here long. Tragus insisted that I call him 'Master.' And I addressed my first owners as lord and lady."

"That won't be necessary."

"He means that friends and kinsmen call him by the short form Homer," explained Philemon. Despite his physical discomforts, there was an impish expression on his weathered face. "But in the presence of this wise descendent of heroic Telemachus, we lowly creatures are privileged to call him 'sir.'"

"Quite so," said Homer, ignoring Philemon's familiarity. He'd long since despaired of controlling his servant's irreverent tongue. "And you, old man, head directly home. No stopping at the tavern. You'll need to take as much rest as you can. This errand shouldn't waste more than two hours. I'll have Tragus lend me Hesper to lead the way back. I'll expect you to walk with me this afternoon, whether dark clouds steal the light or no. You may bring a lantern if you must, but mind you don't waste oil until it's really necessary. We'll work until the heavens drop great torrents on our heads."

Zeta

“I trust you know the way back to your master’s farm?” asked Homer after Philemon limped away.

“I’m sure I could retrace my steps, but I came through the port and market square.”

“There’s a shorter route. Follow this lane out of Polis, then turn right at the first crossroads. A short way down it, there’s a vineyard guarded by a vicious dog. His chain is long, so mind you keep to the road’s far side.”

“Yes, sir,” said Nerissa as she set off.

She walked slowly, but even if she dragged this out at the pace of gnarled Philemon, she had at most an hour to change Homer’s mind. She knew it wouldn’t serve to belabor him with complaints about Tragus or the injustice of her capture as a slave. But Nerissa sensed he might become enticed by the story of her travels. He was a poet, after all. What’s more, Homer’s verse seemed to involve the return voyage of some ill-fated hero following the sack of Troy.

“Sir, I’ve been thinking about your poem,” she tried. “It’s an odd thing, but my family’s troubles started in the same way as your hero’s. With the slaughter of a cow, that is.”

“That isn’t where I start at all. There’s much to tell during the hero’s absence from Ithaca. Of his faithful wife and of her suitors. Of his distraught son and of the gods’ intrigues. The disaster on Thrinacia will happen somewhere in the middle.”

“Really, sir? Did I misunderstand your opening verse? I thought that Zeus becomes enraged when men butcher his cattle. Wouldn’t it make sense for all subsequent misfortune to arise from this? That’s how it was with my family, at least.”

“Your people feasted on the cattle of the Sun?”

“No, sir. Only one old bullock died, and we didn’t even get to eat him. What’s more, he wasn’t part of Zeus’s herd, and even less our mortal king’s.”

“What’s your king got to do with it?”

“Well, it was this way, sir.”

Nerissa dropped back a step, to walk beside him as she told her story. She wanted to watch Homer's face. This way, she'd notice immediately if his interest began to flag. So many things had happened to her and her kinfolk, she could easily leap to the next calamity. She forced her swollen tongue into the Ionian rhythms Homer preferred as she began to speak:

The kingdom of Smyrna long was rich and powerful. Great prosperity always flowed to us because of our location. For centuries, we'd anchored the trade route between Anatolia and the Aegean. But in recent years, our Lydian enemies had made deep inroads into our eastern reaches. To bolster Smyrna's army, our king was forced to raise the levies every year. Both in terms of men and taxes.

That's how my uncle Clemon lost two sons. And my adopted brother Andrastus lost his family's farm, after his father died defending Smyrna's borders. Baron Iadros, who ruled our region along the Meles River, seized many farms for unpaid taxes. He didn't care if people starved or had no roof above their heads. That widows and their children had to sleep out in a ditch. That many caught their deaths of cold and wet. That others were enslaved because of debt. Now an orphan, Andrastus sought work among the herring fleet -- that's when Father took him in.

We managed well enough for the next year, selling half our catch on Lesvos to dodge the Baron's tax collectors. But then a terrible drought struck. At the same time, a mysterious sickness tore through the schools of herring. The sea was red with it, and nothing could be caught. We had no fish to eat, while on the land, the drought caused grain prices to soar. Merchants brought in stocks from Cyrenaica and Egypt, but only the rich could afford to eat bread now.

There was nobody to ask for help. Everyone we knew was gripped by poverty. Many turned to poaching in the Baron's forest. But Father forbade my brothers to do this. “We aren't thieves, he said. Instead, he took my eldest brothers Kestides and Nikos to try the waters far south from Smyrna. He wouldn't let us younger children or my mother come. He knew there might be clashes with local fishermen once he left our territory.

But Father gave us all of his remaining money. And told my middle brother Euredon to guard the house well with his bow. Which might serve to drive off roving thieves, the desperate sort who'd begun to plague our land, but would have little chance against the king's press gangs. Still, Euredon was only fourteen, and shorter than I am now. Father had to hope they wouldn't come to take him for the wars.

Mother hoarded our coins carefully. She traded many of her possessions for the onions and brined olives still available. She showed us where to search for wild figs and mushrooms. But as the drought grew worse, there simply was no food to be found. My baby brother and little sister began to look very pinched. Mother sold our furniture, her clothes and ornaments and house wares, then finally her last possession of any value. It was a golden arm band carved with the story of Persephone and the pomegranate seeds. I believe it came down through her foremothers, belonging to one of the original settlers from Colophon.

Sadly, conditions had grown so bad, the arm band only bought one day of food. Worse, the only buyer Mother could find was the baron's nephew Laedron, a rich merchant of the port. Though Euredon, Andrastus, and I took half shares at our one meal of the day, and Mother none at all, the little ones still cried themselves to sleep with hunger.

Euredon resolved to risk a hunting expedition in the Baron's forest. He didn't tell Mother, because she'd only remind him of Father's admonition. Any protest would result in a sharp "Euphemeite!" from her. As if we were a noisy crowd that needed to be hushed before a drama could begin. But Euredon confided what he planned to Andrastus and me.

"If something happens, go to the Temple of Athena," he said. "Remember, Father pointed it out the last time we were inside Smyrna?"

"The one with great white columns near the postern gate?" I asked.

"Yes, that's the place. Go there and tell Athena what's happened to me. She'll listen to your prayer, Nerissa. She never shirks a battle. If I don't return, I know that She'll protect our family."

"What do you mean, 'if you don't return?' Do you expect a stag to gore you?"

I knew my brother was a fine shot with his bow. I'd often watched him target the flying fish that leaped around our boat when Father worked the seas off Chios. Euredon always struck dead center. I saw little risk of an injured stag running him down.

"Don't you know? Many have been hanged for poaching. Their rotting corpses are left to dangle at the crossroads. It's by the order of Baron Iadros."

"And the king allows this?"

"In these times of war, the king supports harsh measures. It ensures his army's ranks are filled. This hunger makes men eager to fight in the wars. The army is the only place that still has food."

"Maybe we should enlist," said Andrastus.

Nothing ever seemed to scare him, though he had less than two years on my scant twelve.

"No," said Euredon. "How would we send food home? My way's better. When I was

mushroom hunting last time, I saw a large stag's tracks. It was in a remote part of the forest. Baron Iadros will never know."

"But your father's right. We aren't thieves."

"This isn't theft. What right does the Baron have to make us starve? Is he some God to claim that every plethron of land belongs to him, and all the wild creatures?"

"But there is one creature that still belongs to us," said Andrastus. "Iadros has no say in what I do with it."

"What creature do you mean?"

"The bullock they seized along with my family's farm. He shouldn't have gone for taxes, because he was my own possession. My father gave me Atlas when I turned ten. To mark my entrance into manhood."

"You're right. The bullock belongs to you. Iadros can't say that you owe taxes, too."

"Exactly. Let's get Atlas."

"How do you know they haven't eaten him already?"

"He's still alive and I know where he's at. Iadros's men took Atlas to Laedron's field. He's the Baron's nephew, you know. I've been there at night to visit Atlas."

"Laedron's dogs didn't bark at you?"

"They're greyhounds. The ones that always win the races at the summer festival. Laedron lets them sleep inside."

"Good. Then we should have no trouble."

They rose well before the dawn and left our house so silently, Mother never stirred. The night before, Euredon had refused to let me come. He ignored my arguments that we could carry home more meat. I said two extra hands were needed, because it wouldn't be possible to lead the bullock home. Its presence would soon be noted in our village and Iadros would learn of what they'd done. That's why Andrastus carried a sharp knife to butcher it.

My arguments did no good. Though Euredon knew I'm very strong, he forbade me to take part. Making off with the bullock would be too dangerous for a girl, he said. When I still insisted, he threatened to tell Mother every unladylike thing I'd done for the past year. Many scenes flooded through my mind. The boys I'd wrestled, the clothes I'd flung off to swim naked during the sweltering summer, the lovers' trysts I'd spied on with Andrastus. I knew the shame of Mother's disapproval would be blistering.

And so, I'd had no choice but watch Andrastus and Euredon set off in the darkness. My brother's lips were tight, their contours very sharp. He reminded me of the fresco of Apollo I'd seen on the proscenium at Smyrna's amphitheater. In the starlight, Euredon had a profile that

could only be called noble, both grave and joyous. His righteous bearing made me feel so sad, it wrenched my heart.

They didn't even bring a covered lamp, since we had no more oil. By first light, they arrived at the field's edge. In that soft gray hour, Andrastus climbed the field's stone fence. So beautiful they might have been a girl's, his olive eyes were steady with resolve. Like Euredon, his mouth was pressed so tight it could have overlain the thin cut of a dagger. It showed nothing of those soft lips that I'd often dreamed of kissing.

Andrastus found his bullock resting by a cistern. It didn't run away, of course, having known him ever since he was a babe. Murmuring gentle words, Andrastus slipped a loop of rope over the bullock's neck, then led it to the gate. Now everything was silence, except for the chirp of insects and the early morning larks.

Euredon stayed just inside the tree line, a good position to watch for trouble. Andrastus followed the stone fence toward the hillside. Now and then, he said a soft word to the old bullock. His father had named it Atlas because of its great strength. He'd used it to pull the farm wain, which it could do alone, even with a full load. Once it became too old for this work, he hadn't sold it for beef, as would normally happen. Instead, he'd given it to Andrastus. With no surviving siblings, my adopted brother's bullock was more a companion than a pet.

So Andrastus must have felt heart-sore that Atlas must be butchered in the forest. And by the hand of a trusted friend. Andrastus told me later that he hoped to see it one day in the afterlife. Everybody says that there are cattle in the fields of Hades. Andrastus believed his bullock would earn its place by this act of supreme virtue, giving its life to feed starving little children.

Unfortunately, the merchant Laedron was an early riser. When he stepped outside to relieve his bladder, his dogs barged through the door. The largest of them stuck its long nose into the breeze, caught the unfamiliar scent, then shot off toward the upper field. The other three greyhounds were close behind.

These dogs bark very little, as you probably know, but Laedron hadn't reached his privy yet. Their race caught his attention. He roused six of his retainers from their quarters. Heads groggy from their wine the night before, they stumbled out still pulling chitons over their heads. Carrying the long spears we call doroi, they didn't bother with helmets, breastplates, greaves, or heavy shields. Lightly armed, they were able to run at full speed up the lane.

But they were still a long way off. Andrastus could have reached safety in the forest, but he was unwilling to leave his bullock. The dogs were close, and though they weren't muzzled, Andrastus didn't fear them. Greyhounds aren't vicious, except when they catch hares. It would

be very unusual for them to attack a person. Andrastus urged Atlas forward, but the bullock didn't fear these coursers, either. He continued at his own slow pace.

By now, Laedron's men were in range to hurl their spears. But the doru is a thrusting weapon. It isn't very useful as a javelin. In our army, shorter spears are used for this. Besides, these men could see Andrastus was just a boy, not a serious opponent. Shouting loudly, their leader Cletus ordered him to halt.

Andrastus turned to fight them. Can you imagine? A youth of thirteen, armed only with a knife. Tall for his age, it's true, and muscular from a boyhood spent at farm chores, then the last three years on Father's boat, but these were six grown men he faced. Andrastus pelted them with rocks as they approached.

"Leave now, if you wish to keep your miserable lives!" he dared to taunt them.

They dodged most of the rocks, though one guardsman fell with a great lump on his forehead. Drawing close, Cletus sidestepped a swipe of Andrastus's knife, then knocked him reeling with the butt end of his spear. He grabbed Andrastus by the arm, hauled him up, and began pummeling his face open-handed.

What Cletus didn't see was one of his men falling dead behind him. Euredon's arrow was stuck into his throat. Another man yelled out when struck in the chest. Surprisingly, it hadn't been a fatal shot. Then again, Euredon was running down the hillside as he made it.

The other two guardsmen crouched behind the bullock. Cletus was a little braver. He dragged the wounded man to cover, while keeping hold of Andrastus.

"Throw down your weapon, or I'll slay your friend," he called.

Euredon's answer was an arrow that passed beneath the bullock's chest and stuck into a kneeling guardsman's thigh. Cletus stabbed poor Atlas in the throat. In addition to his doru, he was the only one armed with a xiphon. As Atlas lowed with pain and terror, Cletus hacked into its fetlocks with his short sword. He wanted the bullock to fall over without delay, in order to provide a better barrier.

Euredon kept coming. He notched another arrow as he ran. His bow was light, made by Father from a young sapling of mountain ash. It wasn't the heavy sort of weapon now in favor among the hoplon's archers. Euredon leaped over the dying bullock, twisted in the air, and fired even before he landed. My brother's arrow took Cletus through the side of his ribcage straight into his heart.

The one uninjured guardsman turned and thrust his spear. From the forest, I could see it slice through Euredon's shoulder. You see, I'd disobeyed him and followed. I wanted to help. I wanted to carry back as much meat as we could. If neither of them could bring themselves to kill

the bullock, I'd been willing to do that, too.

But now all I could do was watch my fearless brother die. His right arm was nearly severed by the thrust. The wound spurted blood so fast, I knew it would only be a matter of minutes. Meanwhile, Andrastus still was dazed. He could barely stand, let alone run into the forest. Laedron had caught up, screaming at Andrastus that he was a murderer.

In fact, the one man he'd injured with a rock now was on his feet. But it mattered little to Laedron. Guardsmen came cheap. It was Atlas that he raged about.

"You slaughtered my bullock. Now you'll hang."

"Your men did that," I heard Euredon answer, though his voice was growing weak.

"You can see it was a sword's strike, not an arrow or a knife."

"Makes no difference," said Laedron. "Your thievery brought this on. The penalty is clear."

Just then, another volley landed. Not arrows this time. It was more rocks. One thwacked into the uninjured guardsman's temple. Another broke Laedron's arm. They cowered behind Atlas again. By now, the poor bullock was dead. Nervously, they looked to every side. They couldn't tell who'd launched the fresh attack. It wasn't Andrastus. They could see that he was dazed and empty-handed only yards away. And it wasn't Euredon, who lay amid a growing pool of blood.

The rocks were from my sling, of course. Though Mother scowled every time I touched it, I'd practiced hurling stones ever since Father taught me at the age of six.

"You'll be a great beauty some day," he said on a rare occasion when we were alone.

Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous to repeat this now. But back then, I looked nothing like this. What Father said next, maybe it's only the way a good man builds his daughter's confidence, or maybe he really worried what might come to pass in only a few years time.

"I won't always be around to protect you," he told me. "You may need some knowledge of a warrior's arts to fend off suitors on your own."

He'd given me his sling, a keepsake from his own service as a hoplite. He'd taught me how to launch well chosen stones. I'd learned so well, I could strike a gliding locust at two hundred paces.

Mother made no secret of her fierce displeasure. But she never took away the sling, since it was Father's gift. No suitors had come yet, but I'd killed a viper with it once. The snake was coiled near my baby brother Mavros as he played behind our house. And even then, from the look on Mother's face, you might have thought I'd been the one to put his life in danger.

Laedron ran back down the lane. I feared it was to get more men. I bent and grabbed a

large, round stone. I was tempted to hurl it into the back of his skull, but I resisted. It seemed more urgent to help Andrastus and Euredon. If I slew Laedron, I'd have to slay the injured guardsmen, too.

Much misery could have been avoided had I summoned the courage to be ruthless. Sadly for my family, I lacked the necessary grit. Instead, I tore a wide strip from my tunic's skirt and bound Euredon's half-severed arm. After Andrastus staggered over, together we were able to raise Euredon. But he was very weak. My brother could hardly walk, let alone run.

"Leave me," he whispered. "I've lost too much strength. I'll never make it home. Anyway, there'd be a trail of blood. Look, it oozes from this bandaging already. Just leave me here. They don't know who I am. I couldn't bear it if trouble followed us to Mother's door."

At that moment, I spotted more men running up the lane.

"Go," growled Euredon with all his failing strength. "Andrastus, take my bow and quiver. You'll have need of them before this ends."

Though it was as if my own blade gave the mortal strike, I had no choice but leave Euredon to die. It would mean all our deaths if I tried to drag him. Tears filled my eyes so full, it was as if I'd turned bli-- Ah, forgive me, sir, I'd forgotten that I speak to one who must bear this sore affliction every day... At any rate, I steadied Andrastus with an arm around his back. Or maybe it was to steady me. My legs felt like they'd turned to iron.

Feeling like a murderess, I took a last look at Euredon.

"Hon hoi Theoi philousi apothneskei neos," whispered Andrastus.

I tried to tell myself that the old saying was right - whom the Gods love dies young. That Euredon's valiant sacrifice meant he'd have an honored place among immortal heroes. But it was so hard to leave my brother while he still shared the mortal air and soil with us.

I wrenched my tear-shot eyes away, then together, Andrastus and I reeled into the forest. We didn't stop until we reached a cleft in the hillside. It was protected by vines hanging from the ledge above. Though the entrance was invisible, Andrastus led me straight inside. He knew of this secret place because it was sacred to Demeter, the Goddess honored above all others by his late mother. We remained there through the day, then after it grew dark, we crept along a deer track until we reached our home beside the Meles.

We heard later that Euredon lived all through that day. Uncle Clemon's neighbor, who was present at the public execution, said they tortured Euredon with fire and with blade. They put out his eyes and flayed his skin. Still, my valiant brother never revealed his name or ours. They quartered his corpse, fed it to the dogs, and left his head on a pike outside Smyrna's northern wall. The crows soon stripped it to the bone.

Weeks later, they threw Euredon's skull onto a dung heap. But in my heart, he enjoys the burial chamber of the greatest prince. I know his shade dwells in the Isles of the Blessed, hunting stags and wolves and lions alongside our most noble heroes.

I can only imagine that the vilest traitors are tormented in the place where I will spend eternity. I still wake every day stifling a scream, fresh from abandoning my brother yet again. Worse yet, I know his sacrifice was all for nothing.

When the guardsman with the cracked head recovered his wits, he remembered who it was they'd captured first. This man had worked as one of the Baron's tax collectors before he was sent to Laedron as a wedding present. He'd seen Andrastus on that day when they seized the farm and took Atlas.

It became a simple matter to ask around and learn that Andrastus had found work on our boat. Someone must have told them that he'd come to live with us. Naturally, they didn't care that Mother had no part in this, or that Father would have forbidden such a raid had he not been at sea. Laedron went straight to his uncle Iadros, who declared my entire family outlaw. He waited until the day Father and my brothers returned from sea, then sent a score of battle-hardened troops to seize us all.

Eta

Warned by Uncle Clemon, we put to sea at once. Our boat was ill-provisioned, though. Father and my older brothers had met with no success during their voyage to the south. They'd found a sea as blood-red as our Smyrnan waters. The only fish they'd seen were floating on the surface. We had no money and no food. If we didn't find a healthy reach of water soon, all of us would starve.

The only good news was that Baron Iadros didn't send a war ship to pursue us. He owned three rapid triremes, but they were in service to the king. He couldn't pull them from the fleet to chase such a trifling enemy as us. I expect he thought we'd die in banishment. He was satisfied to seize our house and give it to his nephew Laedron. Iadros pronounced it fair compensation for the bullock and the guardsmen's deaths.

We learned of these developments from Uncle Clemon the next day. He'd caught up to our boat off Lesvos. Realizing that Iadros would blame him for warning us, he'd fled with his family, too. My four other uncles also decided to leave Smyrna. There was no fishing, no food, and no work. Press gangs were everywhere, and the king was known for sacrificing great swaths of lives among newly drafted troops. They decided it was best to join us on Lesvos with all their families.

Father had friends on this large island, from many years of visiting the port. He was known for selling prime herring at a reasonable price. But Lesvos was beset with drought and famine, too. Father's friends were unable to offer help, so our six boats sailed on.

Lesvian fishermen reported better luck in the waters two days north. We'd need to cross a wide part of the sea, far from land. But this hardly daunted Father -- he was an expert mariner with a keen knowledge of the stars. What's more, our ships had sturdy masts and sails. They were far abler to withstand rough weather than shallow-drafted galleys. We needed neither the protection of a coast, nor daily supplies of fresh water, as would have been the case were we

propelled by sweating oarsmen.

We found a shoal of herring east of Limnos, but many local boats were working here already. All were well manned and well armed. They allowed us to keep the fish we'd hauled in with our first casts, but advised us with a show of weapons to move on.

We continued northeast for another day, aided by a favorable wind. On the next morning, our small fleet came to Imbrus. It appeared a fair-sized island, surrounded by the sort of water where fish thrive. A cold, deep blue, changing suddenly to azure near the land. Father said it meant a steep shelf, the sort that makes for rich feeding grounds. Indeed, we had little trouble hauling in nets crammed full of herring, along with some sea bass. Also, a few red mullet that would make for a fine deipnon. But wanting to avoid trouble, Father skirted the island's populated side. That afternoon, we found a small cove rimmed with granite cliffs. Though many sea birds lived here, there was no sign of human settlement.

So we put in to this cove, said prayers of homage for our safe delivery, built a fire and burned offerings of our blood, then began building an encampment along the narrow beach. There was a small cascade that spilled over a low point in the cliffs. It gathered in a pool before it joined the sea. Along with Mother, my aunts, and female cousins, I carried clay amphorai here to fill them. The pool would be a reliable source of drinking water, good for bathing, too. We washed ourselves and then our clothes.

While the menfolk hewed timber for our homes, we cooked a feast of grilled fish along with shearwater eggs I'd gathered. There was also fruit, because my brother Nikos had climbed halfway up the cliff to pluck pears from a tree that jutted out. They weren't ripe, but after roasting, they were very good.

The weather remained mild, so Father allowed us to go swimming in the cove. Except for the raucous noise of birds, it seemed an idyllic place. I wondered if the legendary cave of Poseidon was nearby -- I'd heard that Imbrus is the island where he stables his winged horses.

I told Andrastus that I hoped to find it somewhere along the towering heights. I looked forward to many happy years spent in this splendid place. Generous with food and water, safe from danger, glorious in the beauty of its rippled cove and gnarled cedars leaning from its blue-veined cliffs. I wondered why men hadn't settled here before. I must have expressed this thought aloud, because my eldest brother Kestides answered me at once.

"This cove faces north," he said. "In winter, gales will sweep huge waves in here. The shore's too thin to offer much protection. By then, we'll have to cut a pathway up the cliff, and build new homes atop the heights. Or if that proves impossible, we must seek another place."

But it was summer now, and our clan was numerous. We had much time and many

strong hands for the task. I didn't worry over it. The others didn't, either. For now, we felt happy that the starving times were over, that we were free from Iadros, and that we'd found this place of bounty. By evening, the men had built the first of six timber cottages they planned to sit beneath the overhanging cliffs.

The next morning, Father and my uncles took their boats to sea. They planned to fill their nets, then trade the excess fish for supplies. There were many things we lacked for our new homes. Meanwhile, the girls and women and small children stayed behind to make a thatch roof for our first house. Beside the pool, there was much sea grass for us to use. It was pleasant work -- we sang in the bright sunshine as we gathered up great bundles. My little sister Geneia and baby brother Mavros played there in the shallows, along with our youngest cousins.

I still grieved for brave Euredon, of course. Iadros hadn't even allowed us to send him on his way into the House of Hades with the proper funerary rites. I burned my tunic stained with his blood, and buried it beside the pool. Though this was no mighty temple, I prayed to wise Athena as my brother had requested.

At once, I felt a glow that warmed me from within. I knew the Goddess found this peaceful glade a worthy place to hear me. She'd even chosen to ignore the blight that stained my corrupt heart. I called on Her to speed Euredon's noble shade toward a just reward beside the pool of Mnemosyne. Despite the seabirds' clamor, I believe She heard me well. Euredon had always honored Her throughout his life. She wouldn't punish him for my cowardice. I could almost hear Athena's promise that she'd protect him always in Elysium.

The men returned that evening, looking grim. Andrastus told me there'd been trouble when they tried to sell their catch at Imbrus's main town of Eulampio. Everyone knew at once they were outlanders. In these times of war and famine, the locals turned suspicious. An elder warned Father that we must leave at once.

Father and my uncles decided to make do without supplies for now. We'd simply live rough through the summer, eating what we caught. Between our six families, we still had ample salt. When that essential was exhausted, they'd sell a load of dried fish on the Thracian mainland. No sense searching for another cove, when every island had turned unfriendly in these hostile times. Best to stay out of trouble in this remote place.

But trouble found us the next day. A dozen ships sailed into our cove. A hundred men from Imbrus landed.

"Why are you still here?" shouted the elder who'd been hostile to Father in Eulampio. "Yesterday, I made it clear you were to leave. The tide is turning now. If you don't put out with it, we'll burn your boats."

"We're not going anywhere," Father answered. "We've caused no trouble. These waters hold plenty of fish for all. Your boats don't even work this side of the island."

"You'll bring the blood into our fishing grounds. Panta rhei. All things are in flux. Our oracle has told us. Leave now, or be killed."

"The red plague to the south is nothing to do with us. I think what really worries you is our large catch lowering prices in your market. But after the ill-mannered reception you've offered, we have no intention of coming near your town."

They argued on while our shadows crept back to our toes. The sun was high and very warm. I watched the rivulets of sweat stream down this elder's angry face. Then a loud noise caused all of us to turn. It was my young cousin Aristides running from the pond, shouting that little Phoebe had gotten mired while chasing a frog.

A man from Imbrus used the confusion as an excuse to attack. He wheeled and shot an arrow at the sprinting Aristides. My cousin was only eight, no threat to them. The arrow pierced him in his thigh. Aristides pitched forward, falling at his father Clemon's feet.

Believing the wound mortal, Clemon raced with fury at the archer. Before this man could notch another arrow, Clemon gutted him. My uncle pulled his long boning knife out of the archer's belly. He stared back and forth between the gore that dripped from it and the sprawled form of Aristides.

Another second passed, then all the men crashed forward in sharp battle. For every fighter of our clan, there were three from Imbrus. But most of ours had served in Smyrna's long years of warfare against Lydia. We had no spears, no swords, and only Andrastus had a bow, but we'd learned how to battle hand to hand. Our enemies from Imbrus knew only how to battle fish.

I saw foeman after foeman fall, most with gaping knife wounds, one with his head turned to an angle so severe, only the dead are able to maintain this pose. Andrastus slew a dozen more with arrows, exhausting all the ammunition bequeathed by Euredon. With my sling, I took down seven other enemies. I heard myself shout, "Ulule!" repeatedly, the war cry of Athena.

But when I stopped, the anguish of our dying enemies was terrible to hear. Still, I felt exultant fighting side by side with Andrastus as we drove off our oppressors. To me, it felt an omen of our future marriage.

The battle ended as suddenly as it began. The survivors from Imbrus fled back to their fleet and sailed away, their number almost halved. The elder's boat was left behind -- he and his three sons lay dead on our beach. We had only two injuries, neither one life-threatening. I helped Aunt Melissa patch Aristides, whose leg was pierced but wasn't broken. Mother and

Aunt Irene saw to Uncle Xolon, who had a deep cut across his shoulder. Meanwhile, Andrastus went to check on Phoebe. He found my little cousin covered in mud, but happily playing by the pond.

I went over to join them and gave Andrastus a warm smile. He didn't smile back at me. He only cleaned his sword off in the water, a bleak look mired in his eyes. Couldn't he see this was a time for joy, not sorrow? Was he so burdened by our mutual failure to save Euredon that he could never know happiness again? Didn't he feel this bond between us, this promise that we'd always prosper side by side?

"You were wonderful," I said. "I've never seen anything like it. If it wasn't for you, we might have lost."

"You slew almost as many."

"You inspired me. I would have been frightened if you weren't there beside me. Wasn't that wonderful doing something glorious together?"

"It was anything but glorious." He looked at me as if I were a child, who couldn't tell playacting from reality. "These deaths were just as hateful to the Gods as murder. Those we slew were only men like us. They fought because they thought it necessary to protect their homes and families."

Though I loved Andrastus, I could not agree. The Imbrusians had attacked us mercilessly when we were doing them no harm. What's more, our victory felt like gaining vengeance for Euredon. I proved to be utterly mistaken, but still awash in battle lust, that's how it felt. I thought Olympus had favored us because we were in the right. But I didn't say these things to Andrastus. I didn't want to argue with him. I only wanted to stand beside him, to feel the heat that he was giving off, to breathe in the seductive scent of his flowing sweat.

After burying the enemy dead, Kestides and five of my cousins rowed out to the abandoned boat. They meant to claim it for their own, since this was a fine vessel. They all were at an age when young men wish to marry. By forming a partnership to work this boat, they could earn enough to pay bride prices.

When they rowed back, their faces were exultant. Not only at our utter triumph, but with the spoils that they'd found. In addition to the ship and a full supply of stores, they'd found six casks of wine. They brought these to the beach, so everyone could join their celebration.

But Father warned them not to drink and feast.

"We must leave now," he said. "Do you really think this war is done? They'll be back and bring tenfold more fighters."

The young men didn't listen. Already, they had one of the casks open. Imbrus was famed

for the potency of its ruby-colored wine. From where I stood across the beach, I could smell its heady perfume. Loud with booming laughter, Kestides and my cousins drained bowl after bowl. I came close to see the silver skyphai that they'd found aboard the ship. From my brother's pungent breath, I could tell the red stains in his beard were wine, not blood. They must have drunk at least one other cask before rowing back to shore.

Father berated Kestides and the other young men for their recklessness. But while he might rule his own sons, my grown cousins had no duty to obey. Father was eldest of his brothers, and they'd always turned to him for counsel, but within our clan, we believed that all men stand as equals.

Pretending they hadn't heard Father, the youths continued carousing. They turned their throats up to the skies, shouting their great victory. They clasped each other arm to arm. Their chests thumped as they pulled each other close.

By now, my uncles drank with deep thirst, too. Relieved that young Aristides wasn't seriously hurt, Clemon was particularly robust in celebration. He tipped back a cask, and poured a stream of wine straight into his mouth. Even Xolon, his shoulder bound with a length of sailcloth, had joined the revelry.

Father tried vigorously to stop them, but only managed to drag away my second eldest brother Nikos. The men continued drinking until their wine was all consumed. As darkness fell, Kestides decided we must have a banquet. Fish wouldn't be enough -- for a great feast, one needs the rich blood of kine flowing down one's beard. There must be many courses. A triumphant warrior should gorge on fatted lambs, roast kid, and all manner of fowl. I heard him tell my cousins that he knew where to get them.

With Selene's round face brightening the sky, they climbed the cliffs. At the summit, they quickly found a track that led down steep terrain toward long-grass fields. There, the track widened into a rutted lane, wide enough for an oxcart to follow.

Ten minutes later, they'd trotted into well-grazed pasturage that stood before a farm. It belonged to the dead elder's heirs, whatever ones were left. During the battle, Kestides had knocked down the elder's youngest son, knelt on his chest, and pressed a blade against his throat. He'd forced this youth to reveal how our camp site was discovered. Before Kestides slit his throat, the conquered youth had admitted that his family owned the land that spread behind these cliffs. Their shepherds saw us from the cliff tops and reported our location to his father.

I know all this because I'd followed. Their voices were boisterous with wine. It was easy to overhear everything they said. I saw Kestides and my cousins raid the unprotected farm. With all its grown men killed, no one remained to stop them from seizing a sable bull, three

young wethers, and a crate of bantam fowl. They also captured six young women.

Now, there'd be no need of gathering wealth to pay hard-bargaining fathers. At that time, my knowledge of such things was hazy, but as they made these captives their brides, it didn't appear the girls were willing.

After they'd allowed the girls to dress, they led them back toward our camp. One tried to run, but Kestides stunned her with a backhand blow, then carried her over his shoulder. When they reached the cliffs, they forced the girls to descend before them. As for the bull and wethers, they simply prodded them over the edge. I watched them plummet with a sinking heart. One of the wethers didn't die at once, but bleated piteously as if it were being castrated all over again.

Its cries must have risen to Olympus, for we were punished sorely before another day expired. I must admit it felt like we deserved this fate. My brother and cousins had behaved no better than the cruelest nobles.

We woke the next morning to repeated shouts of warning from Andrastus. Stumbling from our one completed cottage, we saw a large force landing on our beach. This time, there were hundreds. They must have rallied every male on Imbrus who possessed a spear or sword. Their leaders now were sheathed in armor.

Our men battled valiantly, but they were overwhelmed. Despite our fighting prowess, there were too many of the enemy. It was only through Father's leadership that any of us were able to escape. He marshaled a retreat back to our boats. Since there was little wind, we chose the four lightest vessels and rowed with all our strength. The men from Imbrus gave chase in their heavier craft. They launched fire arrows at us, but these fell short. Seeing that they couldn't overtake us, they returned to shore in a light rain. As I saw Imbrus for the last time, smoke smeared the weeping sky.

It mounted from our three abandoned vessels, blazing now within the cove. The fires might have been funeral pyres for Kestides and my five cousins, too. This is how I knew the Gods had punished us. The eldest son from each family in our clan lay dead on the sand, their beards congealed with grease, their unwashed bodies still stinking with lust, their souls heaped with curses from the six unwilling brides. I could see our young men where they'd fallen, staring sightlessly at our bitter retreat.

Theta

“You’ve missed the turn!” said Homer. “We should have reached it long ago. But no, we must have passed it while you were chattering away. It proves my point about the folly of a female scribe. How do you expect anyone to think you capable, with your head so full of nonsense?”

“That’s unjust, sir. If you’ll forgive me the impertinence. I suffered these events, along with all those dearest to me. Believe me when I tell you, all these things are true... I’m sorry that I can’t walk rapidly until I’ve healed, but I see the crossroads right ahead.”

In fact, they’d gone by as she spoke of the wine casks. She’d intentionally led Homer past the turn. By her best guess, half an hour had elapsed since they’d set out. One part out of twenty-four between sunrise and sunset at midsummer’s day. If both thumbs touched in turn each of the phalanges on their respective hands, the number came to twenty-four. Father had taught her this. Or twelve finger bones on either the left hand or the right. The exact number of lunar cycles in a year.

Since Homer had told Philemon the errand would take about two hours, it meant they were already halfway to the sheep farm. Nerissa knew she needed much more time before they reached it. Ahead, she could see this lane bent sharply to the right. Though it was actually skirting an ancient burial ground of block-shaped crypts, she’d pretend it was the crossroads.

“Here we are,” said Nerissa as they turned. “I see the vineyard, just as you said. The grapes smell wonderful this time of year, don’t you agree?”

Fortunately, a different vineyard spread along the slope uphill from the crumbling limestone crypts. Instead of moldered death, a westerly breeze carried the rich scent of Ithaca’s pale purple grapes down to the lane.

“Yes, the spring was dry. This rain will plump them full of juice. Then if this summer continues hot, they’ll be especially sweet.”

"I thought they were for wine, not fruit."

"They are. But sugar turns to spirit. The stuff that makes us poets sing and wise men fools. A strong sun following the rain makes for a potent wine. And if some of the grapes are picked intentionally unripe, their juice adds a nice tartness to the wine."

"My Uncle Clemon's favorite wine was very sweet. He says the vintner boiled juice pressed from ripe grapes before it went into fermenting vats."

"Yes, that's done here, too, but I find such wine too cloying. I much prefer straw wine to that."

"Do you mean wine made from sun-dried grapes?"

She'd read about the process in Hesiod. Vineyard slaves would collect the fruit in wicker baskets, then lay them out on mats woven of straw. When they'd dried almost as much as raisins, they'd be transferred into vats. Then slaves would hang onto a rope, while vigorously jumping on these toughened grapes. A flutist would play a lively tune to spur their dance. Of course, she didn't mention Hesiod to Homer, since his mood darkened every time he heard his rival's name.

"Yes, straw wine's one of our specialties. We also export great quantities of wine flavored with herbs and spice and brine. There's even one vintner here who does well with a perfumed blend... But why are we talking about wine? Are you sure you've turned at the right place? When misfortune last forced me toward my boorish cousin's farm, Philemon and I were nearly eaten alive soon after the crossroads."

"Eaten alive? By what?"

"Two years ago, the cursed beast that guards this vineyard, the very sire of Cerberus, it didn't relent until we were out of view. Even then, I feared that it would break its chain. I insisted that Philemon stir his torpid bones into a trot before all three of that monster's maws came snapping at our flesh. But this time, I don't even hear an angry growl."

"There's a dog, sir, but it only has one head. A great tongue's lolling from its mouth. A puddle of drool's collecting in the dust between its feet. The creature looks more indolent than violent. The old one must have died."

"Ah, I wondered if the fiendish thing were mortal. Now it may join its whelp to guard the far side of the River Styx."

"Is there really such a monster, sir?"

"Who knows, except the Gods? Men only have time-twisted tales of heroes who've struggled from death's brink. In my experience, ancient lore is often bent by poets to their own designs."

"But what do you think, sir? My dreams are plagued with worries over Cerberus, you see. So many of my loved ones have made that journey recently."

Nerissa gazed sadly at the largest of the burial chambers. A name was inscribed on the pediment above its entrance, but it had crumbled too much to be legible. Kouroi and korai flanked the doors. She knew these images of maidens and young men were a paean to eternal youth. Many epigrams were also carved on the tomb's walls, calling out to travelers to learn about its occupant. She wished she could walk close enough to read them. Inside, some ancient champion had been sent to his eternal rest with veneration. Maybe Ithacus, himself. But all the worthy members of her family were scattered into dust. There hadn't been a funeral for one of them. Their flesh was left to rot unburied. Their bones made food for crabs or jackals.

"You expect me to believe your tales are true?" said Homer.

"I swear it by the gracious brow of Pallas. Everything I've reported is exactly how my family's misfortunes have unfolded."

"Be very careful what you swear. You'd do well to remember that the good name of Athena mustn't be impugned. Think of the unfortunate Tireseas, who only chanced to see her bathing and so was blinded for it."

"Yes, sir, but didn't the Goddess assuage his loss by sending serpents to wash Tireseas with their tongues? Didn't this blessing give him the power of second sight?"

"That's a tale they tell in Athens. I doubt it's true. My own blindness remains, though I've prayed many times to Athena. And I've never been compensated with the gift of prophesy."

"Why should you be? Did you lose your sight in a similar way?"

"Never mind how I went blind. Just remember never to swear falsely by Athena."

"Forgive me, sir, but it wasn't a false oath."

"Nonsense. No one will credit your story, not even the greatest dotards, unless you make your heroes act heroic. As Achilles says in one of my finest verses, 'One crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name.'"

"I never claimed any of my kinsmen as a hero. All right, there was Euredon. As fine and brave a warrior as Perseus, himself. But the others, hot-blooded Kestides and my cousins and my uncles. They were flawed men, not towering immortals."

"And so should heroes always be. Vanquishing the most calamitous of mortal flaws is why men's names sing like Sirens in our hearts forever. Take Heracles, if we're to speak of torrid blood. Even as a lad, it's told he brained his music tutor with a lyre. Then as a grown man who should shun rash choler, he slew his wife Megara and their children."

"Yes, sir, but that was in a fit of madness caused by Hera."

"Ah, so you do know something about heroes."

"My father told us much of Heracles. His labors slaying the Nemean lion, vanquishing the Cretan bull, cleaning the Augean stables, and the like."

"Indeed. There were nine more, including the capture of Cerberus."

"My father never came to that part, sir. But he did tell us how Heracles joined Iason's voyage on the Argos to retrieve the golden fleece. It's my favorite portion of the tale. Particularly when he cleverly defeats the warriors sown from dragon's teeth."

"Iason wasn't clever, merely fortunate in his allies. Your comment simply shows how little you understand. In many ways, Iason was the least admirable of our heroes. After all she did to aid him, he abandoned Medea to marry Creusa, Princess of Korinthos. It was all for political gain, a mortal failing if there ever was one. Heroes must redeem themselves by acts of virtue. Bravery isn't enough. Your story also lacks this quality."

"I can only tell it as it happened, sir. I'm not so empty-headed as to make Gods out of my departed kinsmen. I'll be satisfied to see them all someday in the Fields of Asphodel."

"You'd be happy to walk among the lesser shades, I take it."

"Not until my time has come. For all I've suffered, I don't wish to hasten Charon's ferry."

"I meant as a mortal visitor. I've long wondered whether it might be possible... Here -- take this down. A verse has come to me."

Homer extracted a sheet of parchment and a slender stick of charcoal from his chlamys. "Exactly as I recite it, mind. I hope you didn't lie when you claimed that you know how to write."

"No, sir. If you don't speak very fast, I'll manage."

Homer's large brow furrowed as he turned his sightless eyes once more toward the cloud-streaked sky. Brooding in expression, he took a deep breath, then recited:

"Now I the strength of Heracles behold, a towering specter of gigantic mold."

"You saw him inside the realm of Hades?" Nerissa interrupted. "How is that possible? Or was it in a dream?"

"No, my hero will encounter Heracles. Ah, better yet, I'll have many of the dead speak to Odysseus."

She'd heard this name before. Of all the heroes in the poem that Homer had recited to Lady Phyllis and her friends, Odysseus came off the best. Despite the meaning of his name. He was the wisest of Agamemnon's allies. And now it seemed that Homer was writing a new poem devoted to this man.

“You’ve chosen to write about a hero named ‘Hated by Everyone?’ That seems inapt, if you’ll forgive my saying so.”

“I take it that your father failed to include my poem *The Iliad* in your education.”

The poet’s lips curled down with distaste. And yes, Nerissa also saw the tinge of jealous pique.

“No doubt he would have included it, had he but known your work.” She didn’t mention that she’d heard much of it, while a slave in the household of Theoton.

“And yet, it seems he was highly familiar with that woeful scribbler Hesiod.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but Father would have disagreed with your appraisal.”

Homer’s glower deepened even more.

“Which isn’t to say that you don’t rank with Hesiod,” Nerissa added quickly. “I’ve only heard a handful of your lines, but as Hesiod wrote, ‘*Pleion hemisy pantos.*’

“That comes from *Works*, I think,” said Homer.

“It does. The half is more than the whole. That’s often true, I’ve found. Or in this case, the small sample I’ve heard from your epic is so brilliant, I’m sure Father would have had the highest esteem for your work, too. Most likely, it hadn’t reached our shores before we were forced to leave Smyrna.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Its fame has spread through all the civilized world. I’ve been invited far and wide to read it at great festivals.”

“Was one of them at Smyrna?”

“No, never there, but close. I’ve performed on Lesvos and on Chios. On Lesvos, after I’d astonished them with my *Iliad*, they feted me with the best wine I ever drank.”

“Really, sir? What was it?”

“Are you trying to distract me into talk of wine again?”

“No, sir. I’m merely interested.”

“If you must know, it was called *Protropon*. I recall someone saying it was made from grapes never bruised by feet or board. They piled great heaps in their vats, creating enough weight to press the grapes below... But as I was saying, they loved my poetry and feted me throughout the night.”

“You must have visited during a time of prosperity. When we stopped at Lesvos, they weren’t nearly so hospitable to strangers.”

“I wouldn’t know how they treat ordinary people, but they were very good to me. And they loved me even better on the nearby island of Chios. Indeed, after I performed, I was asked to lead a school at its ancient Temple of Cybele. I hear that my former students still leave

Sphinx coils at the poplar tree where I'd recite. I'd sit there in a perfect chair made by a great bole at the poplar's base. I would have thought-- No matter. What significance is there in the opinion of illiterates?"

"Sir! You may be a famous man, while I'm a ragged slave, but there's no cause to insult me. Father was a very learned man."

"In that case, I apologize. Still, had he read The Iliad, you'd know why Odysseus earns his name."

"Perhaps you can explain it." Nerissa was careful to resume a cordial tone. She knew that this self-important poet might be her only chance to escape Tragus. "What made Odysseus so despised?"

"For one thing, he tried to shirk his oath to Hera that he'd fight in the Trojan War. Feigning madness, he sowed his field with salt. Odysseus only stopped when the emissary Palamedes put his infant son Telemachus in front of the plow."

"Oh. That makes a good story, sir." She must have missed this part. "So Odysseus made bitter enemies among both men and Gods?"

"Exactly. It's why he must seek advice from the greatest heroes no longer on this earth. This journey that Odysseus makes into the underworld will be an interregnum in my verse... Now if you're quite through with your prattle, I beg you let me continue while the lines are fresh."

"But Heracles becomes a god. What would he be doing among the dead?"

"Be still! You're worse than Philemon, quibbling away at minor points."

"But--"

"Very well, I'll make it clear that Odysseus only meets the shade of Heracles."

Homer took another deep breath, then began again:

*"Now I the strength of Heracles behold,
A towering specter of gigantic mold.
A shadowy form! for high in heaven's abode
Himself resides, a god among the Gods;
There in the bright assemblies of the skies.
He nectar quaffs, and Hebe crowns his joys."*

"Oh, I like that better," Nerissa blurted as she finished scratching on the parchment.

"My meter meets with your approval?" Homer's voice was thick with honeyed irony.

“Oh timeless joy, Calliope smiles on the peasant rhymester's awkward measures.”

“Yes, all but ‘abodes.’” Nerissa ignored Homer's sarcasm. “‘Fold’ would serve you better, sir.”

“You think so, do you?”

“Yes, sir. It makes the rhyme exact. The scansion, too.”

“Indeed? How I could have used your deft ear as I struggled against Troy... Never mind. You may have stumbled across something that could actually use improvement. Read it back with ‘fold.’”

Nerissa did.

“Good. Leave it there. For now... Are you ready? I have more.”

“Yes, sir. Your pace is just the speed at which I write. And may I say, your voice is very stirring.”

“You may say it, but do not think that flattery will change my mind. I have no intention of buying you from Tragus. I'm impervious to a maiden's sweet, soft words. Or her scorn, for that matter.”

“But what of the obligation toward guests? As I understood Philemon, you hold this to be paramount.”

“And so it is. A man who'd be disloyal to his guests cannot be trusted by his family or friends, let alone by the immortals... But you are not my guest, so I fail to see why you'd cite this duty.”

“No, not a guest who's taken shelter in your home, but it seems an inescapable truth that the Fates have guided me into your protection. As everyone knows well, humans are powerless when the Gods direct the pathways of our lives.”

“That's true; no one would dispute this. But do not try my patience. Tripping over Philemon's big feet hardly qualifies you as my guest. You are my kinsman's slave, that's all. I'm already doing you a considerable service by wasting half a day to speak with him for you. Now if you have no more specious arguments, I'll thank you to resume writing down my words.”

“Yes, sir.”

*“Here hovering ghosts, like fowl, his shade surround,
And clang their pinions with terrific sound;
Gloomy as night he stands, in act to throw
The aerial arrow from the twanging bow.
Around his breast a wondrous zone is rolled,*

*Where woodland monsters grin in fretted gold;
There sullen lions sternly seem to roar,
The bear to growl to foam the tusky boar;
There war and havoc and destruction stood,
And vengeful murder red with human blood.
Thus terribly adorned the figures shine,
Inimitably wrought with skill divine.”*

“It’s wonderful,” Nerissa said.

“Is it? No, I think that it needs more... Heracles must speak of his progression from base human to demigod as he drags the three-mouthed dog away. Yes, that’s very good. I’ll put it in:

Down to these worlds I trod the dismal way, And dragged the three-mouthed dog away.”

“Or you could say, ‘And dragged the three-mouthed dog to upper day.’ It flows more naturally. And it *is* what Heracles did with Cerberus, after all.”

“By Zeus’s beard! Will you stop interrupting? Now the next line’s quite flown out of my head.”

“Sorry, sir. But I need more charcoal, anyway. The stub you gave me wore down to a crumb. It’s fallen from my fingers on the lane. If it were food, we’d say it’s for the snakes.”

“Heroes turned to demigods, you mean? Implying what?”

“Nothing, sir. It’s just what Mother always said when food fell on the floor. Is that where the expression comes from? Offerings left for Gods who’ve taken the form of serpents?”

“Of course. Why, what did you suppose?”

“Nothing, sir. A fishing settlement brings many snakes. They couldn’t all have come down from Olympus... But now that you mention it, the next thing that my family suffered might have been avoided if we’d only remembered to appease the Gods.”

Iota

“Appease the Gods?” asked Homer. “Are you suggesting your enslavement is a punishment because your clan offended the immortals?”

“Not only my enslavement. Almost every last one of us died, you know.”

“Men die. For most, it is our only lasting skill. Compared to Gods, this is the one sphere where we can surpass them.”

“Yes, we die, but seldom in such a string of violence and disastrous fortune.”

“That needn't be the work of Gods. We often manipulate our own deaths, expiring savagely through greed and lust and sheer folly.”

“You're right. But Gods must let it happen. They like to watch our weaknesses play out. They tip us toward madness, then gamble on the outcome, so it's said.”

“Said by whom?”

“Why, by my father, naturally. He may have been a poor man, but he was very wise. He knew about these things.” Nerissa stopped and turned to Homer. She touched him lightly on the arm. “But I sense that you are even wiser. Doubtless you could have predicted what would happen to my family as our journey progressed.”

“Why, where did you go next?”

Nerissa set off down the road again, her step deliberate, making sure the poet followed as she began to speak:

A north wind blew us strongly through the gloomy day. When the weather cleared toward evening, Father spotted a small island. As he sailed around it, I noted that its shape resembled an overturned boat. Father said he recognized the place from boyhood, when his own father anchored in its leeward harbor during a fierce storm. This was Tenedos, he told us, a perpetually windy isle sacred to Apollo.

Father led our four remaining ships back to the seaward side where we sailed into a shallow bay. It was a low, flat island, overgrown with tangled thickets. We saw no farms or fishing boats. But Father thought there was a small settlement to the east. At least there had been in Grandfather's time. He remembered a shrine to Apollo that the inhabitants maintained on a small hill above their village.

We anchored in quiet water, then waded into shore. Since the rain had stopped, we were able to spend a dry night on the beach.

In the morning, we cooked a breakfast of dried pompano. We had no hearths to bake bread here. No clay kilns to put over a fire, either, not even a domed cover to hold in enough heat to let the maza cook into a loaf. But at least we had our eating knives.

Along the forest's edge, Mother found sprigs of mint to season the pompano. She also found some wild grapes. They were very tart, but unusually large for so early in the season. I accompanied her, as I liked to do when Mother gathered herbs. These were the only times when I felt valued by her. She'd even smile at me as she passed along her knowledge. But, I wasn't feeling well on Tenedos. When we returned to the beach, I lay down while Mother and my aunts prepared our meal. I helped them serve the men, just as we'd do at home, but when it was our turn to eat, I felt so bloated, I couldn't swallow a thing.

I watched the smoke from our cooking fire curl up to the sky. I thought about my dead brothers, Euredon and Kestides. My five dead cousins, too. I wept uncontrollably, unusual for me. I tried to hear their voices in the smoke. I only heard the cry of a circling eleonora. The gulls and gannets rose up from their teeming colonies to harass the hungry falcon. The sky filled with their shrieks.

It was no use. I couldn't hear my kinsmen's shades. Maybe they'd already completed their journey to the underworld. If they were anywhere above the ground, it wasn't within earshot of Tenedos.

As I gazed into the smoke, my belly clutched with pain. I felt nauseous as I stood. It hurt to straighten up, but I couldn't lie down, either. I staggered toward the forest, not wanting to retch in front of my family. It was then I saw another column of smoke rising above the trees. It was much fainter than ours, appearing like a thin gray line of writing against the soft blue of the sky.

Though I felt no better, I knew it was my duty to tell Father at once. I cleaned my tear-streaked face, composed my expression as best I could, and went to him. Father studied the smoke intently, but didn't seem alarmed. After speaking with my uncles, he told everyone that it appeared to come from a single hearth. It wasn't thick enough to be the mingled smoke of many

fires. And Tenedos wasn't large enough for it to rise above a settlement, seen from far away.

"It must be that only a few settlers remain from the town my father and I visited when I was young," he said.

"That suits us well," said Uncle Clemon. "There won't be enough of them to mind our presence."

"I agree," said Uncle Xolon. "This bay makes a safe anchorage and there's no redness in the sea. If we find fish this morning, we should stay."

"Let's investigate the smoke before we work the water," said Father. "I want no repeat of trouble."

"You're right, Asclemelion. We can't afford another Imbrus."

After a short discussion, Father led most of the men inland. Uncle Xolon stayed behind because Aunt Irene insisted he must rest his injured shoulder. Andrastus also stayed to protect the women and children with his bow.

Noticing that I looked very pale, he asked me what was wrong.

I didn't want to answer. I didn't know, myself. But I felt strange and fearful. There was an awful wrenching in my gut. I felt my entrails were about to burst. Like those split open by an oracle, I wondered what they'd say about our fate.

I blurted an apology to Andrastus, then reeled into the forest. I felt wetness sliding down my thighs. I stopped and stared at it in horror. It was dark, clotted blood, though nothing had cut me. I thought that I was dying, that corruption was bursting my insides. That my failure to save Euredon or to warn Father about Kestides's bride-raid were dooming me to die in agony. I knew nothing yet about the transformation that turns girls into women...

Forgive me, sir. I can see that you don't want to hear this. Though I'm new to Ithaca, I should have guessed your customs would be similar to ours. Women mustn't speak to men about such things. But the problem was that no one had ever told me about it, either. Mother was far too prim a woman. And I had no older sisters.

But I was fortunate in one thing. Aunt Melissa noticed my hunching run into the woods. She caught up to me, then held me close. When my shaking eased, she led me to a stream that we could hear nearby. She knelt by the water's edge, wet a piece of cloth she'd brought, and cleaned my legs. Then she showed me how to wrap a second strip of cloth. Speaking softly all the while, she explained about Selene's chariot and the female curse of monthlies. But also their great boon, for only when they start can women conceive children. When they stop in later life, it's no cause for joy, she told me, because women become old and barren at this time.

As we returned, she advised me to heat pebbles in our fire, wrap them in a cloth, then tie

it around my back to ease the cramps. She also explained that if there was a month when Selene didn't visit while I was still unmarried, I must jump up repeatedly, touching heels to buttocks as a way to dislodge the seed.

I didn't know what seed she meant, but I understood about the heated stones. When I went to do this, Aunt Melissa spoke to Mother. We exchanged a glance, but that was all. I didn't go to her. I knew she wouldn't comfort me. She'd just say something like, "Panthematon mathemata." She didn't have to tell me sufferings are lessons. I'd learned this very well.

Mother left the beach immediately. Now I'm old enough to realize that she must have gone to collect herbs. She meant to make a soothing poultice, surely. But at this moment, all I could think was that she was ashamed of me. Either that, or jealous. It occurred to me that Mother hadn't quickened in three years. I remembered Aunt Melissa's explanation. Mother must be one of those women who'd turned barren as she aged.

Our men didn't return all day. Mother didn't, either.

We were very worried, and it turned out we had cause. Mother limped into our camp the following afternoon. Her robe was torn by brambles, her face heavily scratched, her left knee badly swollen.

She told us that she'd heard sounds of revelry the previous morning. They'd startled her as she searched for the sort of boggy meadow where a certain yellow flower grows. She'd followed the noise, which lay in the same direction as the smoke. When she came near its source, she saw a lonesome cottage in a sunny clearing. Peering from behind an oak, she saw our men behaving just as swine. They rolled in the mud, they swilled large quantities of drink and food, they made disgusting noises, they sniffed around a female, drooling in their lust.

"This woman is a powerful enchantress," Mother said. "I don't mind admitting she's the most striking specimen of female grace I've ever seen. She doses them with potion from her kettle, singing all the while. I watched until they'd drunk themselves into a stupor. Then the sorceress made Clemon kneel, so she could use him as a seat. I'm pretty sure she chose him because he's the fattest. She nestled back against his bulk, oblivious to the many rumbles coming from his stomach. Soon, Clemon fell asleep in this position, snoring loudly. Smiling with contentment, the enchantress worked her loom for the rest of the evening, never tiring or faltering, as if she were great Athena, Herself."

"Did she discover you?" I asked. "Is that how you were hurt?"

"No, I was careful to stay silent. I didn't dare creep away, for fear I'd snap a twig. I had to wait until she went into her cottage. But by then, it was too dark to make my way back here, so I settled down to sleep. I spent a fitful night, but I hoped by morning I could rouse your

father, and he'd know what to do."

"Did he?"

"He had no chance. At dawn, the woman came outside, began to sing again, then ladled more potion into their mouths. All except Clemon, that is. She raised him to his feet, and kissed him on the lips!"

"She what?" demanded Aunt Melissa in a voice of outrage.

"You heard me. She kissed Clemon like a lover."

"Why would she want him? He belches constantly and rarely bathes. Besides, his face is like a pig's."

"Maybe that's why," said Mother. "I told you, she made them all act just like swine. I think it's what she favors in a man."

"She can't have him. He's mine!"

"I also want mine back," said Mother. "He's led us into one disaster following another, but he's all I have."

"Yes, ours, too," agreed my other aunts. "And our sons."

"We'll have to rescue them," said Mother. "It's enough we've each already lost our eldest."

"And Euredon," I said.

I felt furious at Mother. She'd always favored Kestides, her firstborn. Could she really have forgotten that Euredon's death was the event that launched so many troubles.

"Of course," said Mother. "I meant him, too."

The women and older girls set off inland, armed with cooking knives. Despite his wounded shoulder, Uncle Xolon went with them, carrying a gaffing pole. Because of my bleeding, I was told to stay behind and watch the children. I protested that I wanted to join the fight. On Imbrus, they'd seen how well I use a sling.

"You're forbidden from men's presence for the next five days," Mother told me sharply. "That's how it's always been for women. For those who care about their dignity, that's how it must remain."

"But Mother--"

"Not another word!" Though Mother never raised her voice, it was a shaming reprimand in front of all the others. "Now that you're a woman, you need to pay great heed to propriety. Especially during your moon time. Far-winged Selene has a powerful effect on luck, Nerissa. If you disobey and follow, as we all know you're inclined to do, you risk dooming the men to live out their lives as swine."

Glumly, I remained behind. Andrastus also stayed, his bow the children's sole protection now. I couldn't speak to him, or even sit beside him. He was a man, initiated into their ranks two years before. Besides, I had to seek the trees' protection, where I might fasten a new rag between my legs. I blushed darker than well ripened cherries as Andrastus watched me go. I prayed that he knew nothing of what prompted my departure.

When I came back, I felt a little better. It pleased me that I was a maiden now. No shapeless girl without a way to interest Andrastus, I could wear a sashed peplos. And though my breasts were little more than bumps, that day they felt very tender as if they'd swollen overnight. Maybe they'd soon grow enough to fill out the peplos's bodice.

Feeling shy, I looked down as I approached the fire. I noticed that my hips looked round. Walking through the powdery sand was making them sway. I smiled softly to myself. I risked glancing up to see if Andrastus had noticed that my shape was no longer a straight line.

But he was looking out to sea, where many cormorants were diving in the water. It irritated me, of course, though I had to admit the fishing birds were a great spectacle. They plunged like arrows shot from Mount Olympus. The cormorants almost always came up with a fish speared in their beaks. Naturally, this would interest Andrastus.

So I let my pique evaporate in the bright sun. I began to tell the little ones the story of Icarus flying too close to fiery Helios, melting his waxen wings, causing him to plummet from the sky. But I soon grew very tired. Though they begged for another tale, I had to lie down in the sand and shut my eyes.

When I woke, it was late afternoon. None of the adults had returned. I could see by Andrastus's worried expression that he'd heard no news. Though I knew I mustn't speak directly to him, I announced loudly to the children that I was going in search of all our kinfolk. Before Andrastus could object, I used a scrap of sailcloth to collect stones from the beach, knotted it with the cord that bound my hair, and stepped into the forest. This time, I made every effort not to sway.

I had a great deal more energy after my nap. I kept a fast pace, easily following the path. I saw signs everywhere of the adults' passage -- footprints, broken twigs, bent saplings.

After an hour, I came to a sunny clearing. In it, many flowers bent before the breeze. Like the blood that soaked my rag, they were dark red. These aren't the ones Mother went looking for, I thought. They can't do a thing for cramps. Nothing but make you sleepy, full of dreams.

I recognized what they were, you see. In Smyrna, we've long known of poppies, because of traders from the east. I hadn't realized that they grew to the west, as well. But here was a

broad field. It was so large, a farmer could have harvested enough sap to fill ten amphorai, each a metrete in volume. As you probably know, this sticky resin is where the poppy's magic lies. But the flowers have a sort of magic, too. As I passed through the field, their pungent scent made me long to close my eyes again. I had to fight away the urge to lie down and breathe deep.

I raced through the field without taking another breath. After reaching a stand of laurel on the far side, I had to sit down on a log. I chanted a long prayer to the dryad spirits of these trees for help. When I finally recovered, I saw that blood was flowing down my thighs again. This time, it was a brighter red. I'd lost my cloth back in the poppies. But nothing could persuade me to return and get it.

Instead, I used laurel leaves to sop the blood. They served poorly, doing little more than smearing redness across my skin. After granting my prayer, I don't suppose the dryads of these trees appreciated such wastefulness. Feeling sticky, sore, and edgy, I tore another strip from my frayed tunic to wrap as Aunt Melissa had demonstrated.

By now, very little cloth covered my legs. Brambles tore at my thighs as I continued, adding to the streaks of blood. I feared a snake would strike me on the calf. Just before I came to a tangled patch of cedar roots, I saw a scuffed place in the dirt. This must be where Mother had tripped and twisted her knee. She'd never said what had set her running from her vigil at the cottage.

I was very close by now. I could almost hear what the men said in their drunken laughter. I could smell wood smoke coming through the tangled forest. It scared me that I couldn't hear any voices of our women. I feared the sorceress had killed them. After setting a stone into my sling, I made every effort to be silent as I crept through the thicket. The light was dim, the air heavy with moisture. I had no idea how I'd manage to defeat a powerful witch and rescue my kinsfolk.

A scant arm's length in front of me, someone stepped from behind a gnarled cedar. My heart lurched so hard against my ribs, it hurt just like a knife had stabbed me. I had to choke off a scream rising in my throat. I was so scared, I couldn't breathe.

But nothing happened to me. I saw it was a young man, about the age of Nikos, who'd turned eighteen that spring. Like Nikos, too, this youth was very muscular. Now smiling, the youth held out his empty hands. His gesture told me plainly that he meant no threat. Still, I held my loaded sling in readiness as I studied his face.

Even in the gloomy atmosphere, I could see he was extremely handsome. I'd never encountered such a radiant face on a man. His features almost seemed to give off their own light. I remembered Father telling us this island was sacred to Apollo.

"Are you a God?" I asked.

"No," he answered with a laugh. "I'm a man like any other. Why do you ask?"

"You seemed to appear from nowhere. And you're, well--" I felt deeply uncomfortable. Never mind the proscription about speaking to a man for the next five days. There was no way to tell him just how beautiful he looked. And here, my own appearance was an absolute disgrace. I was in rags, blood-smearred, with filthy strands of limp hair clinging to my face. "That is to say, you don't look like the other young men I know."

It sounded so weak an explanation, I felt heat rushing to my face. I could only hope he didn't see me blushing in this murky light.

"Why? How am I so different?" He seemed to be enjoying my discomfiture. "A beauty like you, I'd wager a handsome sum you have well-favored brothers."

"I have brothers, yes, and they're all attractive in appearance, but nothing like--" I felt so embarrassed, I couldn't finish. Now I blushed so strongly, my own face must be glowing, too. "Why do you pay me compliments? I look like the dog's dinner, today."

"No, you look like a mountain nymph, heading for a spring to bathe after the hunt." He smiled gently at me. "How I'd dearly love to be there."

I blushed again. There was no way I could answer his suggestion that he'd like to see me naked.

"It's curious you praise me as an Oread, when you're the one who has Apollo's face," I said.

"I'm only a farmer's son. I wouldn't lie to one so fair and innocent as you."

"Then what are you doing in the forest? Doesn't your father need you?"

"We make extra money selling herbs. I was collecting marjoram nearby. The sort that grows on Tenedos, it's famed across the wide Aegean... And you, what are you doing here?"

"I came to rescue my family. The witch whose fire sends smoke above the trees ahead, she's captured them."

"She's no witch. She's a slaver named Circe."

"A slaver? What do you mean?"

"Just that. Circe captures people and sells them to a trader from Kos who visits once a year. To keep them tranquil, she doses them with a tonic made from poppies. Alone, she's been responsible for stripping half this isle's population."

"Why don't you band together to overpower her? She's just one woman, isn't she? Mother said nothing about henchmen."

"Circe doesn't need them. We've tried to kill her, but she's defeated our best fighters."

Most of us who remain on Tenedos are terrified of Circe. That's why few dare come into these woods. These days, she mostly captures unwary visitors. She doesn't even have to fight them. She appears so comely in men's eyes, they feel fortunate to stand in her presence. She offers them a feast, complete with great quantities of drink. It tastes as sweet as ambrosia, but leaves men stupefied for days."

"You seem to know a lot about her."

"I do. I was one of her captives."

"How did you avoid being sold to the slave trader? Were you her favorite? Did you trick Circe into thinking that you'd marry her?"

"She paid me no attention." Again, the young man laughed. "She kept a fat shepherd as her lover."

"Oh. I guess it's true what Mother said. She must prefer men that way, like Uncle Clemon... So how did you escape?"

"I think it was the moly."

"Moly -- what's that?"

"A kind of wild onion that grows on Tenedos. It's another herb I collect. There's lots of it nearby, including a patch beside the captives' pen. So one day when Circe let us out to feed, I pulled a bulb and ate it. Moly has a very pungent flavor, but I'm used to it since my family eats it often. That evening, when Circe dosed us with the tonic, it had no effect on me. I pretended to be drunk like usual, but the moly had blocked the tonic's power. When Circe began to embrace the fat shepherd, I slipped into the forest."

"Maybe the moly will work for me. I can wait for darkness, creep up to the pen, and feed it to my kinfolk. Where can I find this herb?"

"I have some with me." The youth reached into his sack, brought out two bulbs, and gave them to me. "Take one bite now and tuck the rest away. But a rescue in the darkness has no chance of success. Circe sits out all night with her weaving. What you need to do is step into her clearing in the daylight. She'll move to the attack, but don't resist."

"Why? Because I'm just a girl?" I felt so insulted, my cheeks blazed with heat. "I'm fiercer than I look. My sling's defeated brawny men."

"I'm sure it has. I wasn't impugning your martial prowess."

He had the good sense not to laugh this time. I swear I would have marred those handsome features with a rock.

"But force can never defeat Circe," he continued. "Though her beauty has no power over females, she's invincible in a fight."

“What about men? There must be champions stronger than her.”

“I’ve seen her easily disarm the greatest warriors. One expert with the javelin had his missiles turned against him no sooner than he’d thrown them. Circe caught four in a row and hurled them back, pinning his limbs against a massive elm. I’ve even seen her parry a slingman’s stones by flicking both ends of her staff.”

“Then how can I rescue my family?” In truth, I was in no condition for a fight. I felt tired, weighted down, and overwhelmed. But the last thing I wanted was to admit this to the handsome youth. “She must have some weakness that I can attack.”

“There is one way,” he said. “When Circe raises her staff against you, don’t fight back. Put down your sling, and let her dose you with the potion. But before you step into her clearing, you must eat moly first. This way, your senses will remain sharp. When Circe locks you in the pen, wait for her to go inside her cottage with your uncle, then give moly to the others. The next time you’re released to feed and drink, all your family can escape.”

“All right, I’ll do exactly as you say. Thank you so much for advising me. I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Tenes. Named for our isle’s founder, a distant ancestor. My father honors him, because he died valiantly in battle many generations past.”

“By the Aechean warrior Achilles, wasn’t it? At the time of the Trojan War. My own father loves to tell this story.”

“Indeed. I’m cursed to bear a hero’s name, and me a simple farmer.”

“Yes, a hero’s name, and a God’s face. I call that no curse, Tenes.” Now I didn’t blush. I looked straight into his sea-green eyes. “Since you’ve paid me the honor of sharing your name and counsel, you should know I’m called Nerissa. Named as a tribute to the sea sprites. My little Nereid, that’s what my father often calls me.”

“Ah, so I was right. You are a nymph maid, after all.”



After taking leave of Tenes, I ate one bite of the moly. It was so strong in flavor, my mouth felt like it had burst out in flames. I felt thankful that Tenes couldn’t smell my breath. I had nothing to drink, and heard no rivulet nearby. I feared that Circe would easily detect the moly’s reek, so I plucked some needles from an evergreen and chewed on them to mask the stench. Before I reached the clearing’s edge, I spat them out. As Tenes had instructed, I made sure to leave behind my sling, as well.

Before I stepped into the sunlight, I paused behind a massive tree. It was a sort of willow, similar to the osiers we use for basketry back home. As I watched the clearing, I ran my hands over the woven pattern of its bark. I knew that I was stalling, but this was a fearsome task for one so young as I. Even had I felt my best, the scene in front of me was far beyond my competence to fix.

I saw my kinsmen rooting in the dirt. They all were smeared with mud and grease. They roared with strange noises, making no sense that I could interpret. They bickered over acorn husks. Apparently, Circe fed them on mast, as one does with a herd of hogs. But just as quickly as they fought, they hugged each other, beaming blissful grins. Then fell to slurping from a trough. What Mother had reported that morning was no exaggeration. Our men were acting just as swine.

Meanwhile, my aunts and female cousins slept inside a pen. Mother was in there, too, snoring, drooling, completely disarrayed. Of all the things I saw that day, I think this was the greatest shock of all. Only the most powerful of witches could have made my rigid, always proper mother take the form of a wine-besotted slattern lying in the mire.

I must have made a noise, because Circe noticed me. She stood up from her loom and advanced rapidly, brandishing a thin staff. Now I felt certain that Mother had been right and Tenes wrong. She was indeed a witch. The staff looked just like the yew wands they say sibyls use to cast their spells.

Still, Circe looked nothing like a witch. She was tall, with an exceptionally regal bearing. Her hair was sleek and amber-colored, curling gently on her alabaster shoulders. Her eyes held the glowing blue that sometimes appears in a warm sea at night. Her soft smile seemed genuinely benevolent. She was easily the most stunning woman I've ever seen. If Tenes had the features of a God, Circe was the Goddess that all Olympus looks upon with awe.

I stood entranced. I couldn't have raised my sling if I still had it in my hand. I made no resistance as Circe led me to the trough and bade me drink. She didn't require me to get down on all fours, but handed me a cup.

I drank the potion, and sighed with pleasure. It tasted like a mixture of milk and honey and strong wine. The sweetness masked the poppy's bitter sap. I took another drink, then drifted toward Father. He didn't seem to recognize me. None of my kinsmen did. My legs shaky now, I reeled toward the women's pen. Outside its locked gate, I lay down in the dirt and slept.

At least, I pretended to sleep. I was tired from Selene's visit and my long trek through the thorny forest, but the moly had done its work, so my intoxication was a sham.

About three hours later, I heard female voices. Two of my aunts were talking, but it was

a babble to my ears. From their pen, I began to hear more voices, Mother's loudest among them. I'd never heard her raise her voice before that day. On this occasion, Mother's tone was anything but self-possessed. She was calling out to Circe. I understood the name, but little else. The sense was clear, however, from the direction of Mother's gestures. She wanted more of the potion.

Presently, Circe let them out to feed and drink. Instead of acorn mast, she gave them corn. Now it was the men who slept in their own pen. Except for Uncle Clemon, who I didn't see among them. I supposed that Circe had given him a soft bed in the cottage. We were allowed to eat and drink our fill, relieve ourselves in a shed that covered a deep pit, then Circe locked us back inside the women's pen. When it grew dark, I fed bits of moly to Mother and the rest. Still under Circe's spell, they didn't understand what it was for, but they were all so pliable, it wasn't hard coaxing each of them to chew.

The next morning, they'd come to their senses. They complained of pounding headaches, but I was able to explain the plan. We all drank from the trough, then pretended to reel off in a stupor. When Circe shut us back inside the women's pen, I'd already jammed its lock with a bit of cloth. After Circe released the men to feed and drink, I waited for her to go inside with Uncle Clemon. Then I crept out and went around to each drunken man. I tickled their chins until they laughed, then tossed bits of moly into their open mouths. I stroked their throats until they swallowed.

The next day, all of them were sober. I told Father what had happened. He urged everyone to flee into the forest. He said he'd stay behind to rescue Uncle Clemon. As the others left, I retrieved my sling. After returning to Father, I begged to help. I had the only weapon, since Circe had seized all of the men's.

"No, Nerissa," Father told me. Fortunately, he didn't know that I'd become a woman, or we wouldn't have been able to speak together. "I'll borrow your sling. You may have gained great skill, but I'm the one who taught you, after all. Run now, find the others. Help anyone who needs it. I'll catch up as soon as I can get Clemon away from Circe."

I had no choice but obey. I found the others, struggling through the tangled forest. Though not intoxicated now, their legs were still unsteady. I herded them together, and led them back to our camp on the bay. But Father didn't catch up, as he'd promised. I worried through that long day as we waited for him. I feared that he'd been slain by Circe. I couldn't even speak to Andrastus about it, since Mother had now recovered her full wits. She insisted that I separate myself from all the men.

Father dragged himself into our camp that evening, badly wounded. Uncle Clemon

never did return. He wouldn't leave Circe.

I think Tenes was wrong, after all. Circe really was no mortal woman, but a powerful enchantress. Why else would my uncle desert kind-hearted Melissa and everyone he loved? I'll never know what that cruel seductress did to Clemon after she tired of the sport. Perhaps she merely sold him. Perhaps he lives on as a slave like me. But I suspect she wants no stories told about the celestial charms she offered. And Uncle Clemon always liked to talk. So I have a feeling that his bones lie deep down that stinking pit of Circe's privy.

Kappa

“Don't be crude, girl!” grumbled Homer. “That's no way to end a tale.”

“I'm sorry, sir. But it's no tale. I merely tell you exactly what befell my family.”

“Piffle. Worse yet, it's even less heroic than your last episode. You should have had a warrior make the rescue, not yourself. Your father would have served. He should have conquered Circe, forced her to release his men. Then your hero, filled with mortal lust, becomes enslaved by his own heart. He stays there for a year with Circe, ignoring his men's pleas to return home. Finally, duty to his crew wins over, and he breaks Circe's heart by leaving. Enraged, she convinces him to undertake an impossible task. She makes an augury that he must penetrate the underworld and speak to the greatest souls who dwell there. From them, he must learn the key to completing his journey.”

“But that's your story, sir, not mine. That's what you'd have Odysseus do.”

“Indeed. Odysseus came to Tenedos, you know. Your description of the island's accurate, at least. It *is* boot-shaped, a low and windy place with labyrinthine forests.”

“Of course I got it right. I'll never forget those ripping vines. They seemed to grab our flesh with a determined will to slow us after we escaped from Circe.”

“Yes, fine, maybe you were there. I'm not saying every detail of your story's fabricated. But the point is, Odysseus really was connected to this place. It's where Menelaus took their fleet after departing Troy.”

“I've heard about this. I think it was a ruse by Menelaus.”

“And how do you know this?”

“When I first came to Ithaca, I served in the household of Theoton. I heard you recite for Lady Phyllis and her friends while I was cleaning up their feast. I remember the part where Menelaus fooled the Trojans into thinking that the war was over. Then they returned in force, the war grew yet more savage, until finally Achilles slew the Trojan champion Hector and

dragged his body many times around the city's walls."

"You grasped all this while cleaning in the banquet hall? I find that hard to believe, since I held my recitation in the courtyard. And those ladies were prattling so much, I doubt any of them even remember the names Hector and Achilles. I think it's far more likely that your father knew *The Iliad* after all. Did he let you memorize it?"

"He never mentioned it that I recall. I'm sure he would have, had he read your poem. As I've told you, Father's greatest pleasure was reciting from great epics."

"Are you suggesting that my work doesn't number among these?"

Though Homer maintained his habitually ironic tone, the look across his face was deeply hurt. Nerissa wondered if he'd lost the ability to disguise his feelings, since he'd gone so long without seeing his own reflection in a glass or pond.

"Not at all," she said. "What I've heard of your verse has been superb. But I don't think your *Iliad* reached my part of the world before we sailed. Before today, I never heard your name."

"Never heard my name? And yet, you reel off drivel from that scribbler Hesiod like the words are golden nectar, fit for Gods."

"I meant no disrespect. It's simply that Father adored Hesiod's poetry. He recited it at every opportunity."

"Probably something that charlatan stole from me. Like my phrase *Polyphoisboio thalasses...* that starts my line, 'By the shore of the much sounding sea-'"

"That's in Hesiod's *Works*, isn't it?"

"Yes, and he had the nerve to claim I was the thief."

"I wouldn't know about that, sir. But I think your poetry is very fine."

"What rot. I told you that I need no flattery."

Homer's upturned lips said otherwise. His pique departed rapidly. Now he looked well pleased at Nerissa's good opinion.

"I never say what I don't mean. Your lines are glorious. I see beauty, danger, and cruel fate with every word."

"Keep still, girl. Females! That's the trouble with your species. Never know when silence will serve better. And silence is required now -- inspiration comes. Your phrase, 'celestial charms,' that's rather good. It's usable, I think. Here, take this down." Homer held out another stick of charcoal. "Be quick. The verse comes flooding through my soul."

"Yes, sir. But please remember, not too fast."

As Nerissa fumbled to unroll the sheet of parchment, Homer recited rapidly:

*“Nor shun the blessing proffered to thy arms,
Ascend her bed, and taste celestial charms;
So shall thy tedious toils a respite find,
And thy lost friends return to human kind...”*

“Magnificent! I’m awed that you can pull such luminous verse out of the lightless void.”

“Never mind all that. You must really think I crave your compliments like a drunkard needs his wine. Did you write it down exactly?”

“Yes, sir. Just finishing the last line.”

“Good. Now read it back.”

Nerissa did.

“Yes, I think that will do nicely... Here, write again. Calliope sends more:

*The goddess vowed: then seized my hand, and led
To the sweet transports of genial bed.
Ministrant to the queen, with busy care
Four faithful handmaids the soft rites prepare;
Nymphs sprung from fountains, or from shady woods,
Or the fair offspring of the sacred floods.
One o'er the couches painted carpets threw,
Whose purple luster glowed against the view:
White linen lay beneath. Another placed
The silver stands, with golden flaskets graced:
With dulcet beverage this the beaker crowned,
Fair in the midst, with gilded cups around:
That in the tripod o'er the kindled pile
The water pours; the bubbling waters boil;
An ample vase receives the smoking wave;
And, in the bath prepared, my limbs I lave:
Reviving sweets repair the mind's decay,
And take the painful sense of toil away.”*

Nerissa scratched at the parchment until reaching the last word, then made a slight noise

in her throat, letting Homer know she'd finished.

"Did you get all that?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose there's another phrase or two that you don't like."

"Well, since you ask..."

Despite the poet's sarcastic tone, Nerissa couldn't help herself. It was wonderful verse, but with just a few improvements, men might remember it for generations.

"Yes, pray tell me what you'd change."

"The line where you mention water twice."

"What's wrong with that?" Homer's voice rose high in protest. "I repeated the word water to emphasize it."

"That might make people doubt your brilliance. Some would wonder if you couldn't think of another term."

"You know nothing of epic poetry!" Homer's face looked darker than the thunder clouds that morning. "Anything else?"

"Er, well, 'ministrant' when you described the handmaids. Wouldn't 'attentive to the Queen' be better? And also, 'take the painful sense of toil away.' Personally, I would have said, 'take the sore burden of toil away.'"

"And how's that better, girl?"

"It's more accurate, wouldn't you say? That's exactly how a hot soak makes me feel after a hard day. What I wouldn't have given to lie in such a bath after our ordeal on Buskados."

"Why, what happened on Buskados?"

"Many things. It's no exaggeration to say all of them were ruinous. Even those that looked clever at the time."

"Such as?"

"I know I've tried your patience, sir--"

"Indeed."

"Yes, and I apologize. But if you don't mind another dismal tale, I'll tell you."

Lambda

For the next six days, we endured rough passage through livid seas. Above, the sky was ash and clamshell. Finally, we came to a rocky isle, where low clouds menaced its peaks. Father didn't know this place, though we later learned its name was Buskados. It appeared too small and barren to be settled. But we needed fresh water desperately -- there'd been no time to refill our casks before fleeing Tenedos.

There was a narrow inlet on Buskados, guarded by steep crags on both sides. Waves crashed constantly against them, sending up gigantic plumes of water. These twin fountains created a perpetual salt mist. Helios continued to cower behind thick clouds. But later when He found enough nerve to appear, the colored arc of Iris shone out of this vapor.

Father sent Andrastus up our mast to have a look. He reported that there was calm water past the inlet's entrance. With great skill and experience, Father steered our boat into the cove. Keeping a careful distance, my uncles followed Father's wake. My favorite cousin Philippos was helmsman for his family's boat in the absence of Uncle Clemon.

We anchored in a sandy bottom, close enough to wade ashore. A fast-flowing stream emptied into this cove, still cold from its mountain source. We felt very glad to sate our thirst before filling up the casks.

Everyone was hungry, too. Circe had let her captives gorge themselves, but it had been a week since we'd escaped. There'd only been short rations of dried fish during our voyage. Here on Buskados, we found no wild pears or plums, no nut trees or berry bushes, no herring in its waters. There wasn't even the sea lettuce or kelp that Mother had taught us to gather at low tide during Smyrna's famine. It looked like nothing edible grew on this island.

But Philippos spotted a herd of ibex on the north crag high above this cove. I counted fifteen of these wild goats, though I may have got the number wrong. There was never any moment when all of them were still. They jumped from rock to rock, paused just long enough to

crop some vegetation, then moved on. They seemed wonderfully nimble, landing on the smallest footholds, never slipping on rocks slick with spray. The fountains didn't bother them. They ignored it every time a jet of water soaked their long, coarse hair.

Philippos and Andrastus took their bows and climbed until they came in range. Their shots struck close each time, but missed. The wild goats were too alert to danger. They always bounded off an instant before the arrows hit the rock walls where they'd stood.

After using their last arrows, Andrastus and Philippos began climbing down. Dark clouds once more bullied Helios into hiding. As the two youths descended, an enormous geyser broke over Philippos's back. I feared he'd plummet to his death, but when the vapor cleared, I saw my rangy cousin clinging to a rock. Even from this distance, I could see joy etched across his face. A smile stretched the sharp lines of his jaw. He swept the long hair off his forehead. I could almost hear the laughter singing in his dove-gray eyes.

Both youths returned to us sopping wet. Nonetheless, Andrastus looked as well pleased as Philippos. Though they'd failed to bring us meat, their mission wasn't futile. Andrastus said they'd had a good view of the isle's interior. The terrain appeared much more hospitable, with a thick forest and a clear stream running down the central mountain's slope.

They'd spotted a herd of deer, grazing in a meadow perhaps two hundred stadia away. It was led by a buck with antlers so large, he appeared to carry thick branches on his head. Andrastus suggested that the men form a hunting party. Though this buck might prove a formidable opponent, surely his herd would be easier to slay than wary ibex.

Father agreed to this plan. Fortunately, Uncle Xolon also was an archer. He kept a large supply of arrows on his boat. His shoulder hadn't healed sufficiently to draw his heavy war bow, but he was a gifted tracker. During army service in his youth, my uncle had been put in charge of his phalanx's forage party. Before we set off, Xolon distributed twenty bronze-tipped arrows each to Andrastus and Philippos.

Most people had changed to iron long ago, but Xolon insisted bronze was stronger than cheap iron. Father said the advantage of iron was that it could be sharpened anew once dull, whereas bronze had to be melted down and then recast. He explained that the Mycenaean culture of our ancient ancestors had collapsed because they'd run out of timber. They couldn't build the hot wood fires needed to melt bronze. They'd felled every forest in their heartland and in their colonies, as well.

Still, Father did approve of Xolon's arrows. In addition to unbreakable, armor-piercing tips, their shafts were made of yew, a wood both strong and light. Fletched carefully with stiff tail feathers from a golden eagle, blessed at our Smyrnan shrine to the centaur Sagittarius, they

flew to the center of their targets every time.

As a reward for my resourcefulness in tricking Circe, Father returned my sling and let me join the hunt. I went down to the rocky beach, where I filled a sack with stones about the size of walnuts. My moon time was over, so I wasn't banned from joining the men. I felt very proud to be invited, but nervous also. I'd never pursued anything so large and dangerous as a full grown buck.

Noticing my apprehension, Philippos gently coaxed me into a cheerful mood. I couldn't help but smile, remembering how Philippos once tied sardines to my braids when I napped as a little girl. Though everybody laughed to see it, I didn't feel embarrassed. I was delighted that he bothered with me. Usually, the older boys had no time for small children. Afterwards, Philippos convinced me it was a good way to catch herring if I hung my hair down in the water.

Of all my clan, he'd always been the most light-hearted. Quick with a jest, clever with his mimicry, Philippos often had us laughing so hard, it felt like we'd crack our ribs. He liked to tease, but unlike his older brother Demethes, who'd died on Imbrus, it never was mean-spirited. It's not polite to speak ill of the dead, but it always seems that eldest sons are warlike, caring only for their personal glory, while middle sons learn well to be peacemakers.

As we passed a bog, surrounded by a stand of alders, Philippos told me I must smear mud on my face. He said the bloom that glowed on my cheeks would warn the deer long before we came in range for a shot. I began to do this, until a wide grin burst out on his face. I laughed and flung the mud at him. Now I felt a bit of happiness returning.

Uncle Xolon found the deer tracks easily. He stayed in front with Father while we trailed them through the forest. We soon came to the mountain's slopes, where the terrain steepened sharply. Now the gloomy weather turned even more unfriendly. The sky grew very dark, and stinging bits of ice came from the clouds. These pelted us, growing ever larger, as big as fava beans, until they were a danger.

Ahead, I spotted caves low on the mountainside. We ran through the thinning forest and reached the nearest of these. Since it had a large opening, Father said it was the best choice. Wolves and bears and other ferocious creatures prefer tight spaces for their dens.

There were ten of us, but the cave had more than ample room. We all raced in, the entrance high enough that even tall Philippos didn't have to duck his head. It was dry inside, but there was a dank odor. Above the hail's drumming from outside, we strained to hear the sound of beasts or snakes, but could detect no danger.

Still, I felt a mounting fear. I knew that we should leave. The ice storm would bruise our unprotected limbs and heads, but the pellets likely wouldn't kill us. Within the cave, I sensed a

lethal presence. I didn't like the smell in here at all. I didn't want more guilt burdening my soul. If something ruinous occurred, it would be my fault again, since I'm the one who found this questionable place of shelter.

I backed into the cave wall, then recoiled. A cry was stifled in my throat. There was nothing sinister about the smooth, hard sheet of stone. Its surface was dry, not slimy. It wasn't overhung with spider webs.

Maybe it was only spirits causing my disquiet. My recent thoughts of Demethes, who'd died beside my eldest brother Kestides. I couldn't hear their voices, but that doesn't mean they weren't speaking to me. Sometimes you only hear voices of the dead as a slight buzzing in your ears. I edged toward Philippos, who'd raced in just ahead of me.

"This isn't a good place," I whispered to him. "I like it no better than Circe's pens." Before Philippos could answer, we heard a loud cry from Andrastus.

"There's cheese!" he said. "Great stores of it!"

Andrastus always had the sharpest eyesight. He'd adjusted to the dim light first, and now stood pointing away from the cave's entrance. As the rest of us peered at the far recesses, we began to see not only rounds of cheese as big as cart wheels, but also casks as tall as men. These turned out to be full of milk, kept cool far back in the cave. At a nod from Father, we slaked our thirst and hunger with this feast.

The cheese was very rich, the milk so creamy, I knew it must come from the fattest ewes. There was such a great quantity, Father and Uncle Xolon agreed the owner shouldn't mind the small dent that we made in it. If he even noticed when he returned.

While we sated ourselves, the storm eased as rapidly as it began. As we carved off wedges of cheese to bring back to the others, I could hear the hail had slowed to a light patter.

I glanced at the entrance to confirm this. And then the light was blocked entirely. A huge man strode into the cave, followed by a dozen sheep. So this was the shepherd and this was his cave. He was dressed in a matted robe of wool. Not spun wool, but many shearling fleeces crudely sewn together.

His face was very ugly, stretched to titanic proportions, and there was only the pit of an old injury where one of his eyes should have been. He wore no shoes. He possessed no sword or knife. Instead of a staff, he carried a thick branch. A primitive, I thought. Was this the way that humans lived before Prometheus brought us fire?

He grunted out a word. We didn't understand it. He didn't respond to anything we said, though Father tried six languages. The shepherd said something else while gesturing. We gathered that his name was Polyphemus. When he pointed at us, Father recited all our names.

Satisfied with these introductions, the cave's owner didn't seem angry. In fact, he gestured that he'd milk the sheep, then share the warm drink with us. He used a pail made from stiffened leather. We didn't know how to explain that we'd already drunk our fill, and ate fat chunks of his cheese, so we squatted on the pebble-littered floor and waited. If this giant wished to be a cordial host, the least we could do was sit there patiently.

He finished milking, then brought each of us his pail. The warm milk was even better than what we'd drunk already, so we had little trouble obliging Polyphemus. Now I felt ashamed that I'd suspected evil here, when we were the ones who'd acted criminally. We'd entered this man's home and taken what we wanted, no better than thieves. But still I didn't like our generous host's smell.

After encouraging us to pass the pail and drink again, Polyphemus led his sheep to a crude pen he'd built beside the food stores. After closing their gate, he stepped outside the cave and spread his hands. I saw him smile, as if in confirmation that the hail had stopped. He dropped his arms and sauntered back inside. I thought it was to tell us that the weather had grown favorable, that now would be a good time to resume our hunt. But instead, he turned to the left just inside his entranceway.

From a niche I hadn't noticed, Polyphemus pushed a massive rock. It was almost perfectly round, making very little noise as it rolled across. I marveled that such an uncivilized man could have carved it. Then I gaped in horror as he brought the rock to rest directly in front of the cave mouth. It was his door and now he'd sealed us in!

As the cave went dark, my kinsmen cried out in consternation.

"He's made us prisoners!" yelled Father.

"It's Circe all over again!" shouted Nikos. "Or worse -- I'll bet he plans to eat us instead of selling us as slaves. That's why Polyphemus doesn't kill the lambs. He prefers human meat."

"Quick -- we all must rush him with our knives!" said Andrastus.

"No," said Father. "We might defeat him, but how would we get out? That stone's much too big for anyone but a giant to push."

"Then what's our plan?" asked Uncle Xolon.

"Let's pretend we're happy to stay inside with Polyphemus. When he takes his sheep outside to graze tomorrow morning, we all can run."

Everyone agreed to do this, but it didn't work out as Father wanted. In the morning, Polyphemus forced us to retreat from the cave mouth before letting out his sheep. He stood guard with his alder branch until the last ewe passed, went outside to join them, then rolled the

stone to seal us in once more.

This went on for days. We didn't want for food or drink, but we worried that the others starved back at the cove. And we feared that Polyphemus really meant to eat us. That would explain why he was allowing us to fatten.

On the fifth day, Nikos and Philippos tried to rush the giant as he returned with his flock. They stabbed him with their knives, but he barely seemed to notice. He seized each youth by the nape and lifted them high above his head. I watched with horror as he flung my brother and my favorite cousin to the ground. They struck the cave floor upside down. The walls echoed with the most dreadful sound I've ever heard. It was their skulls exploding. In the light that streamed through the cave's open mouth, I saw shards of bone sprayed in two wide arcs, along with brains and gore.

I screamed and had to vomit, while all the men shouted out with rage. Father caught Andrastus before he tried to attack Polyphemus, too. It might seem cowardly to offer no resistance while he killed us, but Father knew there was no defeating such a giant with a direct attack.

Drenched with yet more guilt, I whispered an idea to Father. In my herb-collecting pouch, I had some poppy resin. I'd collected it after our escape from Circe, thinking that it might prove useful. That evening in the cave of Polyphemus, all of us felt sick with grief and rage. Yet, Father had spread the word and we masked our emotions well. We ate our cheese as usual. After drinking deeply from the leather pail, I returned what was left to Polyphemus. But first, I'd mixed in the poppy resin. I had no wine or honey, but hoped the rich taste of the milk would mask the poppy's bitter flavor.

In one gulp, Polyphemus drained the half-full pail. Soon, he lay down and went to sleep. In the small amount of moon light coming past the huge, round rock, Father was able to creep alongside our captor. He plunged his knife into the single eye of Polyphemus. But he was careful not to let it sink too deep, or he might have killed the giant. Polyphemus didn't even stir.

The next morning, he woke much later than usual. But he must have thought that it was very early, well before the dawn. That the cave's usual darkness was now complete for him didn't seem to alarm our warder. He simply let his sheep out of their pen, rolled back the stone, and stood aside to let his flock go out. Still groggy with my potion, it didn't occur to Polyphemus that we might walk out in their midst.

We continued silently down the mountainside as he rolled his great stone back in place. Once we'd reached a safe distance, we ran all the way back to the cove.

“No, by Triton’s soggy beard, you have it wrong again!” groused Homer. “You just don’t grasp the concept of heroic verse. What lesson has your hero learned? He’s showed mortal failures, yes, with duplicity and cowardice and greed, but he cannot run away at the tale’s end.”

“Why not? That’s exactly what we did. We had no choice, or Polyphemus would have killed us all, like poor Nikos and Philippos.”

“Both of whom you left unburied, their gore splattered across that dismal place.”

“I know. It was a terrible thing to bear. We all felt so ashamed, but it would have been a greater sin to return and sacrifice ourselves. Father had to think about our clan. We had to take food back to them. We had to get them off this island before we were attacked. Father suspected there were other giants on Buskados. After all, Polyphemus wasn’t sired by a ram. He likely had parents and siblings just as large as he.”

“Now that would be more like it. Other giants, yes. And they shouldn’t be mortal, but a clan of Titans. One eyed Titans, a race of Cyclopes. Defeating such an enemy would be much more of a feat.”

“But sir, that isn’t what we faced. Only one man held us in that cave. And Polyphemus was no God -- he bled. I saw it dripping down his flank after Nikos and Philippos stabbed him. I saw the ooze splatter from his eye when Father gouged it out.”

“Yes, that was good. I liked the utter treachery. It sets up a possible redemption.”

“What do you mean treachery? Father was a good, courageous man.”

Nerissa stopped and glared at Homer. Almost immediately, she realized this was foolish. Of course, he couldn’t see her umbrage. But she hoped he felt the cold censure coming from her eyes.

“But don’t you understand?” Homer held out his hands, as if explaining the four elements to children. “Treachery is vital here. I thought your story establishes that mortal failure well. You said it, yourself -- your father trespasses in this cave, then encourages his followers to steal provisions. When the rightful occupant returns and offers shelter, your father allows two men to attack.”

“What are you talking about? Though Polyphemus made us prisoners, Father was wise enough to warn us not to kill him. Nikos and Philippos disobeyed him, but that was understandable when it looked more and more like Polyphemus meant to eat us. He killed Nikos and Philippos when they were only trying to escape.”

“You miss the point. Polyphemus had a right to kill them. Your people stole cheese and

milk. They should slaughter half the sheep, too. And there should be a scene where the Titan's tender with his lambs. It would make him almost sympathetic. That way, your people would exhibit a more monstrous nature than this Cyclopes."

"We were only trying to save our lives. There's nothing monstrous about that."

"You still don't understand. Quite correctly, you've established a display of human weakness, but you fail to take it through." Then Homer beamed, his tone of pique replaced by joy. "I know! Initially, your hero must conceal his identity from the Titan. When asked, he must give Polyphemus a false name. He believes he's doing this to protect his family from retaliation. But falsehood can never be the action of true heroes. They must always show pride in announcing their names and lineage and feats."

"So Father always was. He announced his name was Asclemeleon when the giant first stepped in the cave. But Polyphemus was brutish. He wasn't capable of understanding what we said."

"That needs to change. Quite civilly, he must ask the hero for his name. Ah, I've got it. The answer will be 'Noman.'"

"Why Noman?"

"After he's drugged and blinded, Polyphemus must scream for help. His kinsmen rush to his door from neighboring caves, shouting 'Who attacks you?' When Polyphemus answers 'Noman does,' they'll think he's saying, 'No man does.' That's why they go away."

"But--"

"Wait. I'm coming to the key. After Polyphemus rolls back his stone, enabling escape, your hero's better nature will emerge. As he sails away, he'll call out his true name and history. This will enrage the tribe of Cyclopes, who'll bombard his ship with boulders. He'll narrowly avoid shipwreck, but Polyphemus will call out for succor to Poseidon, father of the Titan race. Vengeful as Zeus, Himself, the Lord of Earthquakes and the Deep will assail your voyage to its end with crushing storms and all manner of earthbound catastrophe."

"That's not at all what happened! Besides, you're saying the right thing to do on Buskados is the very thing that brings a final ruin."

"Indeed. That's always how it is for tragic heroes."

Mu

For the next hour, Nerissa patiently inscribed Homer's version of the events on Buskados. As the Cyclopes alternately spoke with eloquence then consumed pairs of sailors at each meal, she bit her lip to silence the protests that wanted to spill out. She read back the poet's words each time he asked, making no objections.

Apollo drew his blazing orb ever closer to nightfall. If she could keep Homer heedless of their journey's original purpose until evening, he'd have no choice but return with her to his home. By then, he'd have a true measure of her usefulness as guide. Well, not guide so much, because she'd led him in the wrong direction, but certainly he'd have to credit her value as a scribe.

She'd have a quiet word with Philemon, convince him to rest his swollen feet another day, then another and another. If luck was in her favor just this once, Homer would begin to find her help invaluable. He'd purchase her from Tragus, if only to avoid the embarrassment of explaining why he'd been so slow to return her.

Not hearing any sounds of writing, Homer repeated his latest lines. The poet's irritated tone startled Nerissa from her rumination. She quickly flexed her hand. She knew she mustn't allow herself to slip into such thoughts again. She took a deep breath to renew her concentration, then inscribed the Cyclopes's cries for vengeance:

*"Hear me, Poseidon; thou whose arms are hurled
From shore to shore, and gird the solid world;
If thine I am, nor thou my birth disown,
And if unhappy Cyclopes be thy son,
Let not Odysseus breathe his native air,
Stymie Laertes' son, of Ithacus the fair.*

*If to regain his country be his fate,
Be it through toils and heartache long and late;
His lost companions let him first deplore;
Some vessel, not his own, transport him o'er;
And when at home from foreign torments freed,
More near and deep, domestic woes succeed!"*

"You there on the road!" From across the field, a cry interrupted the poet's recitation. Though far away, the deep voice carried strongly on the wind. "Is that you, Homeros, son of Hippomachus? I want a word."

"*With imprecations thus he filled the air,*" the poet continued, ignoring another loud cry to stop.

"Sir, that man is calling to you," said Nerissa. "He looks determined that we stop."

"Pay him no heed. The man whose voice accosts us is a common ruffian. Now where was I?"

"*With imprecations thus he filled the air,*" Nerissa read back the line.

"Right:

*With imprecations thus he filled the air,
And Poseidon heard the profane prayer,
A larger rock then heaving from the plain,
He whirled it round: it sung across the main;
It fell, and brushed the stern: the billows roar,
Shake at the weight, and ebbing beat the shore."*

"Stop, you scoundrel!" The voice was even louder now, as its owner ran across the field. "I'll have my seven minai or I'll wring the silver from your hide."

"Sir, that man looks very angry," said Nerissa.

And also very large. He now was close enough to see his size rivaled Polyphemus. But he had two good eyes, with a fierce hatred gleaming from them. Nerissa recognized him as the executioner Jeremos. From the rough homespun he wore, Nerissa guessed that when he wasn't chopping heads, he was the tenant farmer of this field.

"We must leave at once," said Homer. "That man is a lunatic. Stir your legs."

"What's this about the silver? Do you owe him money?"

"That's no concern of yours. Just take my hand and run."

"We can't outrun him, sir. I suggest you speak to him. Your tongue has more silver than all the mines of Siphnos."

"Ah, it seems that yours is very clever, too. But that isn't what's required. This is why you'll never serve. It's true I need a younger guide than Philemon, but a stout manservant's necessary. Someone who could fight off louts like this."

"Let me have your pouch, sir."

"What, do you propose to buy this man off with my dinner? That's all I carry in the pouch. While there's a nice piece of roast mutton and some newly ripened olives, I doubt he'll accept it in lieu of seven minai."

"Just take the food out, sir, and give the pouch to me. I can fold it for a makeshift sling. If you'll recall, I proved myself an accurate shot on Imbrus."

"Oh, brilliant. You'll defend us by pelting him with olives?"

"Of course not, sir. You may have noticed as we walked that this lane is very rocky."

She knelt and selected three stones from the road. Meanwhile, Homer took out the piece of mutton, a heel of wheaten bread, a handful of plump olives, and a goatskin full of wine. With a dubious expression, he handed the empty pouch to Nerissa.

"Stop!" she yelled at Jeremos, who was now halfway across the field. "Leave my master in peace, or you'll force me to defend him."

"I'm not your master," objected Homer. "If you must speak for me, don't utter falsehoods."

Jeremos only snorted with derision. He kept on coming at an even greater speed. Nerissa slung a rock that grazed his boot. Jeremos stumbled, but didn't fall. He glanced at his foot, then at Nerissa. He was too proud, too strong, and too fearless to be scared off by a tattered slave girl's lucky throw. With a contemptuous expression, he began to run at them again.

Nerissa's next rock thumped into his chest. This one put him down immediately, his breath knocked from his lungs. But Jeremos's rage outweighed his caution. He regained his breath, wiped the mud out of his eyes, and stood. He felt all around his ribcage. It was deeply bruised, but there were no broken bones. Now, he drew a large knife from his robe. Clenching his teeth with hatred, he ran toward the road.

Leading him only slightly, because his pace was slower now, Nerissa struck his thigh. She hoped he'd retreat before she was forced to aim at his head. She knew she'd be blamed for killing him. She couldn't claim *dikaioi phonos*. The jurors would never consider it a just killing, though the man presented a mortal threat to Homer. She was a slave and had no rights.

Not even to have a family and own property, as was the case in many other lands. Moreover, she wasn't the blind poet's body guard. Doubtless, he'd say nothing to defend her when Jeremos's kinsmen pressed their case for execution.

Jeremos sat up and felt his thigh. Like his ribs, it wasn't broken. Nerissa had chosen the smallest stones. He got to his knees, then to his feet. He glared with fury, first at Homer, then Nerissa. But as she raised her sling again, he turned away, then limped back to his hut.



“Damn you, girl! You’ve lied to me.”

It was the first thing Homer said since Nerissa's victory. Hardly the thanks that she'd expected. What had she ever done to him, other than save his disagreeable life? Nerissa had to wonder if some woman once betrayed him. Maybe a young one, no older than she.

“Sir, I haven't spoken falsely. I wouldn't bring disgrace upon my parents' memories. Everything I've told you of my history is true.”

“You said we turned at the vineyard that belongs to Pylocles. You claimed he had a new and silent dog. But we never turned as I instructed, did we? Instead, you led me to the one road I must shun. And you attacked the one man who wishes ruin to fall down on my head.”

Homer thrust his arm out. The motion was so violent, Nerissa thought he meant to strike her. But instead, he opened his palm, his arm held stiff, his visage stern, unyielding. After a moment of perplexity, Nerissa realized that he wanted his pouch returned. She gave it back without a word.

“I'm very sorry, sir,” she said after the silence extended uncomfortably. “I admit I may have been mistaken about which vineyard we passed. I must have gotten lost.”

Now that Homer mentioned it, she *had* strayed far from truthfulness. But Nerissa hardly felt ashamed. Had this insufferable poet given her a choice? He didn't have one single grain of sympathy for all she'd suffered. The only thing he felt for her was a wish to reunite Tragus with his property, while causing himself the least inconvenience. Ever since they'd met, he'd belittled her abilities, insulted her family, and now condemned her honesty. She had every right to indignation.

“But you're at fault, as well,” Nerissa said. “I saved your life, and all you can do is criticize. You must be the most ungrateful man who's ever walked on Gaea's earth.”

“It's gratitude you want? For what? You knock down Philemon, then convince him he's too sore to walk. You beset me with a string of hard luck stories so unbelievable, not even the

most gullible audience would credit them. You force me to waste a day returning you to my worthless cousin, who's bound to put me out of sorts for weeks... then you don't even lead me straight. And you entangle me with Jeremos, the one person I must avoid."

"Why? What have you done to him?"

"Done to him?" Homer's voice rose high with frustration. "It's what he's done to me! That man has hounded me for years. He's slandered my good name."

"He says you owe him silver."

"He claims this, but the charge is false. Not only that, but it's patently malicious."

"What's it about?"

"About? You have the nerve to ask? After your deception nearly got me killed?"

"I drove him off. He was running at us with a knife. A very large one."

"Then it was even more foolish to attack." Homer's face plainly registered disgust. He shook his head and muttered to himself as he put the bread, wine, mutton, and olives back into his pouch. "Never mind. This is getting us nowhere. Now I insist you retrace our steps to the vineyard of Pylocles. And this time, you'll make the turn, no tricks. If we hurry, there's a chance of getting some work done this evening with Philemon."

"You still intend to force me back to Tragus's abuse?" For all of Homer's coldness, Nerissa had never quite believed he'd do it. "You think I've lied about the rapes and beatings, too. And that poor ewe. But it's all true. He'll kill me, I swear it by Athena's righteous heart."

"I think you have a rich imagination," Homer said. "A fine quality in poets, but not the sort of virtue one looks for in a slave."

"So be it, then. I've endured every pain and calumny the Gods could dream up to amuse themselves. Why should a weak man like you have greater mercy? I'll lead us on the proper path, but don't expect me to write down any more of your distortions."

"What? You--"

But a thunderclap obliterated Homer's words. It was so loud, it seemed to tear the world like a great mountain-splitting earthquake. Of course the poet couldn't see the jagged line that cleft the heavens, but he gazed up sightlessly, aghast at Zeus's fury. He stood there frozen as more thunder boomed and lightning struck the field. It was so close, their nostrils burned with a metallic reek. Now Homer's frightened visage turned to awe.

Grabbing his hand, Nerissa pulled with all her strength. The rain began to lash, driving from the west. If they cut across the field's upper corner, they'd reach a stone fence where they'd find a bit of cover from the slanting storm. Tugging an unresisting Homer across the fallow land, Nerissa ran.

“No, wait,” said Homer, coming to his senses. “We must head up the road.”

“Why? I see no other shelter.”

“Not far north of Jeremos's farm, there's a small cave on the slope of Neriton. Philemon tells me there's a large white boulder on the opening's right side and a poplar on the left. We call it the Grotto of the Nymphs. My ancestor Odysseus was born inside it. Before this feud broke out, it used to be my favorite place.”



Nerissa found the cave just as the worst of the storm began to lash the slope with sheets of water. Little light was coming from outside, and they had no torch or oil lamp. She'd lived through so many things, not much scared Nerissa any more. Least of all was death, but ever since Buskados, she had a fear of caves. She couldn't help thinking that evil might lurk in its dark niches, that black stains of gore might be splattered on the walls, that she might never reemerge into daylight. She caught herself groping around the inside of the cave mouth. She pulled her hand back, disgusted with herself. Of course there wasn't a gigantic stone, ready to roll across and seal them in.

“Don't stop here,” said Homer. “There's a recess at the back. It has a ledge where we can sit.”

“I can't see anything in here. The storm has made it very dark.”

“Light or dark, it makes no difference to me. Very well -- now that we're equally blind, I'll lead.”

He didn't sound angry now. The storm had chased away Nerissa's resentment, too. She only wanted to get warm and dry.

“Yes, sir,” she said. “I'll just put my hand on your shoulder, if you don't mind. I wouldn't like to become lost in here.”

“We won't. It isn't a large cave. But people come here often enough to keep it free of snakes.”

“No one lives in it, do they?”

“Ancient people did. Philemon tells me there are paintings on the walls. Supplications to a fertility goddess, that sort of thing. And he once found knuckle-bones so old, they crumbled when he held them.”

“Knuckle-bones for astragalomancy? We do that, too, in Smyrna.”

“I'm not surprised. It's one of the oldest forms of prophecy. No doubt your Achaean

ancestors brought it east. They, themselves, learned it from Oreads. Who taught it to the Muses, too.”

“Is that why this cave is called the Grotto of the Nymphs?”

“Just so. If it weren't dark, you'd see an ancient altar. It's so old, the stalactites and stalagmites that surround it have managed to wed.”

“That must be beautiful. I hope the storm ends before nightfall, so I can see it.”

“Maybe. But don't count on it.” He didn't add that Nerissa's more likely motive was transparent -- if they were delayed here until evening, there'd be no chance of Tragus reclaiming her today. “The Gods are treacherous, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I suppose you've heard that Zeus was given lightning by the Cyclopes.”

“Yes. Poseidon gained his trident from them, too. And Hermes his helmet of invisibility. Father taught us all of that.”

“Then you know why Zeus's battles with the Titans are often long. After all this time, their primordial race remains infuriated that he'd usurp their power by turning these gifts against them.”

“Oh. Now that you put it like that, it does seem dishonorable... I've often wondered why such powerful beings need to act so faithlessly.”

“Isn't that obvious? It arises from their very power.”

“Is that why they're so often angry with us? Because we know about their failings?”

“I doubt it matters to them what we think. As far as I can tell, they care little about us. About as much as we do for the thoughts of beetles. Which come to think of it, you'd better sweep the ledge before we sit down. Beetles, spiders, and what have you, they all tend to gather there, because it's always dry.”

“Yes, sir. I can see a little now. Your ledge is just ahead.”

“There should be a blanket wedged into a crevice right above it. I used to roll it for a pillow when I'd lie back and think. If it's still there, we can towel off with it, then brush the ledge.”

“We're here. I do see something stuck into a crack.” Nerissa reached up and pulled the blanket out. “Your blanket's dry. A few holes, but it's in one piece.”

“Good. Help me shake it out.”

She did, then Homer let go of the blanket's corners. He said nothing, but it was clear that he was offering Nerissa the first turn to dry herself.

Though the blanket wasn't clean, she accepted readily. She stripped off her sodden rags,

then rubbed the woolen cloth over her skin. It was soft, not rough as she'd expected. It felt wonderful, in fact. She could feel warmth start to seep back in her bones. The gooseflesh of her skin receded. Her shivering began to ease.

Homer didn't hurry her. It puzzled Nerissa, since he'd been just as soaked as she. He seemed a different man from the cross and haughty poet who'd berated her. He sat there patiently as she wrapped the blanket close around her body. He didn't say a word, even when her chattering teeth grew quiet. Recovered now, Nerissa unwrapped the blanket. Though she extended it against his arm, Homer remained motionless. If he weren't a blind man, she could swear that he was gazing at her naked form.

It felt odd that Homer's eyes were turned in her direction, almost as if he had the vision of night creatures that worked inside this cave. It felt odder still that she didn't mind. An image leaped into Nerissa's thoughts of the poet's hands upon her body. Not rough, but tender like the blanket. They'd feel her all around, the way Grandmother used to see the children's faces with her fingers after her eyes grew dim.

As Homer continued staring straight at her, Nerissa wondered if he was completely blind. Maybe people came to him as blurry forms, as Grandmother once said. But if Homer was enjoying the shadowy outline of her body, there was no change in his thoughtful expression. And no indication that he knew she'd finished drying.

Nerissa pressed the damp blanket into his hands. Still, he didn't speak. He simply removed his outer chlamys, patted his limbs dry, then rubbed his dark curls vigorously. Again, she was surprised that he didn't strip his chiton to wring it out. Most men would have done so, whether blind or sighted. Men of property wouldn't care what slaves might think about their nudity. A slave was no more than a useful item, like a cake of soap or birch flail at the baths.

Maybe he was shy. Maybe he had some deformity, in addition to his blindness. No, that didn't seem to be the case. With his inner garments plastered tight against him, Nerissa could see that Homer possessed a fine physique. Then she saw this fact confirmed as he unclasped his chiton, turned his back away, and toweled off the beads of water clinging to his upper torso.

It was odd that Homer seemed so ill at ease to bare himself in front of her. Other than the strangeness of his eyes, he was an attractive man. He had a very virile body. Could it be that there was something wrong about his manly parts? No, as he turned back, Nerissa could see their outline beneath the wet cloth. They seemed to be of normal size and form.

He returned the blanket to Nerissa. She noticed that he'd used the same side as her, leaving the other dry. It must have been on purpose. Again surprised at his consideration, she wrapped the blanket around her body once again. Now she wouldn't have to put her wet and

tattered clothes back on. She used them to wipe the bench before they both sat down.

“Here,” said Homer, handing her one half of the bread he'd torn in two. “You must be hungry. If I know that lout Tragus, he didn't feed you much.”

Was the food and blanket Homer's idea of an apology? She wondered why he couldn't simply thank her for driving off the huge man Jeremos. And she felt very curious about their feud. Was it possible that it involved a woman? She didn't even know if Homer had a wife.

But Homer's generosity wasn't finished. Using a small knife from a pocket of his cape, he cut his wedge of roast mutton exactly down the middle. He handed one piece to Nerissa, then folded the bread around his own. She followed his example, then took a bite -- it was the most delicious thing she'd ever tasted. She'd learned to ignore hunger so often in the past two years, she hadn't realized how much her empty stomach craved food. As she chewed, Homer held out his hand once more. This time it was full of olives. They were bursting with sweet oil. So flavorful, they must have been newly picked that morning.

After Nerissa finished the first three, Homer offered his wineskin. The drink inside was very good. Uncommonly rich in flavor, with hints of clove and orange blossom. If this came from a vintner here on Ithaca, he was a true master of the Bacchan art. She filled her mouth with wine again, then handed back the goatskin.

Homer accepted it in silence. Now Nerissa realized that he felt ashamed about his outburst earlier. For all the clarity of his verse, this poet was a hard man to read. He must be favored by the Muses, because his writing sang with their immortal voices. But he was also plagued with deep hubris. She knew, because today she'd heard echoes from the Muses, too. When told that he'd misheard a word or two, Homer was unwilling to accept the possibility he'd erred.

Here in this holy cave, Nerissa felt a gathering sense that she'd been sent to help. Was this the object of her long and desolate ordeal? She felt a strange connection to this brilliant artist. She found she didn't mind his frequent spates of arrogance. Wasn't this the way of exceptional men? No matter how irritating, their sojourn had been the most enjoyable thing to come into her life in years.

Nerissa realized that she felt something powerful toward him, but she could not say what. It was especially unsettling to feel this so soon after Theoton's betrayal. She didn't know what to think. She hardly knew how she felt about herself, let alone this man.

She hadn't been a month on Ithaca before betraying Andrastus in her heart. She'd turned her loneliness into something warm for Theoton. She'd convinced herself he was a man of remarkable worth, when he really was the sort of opportunist who'd thought nothing of casting

her aside.

And she couldn't even blame it on desperation. Even before being made a slave, she'd hardly led an admirable life. She'd killed men, so many that she didn't have a count. She'd widowed blameless women, and caused children no different than her to live as orphans. Each of them would know a crueler world without their fathers. She'd left her own brother Euredon to die, the noblest person whom she'd ever known. She'd allowed the scum of all the seas to rape her on the Thallia. She should have leaped into the waves before Hycron even had the chance to cut her. This lie she told herself about staying alive to preserve her loved ones memories... it was the worst form of cowardice.

And she was lying still. She should just tell Homer he was right. That she was an unfit companion. That she'd intentionally led him off the route. As soon as the storm ended, she'd go back. She deserved everything that Tragus did to her, and more. She'd stayed alive time after time, while her entire clan had died.

If anyone deserves the name Odysseus, it's me, she thought. I should be loathed by all, both Gods and men.

Why would her family's shades want her prayers? They'd be right to curse her if she built an altar for them. She should be kicked to death and covered with manure in place of that poor ewe. Who could blame the Fates if they doomed her soul to lurk alone in misery forever?

"Sir," she said. "There's something I must tell you."

"Another story, is it? Let's hope that it's a long one. This storm shows no sign of abating."

"No, sir, it's not another tale of tears and grief and lamentation."

"Hmmm, that's rather sonorous. This phrase, I like it well. It perfectly describes the ordeal that I seek for heaven-scorned Odysseus. Your history contains no more lamentation?"

"It does. That is to say, many more sorrowful things occurred between Buskados and here, but I have no wish to disturb you with them. I am a slave. That's all I am, and all I should be. As I remember from your Iliad when you recited it for Lady Phyllis, 'Zeus, of the far-borne voice, takes away half one's virtue, when the day of slavery comes upon him.'"

"That's 'half a man's virtue.' And no one disputes your status as a slave. But come, slaves needn't be dejected. Take Philemon. That old grouser may be a hypochondriac, but he's happy, I can tell you. He has a cat he pampers; he feeds it kitchen scraps and goat's milk every night. I'd wager it surprises you to hear that I permit my slave a pet."

"No, not really. I hope I haven't given you the impression I consider you harsh. Maybe it's because my only experience with masters is that they're cruel men, thinking only of their

selfish needs.”

“I’m anything but cruel. People can say what they like about me, but I assure you I’m the most tolerant master imaginable. I even allow Philemon a bowl of barley ale each night before he sleeps. You should hear him chuckle in his dreams. And my cook, she’s singing constantly. They both have well-contented lives.”

“Maybe so, but they don’t belong to Tragus.”

“Come now, girl. It isn’t like you to sound so despondent. I’ve listened to you through the day, and this is the first time your voice has lost its cheerful tone.”

“Is that why you don’t believe me? Because I failed to recount my travels with appropriate gloom? I suppose it never occurred to me to change my voice.”

“What? No, I never said I don’t believe you. But you must admit, you have a bard’s natural affection for hyperbole. I’m sure your family saw its share of hardship. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have wound up a slave. And I don’t mind a fair bit of exaggeration. That’s why people listen to us poets. Accounts of ordinary life, the sort favored by that plodder Hesiod, they hold no interest for most. So don’t hold back on my account. I find your tales implausible, but fascinating. Go right ahead. What’s next?”

“Nothing sir. That is to say, it wasn’t another tale I wished to tell you... What I wanted to say is you were right.”

“Right about what? It’s not often I hear that from a woman.” Homer smiled with self-deprecation. “If I’m right this once, it would certainly help me to know what it involved.”

“Please don’t banter with me, sir. I don’t deserve your kindness. I deliberately missed that turn. I hoped to gain more time. I wanted to prove my skill at scribing to you. And to convince you that it would be unjust to force me back to a brutal master. If you only heard my wretched history, I thought--”

“*Wretched* history? Why, it’s marvelous. You needn’t be dispirited. My criticism’s only intended to improve. You mustn’t think I offered it in malice. If you simply make your heroes act heroic, this tale has everything it needs. Warfare, disaster, vengeance, greed, deceit, and lust. Olympian intrigue. Not to mention a budding romance, if I correctly read the signs between you and this Andrastus. But I’d like you to do more with that.”

“I would have liked it, too...” Nerissa felt relieved the poet couldn’t see her blush. “But it never happened, sir. I prayed it would, and once, it seemed Athena heard me, but then--”

“Her rivals intervened? Yes, that would be good. Poseidon, perhaps, furious that the Athenians rejected his gift of water.”

“They what?”

“It happened when they held a contest to name their city. While Poseidon’s water would give them naval and trading power, they claimed it was too salty to make Athens prosper. They chose Athena’s olive tree instead, for its bountiful fruit and wood and oil. The perfect crop to take advantage of their rocky soil. That’s why they named their city after her, you know.”

“I know nothing of the Gods’ rivalries. I can only tell you what actually took place on earth.”

“You still insist this story’s true in all its details?”

“Of course it is. I wasn’t gifted with your powers of imagination.”

“No? Pity, that... Cheer up, girl. You’ve done well enough so far. We’re dry now and we’ve had a satisfying meal. Better yet, this wine’s particularly good for storytelling. Can you feel it curl its warmth into your blood? There’s nothing like good food and drink, pleasant company, and a safe place when you know the storm outside could flay you into carrion. We have all evening, it seems. You’d better carry on.”

Nu

Throughout a long morning and afternoon, the weather worsened steadily. The sky above grew darker than a moonless night. But being day, there weren't even stars to guide our way. As the storm increased, waves surged as high as liquid mountains. Our vessels were like hobbled creatures on their slopes, stumbling vainly for a foothold. Each time we struggled up an impossibly steep wall to gain its crest, we'd immediately plummet into a fearsome trough.

Poseidon's frenzied ocean slid and heaved; black plumes of water tried to crush us with their might. And all the while, the Sea God's anger lashed our sails with stinging spume. The salt of His cold spittle ate into our hulls. We heard His fury in the seething wind. We felt His promise of revenge each time a towering whitecap broke against our planks.

I scarcely had the heart to hang onto the mast. I felt so grieved for Nikos and Philippos, rotting there unburied in the cave of Polyphemus, I couldn't bring myself to care about the storm. Once again, I'd failed to save those closest to me. I'd let a misplaced sense of honor stop me from drugging Polyphemus soon enough. No, it wasn't even something as forgivable as honor. The bare truth is that fear alone had stilled my hand.

Let the next wave tear me from my family -- these were the words that filled my anguished heart. Let the water pull me down and take my life. Let hagfish suck the jelly from my eyes. Let all my bones be scattered, swept across the deeps, let dark, cold tides wash every scrap of flesh away. I had little hope that the abyss could also wash away my pain.

We struggled on for hours, desperate for rest. When Poseidon's rage was at its worst, Father ordered us to bind ourselves securely. Our sail was in shreds, the rudder cracked. There was nothing more to do but tie our bodies to a mast or beam or spar. The others all managed,, but I couldn't make my fingers work. They wouldn't open from their crooked prayer.

"Please take me as your sacrifice," I called against the howling storm. "I'm sorry about Polyphemus. I'm sorry about everything. Take me, and leave my family at peace."

But great Poseidon wanted no part of my offer. Instead, the dark clouds lifted and the

waters stilled. I knew He'd opted to prolong our agony. He wanted time to devise yet greater torments. No easy drowning for such cursed malefactors.

After Father lashed the rudder, we were able to row in the direction of Aunt Melissa's boat. It was hopelessly smashed, demasted, leaking badly. Without Uncle Clemon, Demethes, or Philippos, it had fared badly in the storm. There was no one with strength enough to turn their prow into the crashing waves. The family's two oldest sons had died three years earlier, forced to serve as soldiers in the Lydian wars. Aunt Melissa had suffered a broken arm in the storm, her remaining children each were gashed and battered.

As the largest vessel, we took them all aboard, then left Clemon's boat to sink. My other uncles reassembled, but our little fleet was in a perilous condition. There was no land in sight, and with no stars, no means to orient ourselves. Once more, we had few provisions. Our only fresh water was the rain we wrung out of our tattered sails.

But Father was never one to panic. He told my uncles that we must wait for a clear night, then determine our position. In the meantime, we must mend our sails. For just such emergencies, he always stored a good supply of canvas, strong sisal thread, and long, curving mariner's needles.

While we all sat at this work, Father tried to cheer us with a story.

"There's no need to feel heartless," he said. "Men have lived through much greater ordeals. Disaster is a part of human life. Our ancestors endured despite worse sorrows than we've known. Think of Prometheus, for instance."

"But he was a Titan, not a man," I said.

"My point exactly. His foe was indomitable Zeus. Imagine coming up against omnipotence. That's far more than anything we've faced."

"Will you tell us about when Prometheus stole fire?" asked my cousin Chloe.

"It started much earlier than that," said Father. "It was all because Zeus wanted to make a permanent division between the rights of mortals and immortals. So He hosted a great banquet where these accounts would all be settled."

"Prometheus resented his minor status, didn't he?" said Chloe. "So he played a trick on Zeus."

Of course, she'd learned this tale before, since it was one of Father's favorites. Back home, Chloe's family lived next door. She often spent her evenings with us. But I knew the great attraction wasn't Father's stories. Like me, Chloe breathed a little faster when Andrastus was around. Her large eyes sparkled and she'd throw her shoulders back to make her chest stand out.

Chloe was only a year older than me, but a world away in the ripe contour of her body. She always tried to draw Andrastus's attention with her womanly shape. She did everything possible to brighten her face and hair and clothes before she'd let Andrastus see her. I struggled to remember that jealousy only made me as ridiculous as her. Andrastus is too fine a person to fall for a vain and empty-headed girl, I'd tell myself. Of course, I badly underestimated Chloe's determination to prevail. I hadn't yet experienced the depths of treachery that lurked within my cousin's heart.

"I wouldn't say Prometheus intended it as a trick," Father answered Chloe's question, though I'd forgotten what it was. "More like a test, to see if Zeus could prove Himself all-knowing. But don't give away the secret. Geneia hasn't heard this yet."

"Yes, tell us, Papa," said my little sister. "What did the Titan do?"

"He brought two gigantic platters to the banquet's central table. He told Zeus these were offerings, then asked Him to select one. On the first was an ox's stomach, slimy on its gray and lumpy surface, dripping blackened blood."

"Yuck, I'd never pick that. I hope Zeus didn't, either."

"You get your wish. But Zeus didn't enjoy his choice. He picked the other, a serving of crisply broiled, delicious smelling fat. Then biting into it, Zeus found it was only a thin sheet of crackling. It looked large, because it was wrapped around the ox's bones. He broke a tooth, and spat it out with fury."

"But a deal's a deal," said Andrastus. "You know that, Geneia. Even great Zeus had to stand by His choice."

"That's right," said Father. "Zeus had to keep the bones and fat, while the portion that He didn't choose would go to men."

"I still say the stomach sounds disgusting," said Geneia.

"Yes, but what I didn't tell you is the same thing Zeus couldn't see. Inside the ox's stomach, Prometheus had hidden all the choicest cuts of meat. So that's what men eat right to this day, while we burn the bones and fat as offerings. Zeus was furious at being tricked, of course. 'Fine,' He said. 'Men may have the meat. But I'll make them eat it raw.' That's why He chose to hide the secret of fire from our ancestors."

"But we do have fire, don't we?" asked Geneia.

"Yes, because of Prometheus. He was just as proud as Zeus. Determined to win their contest, he stole the fire and gave it to humans. Which made Zeus even angrier."

"That's when He sent Pandora, right?" I said. "With all the evils that still plague our world."

“That’s right. This was to be our punishment. As for Prometheus, great Zeus chained him to an immense boulder. Every day, an eagle came to eat his liver. You can imagine how much that hurt. Especially since every night, his liver would grow back.”

“But Prometheus endured,” Andrastus said. “Is that the lesson you’d have us learn?”

“Correct. He didn’t cry or flinch or make protest. He simply abided until years later when Heracles rescued him. When that supreme hero slew the eagle and freed Prometheus from his chains, hope returned into the hearts of men. That’s why we must never let the threat of insurmountable obstacles defeat us. If we live, then we are not defeated. If our hearts beat on, we mustn’t allow them to be weighted down with sorrow.”



Father’s story eased my burden slightly, and so did many more through the next week. But nothing could assuage our growing thirst and hunger. It was only a few flying fish that kept us from starvation. After our small store of rainwater was depleted, all we had to drink were the meager juices from these fish. Father said they were the rising souls of drowned sailors, eager to help their brethren in a time of peril.

Meanwhile, Chloe’s presence continued to nettle me. In the ship’s tight quarters, she’d brush against Andrastus at every opportunity. She’d laugh delightedly at even the most ordinary things he said. She’d sway over every time I happened to be speaking with Andrastus. She’d say that Aristides had challenged me to a contest of cup and ball. I don’t know about Ithaca, but in Smyrna only children play with such a toy.

I knew that Aristides hadn’t really started up a game. I don’t think he even salvaged his cork and ox-hide ball from the wreckage of Uncle Clemon’s ship. Chloe said it only to embarrass me. It put me in the worst light in front of Andrastus. If I refused, I was being ungracious to bereaved Aristides. If I accepted, it made me seem a child like him. I decided that my only dignified response must be a womanly laugh. Unpracticed, it probably came off like a donkey braying.

“I’ve entertained Aristides all morning playing Ephidrismos,” I said.

If you didn’t have this game when you were young, the players aim at a large stone called the Dioros. We got it and the shooting stones from the ballast of our ship. The one who strikes it gets a ride upon the other’s back. When you’re the donkey, you must stumble blindfolded until you find the Dioros.

“Then play Chytrinda with him,” Chloe said. “You can use the soup pot.”

"I came up for fresh air," I said. "Why don't you take a turn? I'm sure the pot's big enough to fit over your head."

Chloe ignored my insult, tossed her curls with an amused smile, then resumed her conversation with Andrastus. Like I was just some flat-chested girl who couldn't possibly be interesting to such a strapping youth. If I opened my mouth again, she'd roll her eyes as if to say, "What an irritating child -- Nerissa doesn't even have the manners to keep quiet while we're courting." If I could have chosen between Chloe and the becalmed sea, it would have been an easy choice. I gladly would have borne another month of nothingness if it could be spent without her.

More favorably, the stars returned, so Father was able to estimate our latitude. We were somewhere between Limnos and Lesvos, in the wide part of the sea. If we allowed the prevailing winds to push us west, we'd reach Hellas, likely somewhere in Thessaly. If we didn't die from thirst, that is. There was still no sign of rain.

We continued for another week. The wind had died. The heat grew strong. It punished us unbearably, until our bodies couldn't shed another salty tear. A slow tide pushed us to the south, away from any chance of landfall. There were no stories now. We didn't need them, since we each saw what we chose inside our addled heads.

Finally, Andrastus shouted that a flock of white terns passed overhead. Shaking the visions from my eyes, I saw that he was right. This was no ghostly flock. The birds were real. They called aloud. They made a noise like mewling kittens.

We all roused with a fresh will to survive. We realized that these birds must come from land. Dragging ourselves out of our private miseries, we began to trust in life again. Those of us who still were able climbed the masts to peer across the waves. An hour later, Andrastus spotted the hills of a small isle. And above them, brilliant clouds like the streaming tails of proud white stallions. These didn't promise rain, of course, but maybe later. If this isle was beloved by spirits who dwell among the nimbi, they'd grant it frequent showers, enough to nourish streams.

We set our rope-bound rudder toward the isle. There still was only the occasional hot puff of air, as if from the mouth of an exhausted horse. There certainly wasn't enough wind to stir our heavily patched sails. But we pulled our oars with all our strength. The hills grew higher and the white clouds nearer, then Andrastus saw a line of surf. After another hour, he was able to make out a gap. Father said that it looked large enough for our boats to pass through the reef unharmed.

By mid-afternoon, this channel came in sight. Our strength renewed by the promise of

safe haven, we rowed like demons toward it. Father distributed the last water squeezed from our sails nine days before. Against a time like this, he'd hidden it in the covered basin where he normally stored bait. There was just enough for each of us to wet our throats and clear our heads. Though it tasted strongly of fish oil, the water revived us. We all must be alert as we navigated through the rocks.

"Watch as I maneuver through the shoal," Father called across to Uncle Xolon. "Don't follow closely. Tell Demetrios the same and have him pass the word along to Stamede and Aremethus. If we go aground, don't try to rescue us. Avoid that spot and get your family safe ashore."

"Good advice, but I'll go first," called Xolon. "Your rudder's lashed together. My boat is sound. It's smaller, too. So I must risk the crossing first."

"No," shouted Father. "You're injured, Xolon. And Klepatos died on Imbrus. You have no one to help you steer. Except for Irene and your daughters, but I doubt they're strong enough."

It was too late. Xolon had already turned his boat toward the gap. Aunt Irene and the older girls pulled hard on their oars, while young Phoebe sat on the single mast's cross-tree, calling down sightings of sunken rocks.

We saw them make it through the first bend of the channel. Then the surf grew stronger, crashing high enough to obscure their sail from sight.

My uncle Demetrios followed Xolon. Then Stamede and Aremethus, whose families shared the boat we'd captured. They'd all been to Xolon's leeward, so they didn't hear Father's call. Fortunately, they were experienced mariners. They kept a sizeable distance between their boats. Once they'd passed the line of crashing surf, Father had no choice but follow.

His caution was understandable, but so was my uncles' haste. The island looked green with life, the white clouds promising. Food and water would be plentiful. There was no red tinge in the ocean here. Past the breakers, the bay was calm. My uncles must have sensed that it was full of sweet-fleshed fish. Better yet, the place was civilized. There was a small town situated on an inlet. Here, we'd face no wild men, no treacherous slave takers.

Best of all, we could see people waving to us. As Uncle Xolon's boat drew near, they even offered songs of greeting. We could hear the choir's voices drift across the placid water. The sound was delightfully serene. Then I heard Xolon's voice join them. Proud owner of a celebrated baritone, he'd won many singing contests at the Festival of Dionysus back when Smyrna knew prosperity.

We saw Xolon land his boat, then step ashore. He was presented with a chalice and a

laden platter, gifts of wine and fruit and honey cake, I guessed. We were too far away to see just what he drank and ate, but the taste was like ambrosia in my parched imagination.

Aunt Irene and my cousins followed Xolon onto the island's soil. They were greeted warmly, too. Then Stamede landed at the pier, then Demetrios and Aremethus. Four maidens stepped forward and placed garlands on my uncles' balding crowns. The chorus then resumed their sweet, harmonious song, calling across the bay to us.

"What a splendid thing!" said Father. "After all our trials, to find a land like this. A bountiful island and a friendly people. To be offered welcome instead of enmity. I doubt in all the world we could have found a better place."

But the tide began to turn, and a stiff breeze rose. Together, they prevented us from landing. We had to anchor for the night. After darkness fell, we heard music and revelry from the direction of the town's shimmering lights. The delicious aroma of roasting mutton drifted out. Our stomachs twisted painfully, jealous of the feast that we were missing. If we weren't so deprived of water, we would have salivated, just like hounds. But still, we felt happy that the islanders had presented our clan with such a generous reception. We fell asleep with dreams of rejoining our kinsmen in the morning, amid these cordial people.

As dawn peeled back night's blanket, I woke first. My pleasant dream had been disturbed by a faint cry. I'd seen jolly Stamede fed a pickled fish that sprouted daggers in his belly. After I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, I threw off my own blanket, then stood and came out to the deck. I had to rub the dream out of my ears, as well, because I still heard traces of agony upon the wind.

But then I heard one unmistakably. It was the voice of poor Phoebe. High-pitched, it reached me clearly. I'd never heard such torment.

I woke Father and the others. I didn't have to tell him what I'd heard. We all could hear the sounds of slaughter now. The islanders' seeming welcome was a trap. These must be brigands who preyed on passing vessels. Those who made it through their reef, they lured in, plied with wine, then murdered. They either kept the vessels and whatever goods were on them, or sold their plunder to rogues who'd ask few questions.

Father quickly raised our anchor. The wind was still against us, but the tide was in. We all pulled ferociously against our oars. When we'd gathered enough speed to ride in on the shore break, Andrastus strung his bow. I readied my sling with broken ballast stones. Father strapped on his axe and knife.

Before we reached the pier, Andrastus slew six islanders. Oddly, three of them were women. They each were armed with bows, fighting alongside their men. I was reminded of a

legend Father told about the race of Amazons, because these women all were beautiful. Daughters of Aphrodite, they were as radiant as Queen Hippolyte, the one from Scythia whose girdle was stolen by Heracles.

On this island, the warrior women were fully clothed. If they cut off a breast on the side where they drew their bowstrings, I couldn't tell. But they were fearless in their bloodlust. As they loosed their arrows, I took down three more with my stones. No dulcet chorus now, the others screamed like harpies as they leapt over their fallen sisters. It didn't bother me to kill them. Their limbs were streaked with blood, so I knew they'd participated in the slaughter that I'd heard.

We saw none of our kinsmen left alive, but there was a young girl's body sprawled face down on the sand. Her ragged clothes told me that she was one of ours. From her size and the amber color of her hair, I think it must have been my cousin Phoebe.

The battle's noise brought a hundred more islanders running from the town. They added a hail of lances to the archers' arrows. Our boat became a porcupine. Mother was injured. Geneia, too. Father plucked the shafts and hurled them back. He roared back bold defiance, standing there amid a fresh deluge of lances.

"Father! No!" I called to him. "We have no hope to save the others. They're all dead."

"Then we'll die, too. We must avenge our kinsmen."

"We can't win," I cried. "There are too many of them. Mother and Geneia are badly hurt. Do you want them to die?"

He didn't hear me. A maddened frenzy lay across his face. He gathered an armful of spears, and stood up on the bow.

Andrastus cracked an oar over Father's head. Together, we dragged him to the far side of our central mast. We propped him there where lances couldn't strike. Then Andrastus set the sail to catch the seaward wind, and steered us back toward the narrow gap. When Father began to stir, Andrastus bound him to the mast. We needed him alive, not sacrificed in a futile effort at revenge. He frothed and bellowed in his madness. He called us cowards, heartless traitors. He swore he'd look on us no more. He cast us from the family. We had to seal our ears against his bitter words as we sailed out past the reef to face the empty sea.



"Much better," Homer said.

"Better?" Nerissa could hardly believe he'd use that word. And yet the poet's tone was

anything but mocking. "It was the worst day of my life. My uncles, aunts, and cousins were all felled in a single swath, as by the wide stroke of a scythe. Mother and Geneia played at long odds with the weighted dice of death. Father had disowned me. We faced an empty ocean, that mocked our dry lips with its salty billows.

"And worst of all, I felt sickened with myself. Jealousy was making me care more about Chloe's seductive presence on our boat than about our losses. Since Father was also furious at Andrastus, my cousin took every opportunity to console him. While I coaxed Mother and Geneia to eat the flying fish that came aboard, I'd see Chloe sit with him or mend his clothes or brush his hair, just like they were a promised couple.

Once, Chloe even got him to lift her in his arms. She used the excuse that she needed to reach a skein of sisal thread Father kept high up on a shelf. I couldn't help noticing that Andrastus grasped Chloe around her perfectly formed hips. Or that she turned and pressed herself against him when he set her down.

I couldn't even hate Chloe as a rival. When had Andrastus ever looked like that at me? I could see it was only out of respect to my parents that he stopped himself from running his hands over Chloe's breasts, from tasting her mouth with hungry kisses, from pulling her round hips against him, from lifting her dress, from laying her down, and then-- I despaired of ever seeing life return to goodness."

"This episode was much improved," said Homer. "You've drawn a worthy setting for heroic tragedy. You've provided your people with real passion, too. And finally, your hero acts with valor. He guides his people through a hostile sea, he leads with wise advise, he hurtles to the rescue though his counsel's been ignored, he perseveres against the foe despite hopeless odds, then leaves the field only when betrayed. It makes me wish that such men really lived among us."

"He did. Asclemelion was as real a man as ever lived. He was my father, sir, you must believe me. It isn't bad enough I'll never hear him say that he forgives me. I'll never feel his patient smile warm my heart. I'll never see him in this life; we can never become reconciled. But when you deny he ever lived, when you negate his very name, it aches like bones that splinter in my soul."

"What a strange slave you are. I offer praise and you hear it as insult. I assure you that it wasn't meant as such. I only said that you show promise. You've learned the lesson I intended. It's not many girls who have the intellect to limn a hero well. Not many young men, either. Believe me, I was so often disappointed by my students, I stopped taking them a decade past. So if you're truly clever, you'll learn another lesson. Accept praise as well as criticism with a

willing spirit.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll remember that.”

There was no sense protesting further. In addition to his ruined eyes, Homer’s ears were also deaf to feeling. And yet, the people of his poems were rich with pain and rage and raw desire. The women just as much so as the men. Maybe Homer was only deaf to those around him, those of flesh and breath.

“I’m grateful for your interest,” Nerissa added. “I’m glad you like the way I’ve told my story. A lot more happened after the reef-encircled isle. Shall I continue, or do you wish to rest?”

“Let’s not leave this episode so soon. I said that it was better, but it’s hardly satisfactory. An isle of brigands? That’s far too ordinary. There are many such. I once was in a shipwreck at a small cay near Lesvos. Far from coming to our rescue, the inhabitants made their living on the salvage. They didn’t care if we lived or drowned. We should make your natives more exotic, something an audience would relish... Hmm, they could keep pyres burning on their shore, oriented not to the channel but the rocks.”

“Father told us of such a place. Instead of waiting for ships to founder on their own, these cruel people misdirect them straight onto the reef with lights.”

“I suppose that won’t work, then. Too many will have heard about this trick... Ah, I’ve got it now, they’re Sirens. A race with female heads and torsos, but raptors’ parts below the waist. With an irresistible chorus, they lure sailors to smash their ships upon the rocks. Thereupon, the Sirens promptly devour every victim.”

“If they do that, how would such a tale continue?”

“The hero must be warned about them. Circe can do this, after he wins her love. So he plugs his sailors’ ears with melted beeswax. And bids them lash him to the mast. That part was good, when Andrastus bound your father.”

“Why can’t the captain plug his own ears?”

“Because he must listen for his men to cry out sightings of sunken rocks. I thought you were the daughter of a fisherman.”

“I am. But it still makes no sense. If he’s the helmsman, what good will lashing him do? His vessel either crashes without anyone to guide it, or if the wheel is near enough for him to reach, he’ll steer them straight onto the Sirens’ rocks.”

“Don’t quibble, girl. I swear I would have heard less carping out of Philemon. This captain needn’t be the helmsman because they’ve bound the wheel as well. They won’t be in a narrow straight like yours. They need only pull hard at their oars to circumvent the island.”

“But there *were* rocks. It was a very dangerous shoal.”

“Yes, yes. If they're that important, we'll have these rocks come later -- they can jump around. Much more interesting. You gave them scant attention.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But back to the Sirens, they should promise in their song to tell the hero's future. That very thing his heart desires most, the one route that will lead him home. He must instruct his crew, no matter what he cries, if he calls anathema on their names, if he promises a terrible revenge, they mustn't lose him until they're out of earshot from the Sirens.”

“I thought you had him plug the sailors' ears.”

“I did. Very good -- you've caught the test I set. They only see him shouting and struggling to break his bonds. So they wind more chains around him. Yes, that's perfect. The Muse's voice sings sweetly in this cave, free from all deception.”

“You said it was the Grotto of the Nymphs. But I assumed the spirits here were Oreads, not Naiads like the Muses.”

“They are, but never mind all that. Get out your parchment, girl. The verse, it echoes like a chorus in my ears.”

“It's night, outside, and black as tar in here. How am I to write?”

“Oh. Of course. When one is blind, it's easy to forget the time of day. But still, you must record my words. Philemon has done this in the darkness many times. Hold the straight side of my knife against your parchment as you write. Move it down about a dactylos each line, then they won't run into one another. Concentrate on what I'm saying, so you can decipher any blurred places in the morning.”

“Yes, sir. I'll try.”

“Good. Now I begin:

*While to the shore the rapid vessel flies,
Our swift approach the Siren choir descries;
Celestial music warbles from their tongue,
And thus the sweet deluders tune the song*

*Oh stay, O pride of Hellas stay!
Oh cease thy course, and listen to our lay!
Blest is the man ordained our voice to hear,
The song instructs the soul, and charms the ear.
Approach! thy soul shall into raptures rise!*

*Approach! and learn new wisdom from the wise!
We know whate'er the kings of mighty name
Achieved at Ilion in the field of fame;
Whate'er beneath the sun's bright journey lies.
Oh stay, and learn new wisdom from the wise!*

*Thus the sweet charmers warbled o'er the main;
My soul takes wing to meet the blissful strain;
I give the sign, and struggle to be free;
Swift row my mates, and shoot along the sea;
New chains they add, and rapid urge the way,
Till, dying off, the distant sounds decay;
Then scudding swiftly from the dangerous ground,
The deafened ear unlocked, the chains unbound."*

"I've got it, sir," Nerissa said a few moments later.

Her second stick of charcoal was worn down to a scrap again, having flown across the page. It didn't matter that the invisible line might look like bird tracks trailing from a bowl of ox blood. She wouldn't have to decipher it if Homer asked to hear the verse read back tomorrow morning. She remembered every word.

"It was magnificent," she added.

This wasn't flattery. She really thought so, even if she hadn't sensed the rising possibility that she might gain Homer's patronage.

"Did you hear any flaws?" he asked, without a speck of irony.

It seemed he genuinely valued her opinion.

"'Descries,' in the second line. The meter's off. I think 'spies' would be better."

"Good. Anything else?"

"'Achieved at Ilion in the field of fame.' There should be another syllable to make it flow. Maybe 'far' would serve well before 'field.'"

"You don't think that would be too much alliteration?"

"No, sir. You have 'raptures rise' and 'wisdom from the wise' before this line, then 'wisdom from the wise' again. Far fields of fame would continue your technique, but break up the string of dyads."

"Very well. Remember that. We'll change it in the morning."

Phi

Nerissa woke up first. Light streamed in through the cave mouth. The air had lost its chill. Outside, it must be well into the morning. She felt surprised she'd slept so long. This was the first good night of rest she'd had in years.

With Homer still inside his dreams of fame, nothing would be easier than to walk away alone. Then he couldn't make her return to Tragus. By the time someone found the poet, either groping his way home or raging impotently inside the cave, she'd be far away. Maybe even on an outbound ship before word reached Tragus.

No, she decided. Not so much because of Mother's admonition in the breeze: "You know it would be heartless to abandon a blind man. I taught you loyalty, not deceit." The words came very faintly after so much time and distance. She'd grown inured to Mother's exacting standards.

This wasn't why she didn't leave. Nerissa simply recognized her best chance lay with Homer. They'd both felt the connection. He might be rigid in his disdain for women's minds, and insensate to her personal disasters, but they shared a deep, sustaining love for poetry. They each could hear Calliope's stirring voice. Besides, Nerissa knew she'd look even more like an escaped slave now, dressed only in a blanket. It would be all but impossible to pass through Polis undetected, then slip aboard a ship.

She went outside, greeted by a bright sun and a sky somewhere between dark blue and purple, like violets when they first unfold. Directly overhead were streaks of cirrus like wispy fleece from milkweed pods. Waxwings, redstarts, and wheatears were in full throat. Unless this glorious day was the most outrageous liar, it promised everything would turn out well.

Nerissa followed a burbling sound around the hillside to a spring. She washed out Homer's empty wineskin, then filled it with cold water. She noticed her reflection in the pool -- the swelling from Tragus's latest beating had gone down, but she still looked like Medusa.

Not willing to see herself like this, Nerissa plunged her head into the water. She pulled back immediately, gasping at the chilly shock, but smiling. It felt odd to be almost... could the feeling be happiness? No, more like hopeful expectation. She turned away from the pond, then used her fingers to comb out the wet tangles of her hair. She tied it back with a thread pulled from the blanket.

She gathered berries for akratismos, also fruit from primrose bushes to make a tea. After returning to the cave mouth, Nerissa found some scraps of flint. She built a pile of tinder, then lit it by striking one of the flints against Homer's knife. She built a fire, then placed small stones close to the flames. Since the wineskin would burn if she heated it directly, Nerissa picked up the stones with a corner of her blanket, then dropped them in the spring water. When it was hot, she put the rose hips in to steep. All the while, she sang favorite songs from Smyrna.

Homer woke up to her music. He threw his cape over his shoulders and came outside. The sun felt wonderful. The rose tea smelled delicious.

"That was pleasant waking to your song," he said. "It blended with my dream of Sirens. Your wounded mouth must be much recovered now. Your voice was very sweet."

Surprised at Homer's cordial mood, Nerissa wished him a fine morning. She brought the wineskin to his hand. She warned him that it was a hot tea made of rose hips. Tipping his head back, Homer drank a sip. He smiled, then took a much longer drink.

"I would have preferred this tea with honey," he said, "but it still was very good. Just hot enough to warm me from the inside, but not too hot to scald my throat."

He returned the wineskin to Nerissa, knowing exactly where she stood though she'd moved closer to the fire. In exchange, she gave him a handful of berries.

"Now these are very sweet," he said. "An unexpectedly delicious breakfast. Though I would have liked some cheese and bread."

They ate together, as they'd done last night. Homer didn't seem to think that she should serve him. Unusual, because men and women rarely ate together, even when it wasn't a question of slave and master. That's how it had been in Smyrna, too.

"I've been wondering," Homer said after savoring another drink from the wineskin. "You aren't captured in any of your tales. How did you become a slave?"

"You'd really like to know?"

Nerissa looked closely at Homer's face. His expression was much softer than it had been all yesterday. But that could merely result from a good sleep, not a change in attitude. Still, his question seemed like progress. Maybe he'd spent the night reconsidering whether he should buy her, after all.

“Why would I ask you if I didn't want an answer?”

“I'll give you one, if you promise not to call it a tale. Everything I've told you is the truth.”

“I never said it wasn't. Are you always so prickly in the morning?”

“Not at all... I'd just like you to understand that I value honesty as the most important human quality.”

“Agreed. Now will you tell me of your capture?”

“Gladly, if you have no objection to spending another hour listening to me.”

“Not so long as this tea and the morning sun hold out. I find both very pleasant.”



“We'd better be off,” was all that Homer said when Nerissa finished her account of the events on Scheria. “Judging from its heat, I'd say the sun is well up in the sky already. If we wait any longer, Tragus will be drinking by the time we get there. Which will do neither of us a bit of good.”

“Couldn't you send a messenger to him?” Nerissa asked.

“A message saying what?”

“Why, an offer to purchase me, of course.”

“Are you still on that? I told you, it's impossible.”

“But I thought--”

“Thought what? Sharing two meals and a dry cave in the storm doesn't mean I intend our association to be permanent.”

“After everything I've told you? You still don't believe me, do you? You must be the most cynical of men, if you can't tell a truthful person from a liar.”

“It makes no difference what I believe.”

“I'll work very hard for you, I promise. I'll be your guide and scribe and errand girl and more. Philemon would be very happy to have only household tasks, I'm sure.”

“Yes, like testing the softness of my bed each day as soon as I depart. But that's not why. Didn't I make it clear that this could never work?”

“You've said so, yes, but I can't see the reason. I've proven my worth in driving ruffians away. I've shown myself to be an able scribe. And you value my poetic instincts, I know you do.”

“You have a high opinion of yourself.”

"You praised my work, yourself."

"I said no such thing. I merely indicated there's a hope you'll understand heroic verse some day."

"Yes, if I had a wise and gifted teacher. Couldn't that be you? Forgive me, but I sense you crave a worthy pupil."

"Again, you have a high opinion of yourself."

"No, in fact it couldn't be much lower. But you could lift me, sir." Homer was wavering, she knew. Maybe just another stroke on his great pride would do it. "In this benighted world, I sense that you alone possess the power."

"That, I might. But still, we'll never know. Come, it's time to take the road to my cousin's farm."

"He'll kill me, sir. Is that really what you wish?"

"It's not a question of what I wish."

"Then why? Why can't you simply buy me?"

"Will you be still? I thought you had better breeding. There are some things you cannot force a man to say."

"Say what, sir? I don't understand."

"No, I'd be a fool to expect a girl to understand questions of commerce."

"Commerce? There's hardly a fortune depending on this transaction. Tragus only paid fifty drachmai for me. And now, after two months of his beatings, no one would spend that much for an ugly slave girl. I'm sure he'd be satisfied to recoup his investment."

"By Zeus's teeth, please let the matter drop!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be insistent. It's just, I was so taken with your brilliance, I had my heart set on working for you."

"Yes, all right. No need for apologies. Look, I would have valued your assistance. It's not easy for me to say, but you truly have a remarkably fine ear for a girl." Homer grimaced, as if conceding this point pained him gravely. "But it's impossible -- there's no use discussing this further. We'll just return you to Tragus. Don't worry, he won't abuse you further. I'll put the fear of all the Pantheon in him."

"He's far past that. Forgive me, sir, but I don't think anything you say will stop him. Tragus knows he's doomed to the foulest reaches of Tartarus. With nothing more to lose, that's why he takes it out on those within his power."

"What would you have me do? Once more, you're forcing me to say that I don't wish to buy you."

"Then could you possibly lend me a chiton? Your cook must have an extra. Doesn't matter if it's old, long as it's clean." She still didn't know if Homer had a wife. "And a length of linen for a veil, so I won't be recognized. I'd be eternally grateful, sir."

"If I enable you to disguise yourself, I'll be a criminal."

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't think of that... But couldn't you do nothing?"

"What do you mean? I can't say I didn't know of your escape. Jeremos saw us together. He'd love nothing better than to catch me in a lie. He'll demand I be imprisoned."

"You don't have to deny we've met. But how could a blind man stop me from going on my way this morning?"

"I couldn't. But I'd be duty bound to tell Tragus."

"Why? Has he ever done the least good thing for you?"

"No. But that has nothing to do with it. Look, I know that you're intelligent. Don't pretend you're just a simple girl who can't understand a point of honor. Loyalty is everything, and Tragus is my kinsman."

"But there's honor on both sides of the question, isn't there? After all, the way that Tragus treated me, only the worst cur would do that. And he's sworn to make me suffer terribly if I dared to escape. So returning me to Tragus would be like participating in his cruelty. What honor is there in that?"

"I can't believe he'd kill you. Tragus is much too near with money to do that. Don't try to turn this into a weighty question of philosophy."

"Can't you at least consider the question? Say, long enough for me to reach the port?"

"And how would I get home? You'd have to tell Philemon to come fetch me, then he'd be drawn into the crime, as well."

"It's not a crime. Don't I have a right to save my life?"

"You establish a false question. Suppose we posit that your life really is in danger -- it's a life that doesn't belong to you. That's what your rationales omit." Homer sighed, then drew a cloth out of his satchel to wipe his berry-stained hands. "I'm sorry, Nerissa, I sympathize, I really do. But Tragus is your lawful master. Oh, and just one thing before we go. If you'll read back that verse I recited last night, I'd like to hear how those changes you suggested sound."

"Of all the-- You have the gall to ask me for this service even now? When you've just condemned me to a brutal death?"

But Nerissa and Homer didn't get the chance to finish their argument. Or the verse, for that matter. They heard the crackle of a broken stick, and then the skitter of a rock tumbling down the slope. Something large was rapidly approaching, making no effort at stealth. A

human, then, not a wolf or panther.

Before they could stand up, Tragus stepped around a hemlock. His hair was wild, laced with bits of bramble and fragments of dead leaves. What looked like scraps of wool were caught in his tangled beard. His clothes were filthy, bloodstained, almost as bad as the rags that Nerissa had abandoned. As he came out of the shadow, Nerissa could see his close-set eyes were shot with red. Obviously, Tragus's search for her hadn't diminished his thirst.

"Aha!" he shouted. "I knew I'd find you here."

Nerissa grabbed for the wineskin as Tragus charged at them. She dumped the stones she'd used to heat the tea. She picked one up, though it still was hot enough to sizzle in her palm. But when she reached for Homer's satchel, he felt the motion of her arm. Guessing her intention, Homer snatched away the sack that made such an effective sling.

"No stones!" he said. "If you brain Tragus, we'll both be tried for murder."

"Murder?" said Tragus as he drew up. "What's this? She killed one of my sheep, but what have you to do with it?"

"Nothing, except Nerissa told me that she only put it from its misery after you stomped it half to death."

"She lies. This damned girl's been nothing but trouble. But I'll deal with her. She'll earn me the full price of my sheep, plus the whole day I spent looking for her."

"She says she ran away because of your abuse. And feared for her life because of the sheep."

"More lies." Tragus glared at Homer, though he must have known his vicious scowl would go unseen. "But what I want to know is what you're doing with her?"

"We met by chance in Polis. I was returning Nerissa to your farm when the storm struck yesterday. We had to shelter here for the night."

"This is far out of the way from Polis to my farm."

"We took a wrong turn. Philemon went lame with gout, so he couldn't come with us. And naturally, Nerissa's unfamiliar with our roads. What made you look here, anyway?"

"Jeremos said he saw you with the girl."

That word "saw" was interesting, Nerissa noticed. Clearly, Jeremos hadn't given Tragus the full story, ashamed that he'd been routed by a girl.

"He tried to start an argument with me yesterday," said Homer. "So what?"

"So it wasn't hard to guess where you were headed. I remembered our family history that says the hero Odysseus was born here."

"I might have known it was Jeremos." Homer pronounced his enemy's name with

curdling disgust. "He'd gladly slaughter me, and bribe his way out of execution, if he had any money."

"Yes, maybe I'll lend him some." Tragus's grin was positively evil.

"The two of you make a most unwelcome pair to turn my stomach sour. That murderous swine is the largest pile of manure that's ever fouled this land. And you--"

"What of me, Cousin?"

"You're not fit to own livestock, let alone people. You can't deny you've sorely beaten this poor girl. Philemon described her injuries to me."

"Of course I hit her. So would any man who owns an insolent slave. But you wouldn't know how men act, would you?"

"Don't try my patience, Tragus. I won't rise to your insults. If you still have a scrap of honor, you'll give me proper respect."

"Respect? For what? You may be my elder by a few years, but you've never been my better."

"Every man's your better, you despicable tosspot. Nerissa tells me that you've raped her many times."

"I'll do as I please. She's of age and she's my property. I'll thank you not to interfere."

"And I'll thank you to act human. The self-contempt that you must feel each moment of your life is no excuse. You bring shame on our lineage."

"Oh, *I'm* the big disgrace. This, from the biggest fool around. Walking the hills incessantly, trailed by that limping dotard Philemon. Spouting your nonsense at every festival. Claiming you've won prizes far and wide. But tell me, what's happened to all your golden laurels? The only one we ever saw turned out to be plated tin."

"It's not my fault those cheats from Samos tricked me. Unscrupulous charlatans! I drew thousands of poetry lovers to the Apturian Festival, I had the people weeping at the beauty of my Iliad, and they reward me with base metal. I ask you -- did they treat Archilochus this way?"

"Who's Archilochus?"

"He's a coward who ran from the Saians on Thasos, then had the gall to write:

*Some barbarian is waving my shield,
since I was obliged to
leave that perfectly good piece of equipment behind
But I got away, so what does it matter?
Life seemed somehow more precious.
Let the shield go; I can buy another one equally good."*

"Disgusting. But what's some spineless bastard have to do with it?"

"Nothing."

"Do you claim this other poet caused your failure to return my slave?"

"What failure? I told you that the storm delayed us... My point is that they gave that craven Archilochus a golden tripod, like the one that Hesiod unjustly won at Chalcis."

"Do you expect us to believe you were tricked out of all your other supposed laurels, too?"

"You know very well I lost them in that shipwreck coming back from Lesbos. Anyone with the wit to look for proof could find a full accounting of my victories in the city annals of Mytilene."

"I know none of these things. I know only that the last person I'd ask for advice about the management of slaves is you. You're an utter laughingstock. I'd be surprised if you're not ridiculed by all Olympus."

"Cur! You dare to say this? If I still had my sight, I'd take a horsewhip to you."

"If you still had your balls, I'd stomp them for you."

"Enough! I see you've sunken even lower since the last we met. I won't waste further time on a man who refuses to hear reason. But you may not keep the girl. I'm told that you paid fifty drachmai. You've damaged her, but I'll still match this sum."

"Fifty drachmai, Cousin? From what I hear, you don't have two oboloi to rub together."

"Who told you this? That's outrageous! I'll bet it was Jeremos. I'll have you both tried for slander."

"It's not slander if it's true. We'd win, and you'd be publicly disgraced. Face it, you're in debt up to your ears. If you had fifty drachmai to your name, you wouldn't have to rent a hovel in the worst quarter of Polis."

Now Nerissa understood. So that's what Homer was doing on the shabby street where she'd first bowled over Philemon. She'd assumed that they were headed for the market, taking the most direct route from an estate north of town. It also explained why he only had a hobbled old man for a guide. And why Jeremos had been so enraged at Homer about a debt. Again, she sensed that it involved a woman.

"I may be short of funds just now, but that doesn't change what I must do. Your ill behavior shames us both. These rapes and beatings won't continue. You'll sell me Nerissa and take a promissory note."

"Your bond is worthless. It's common knowledge that you have no more earning power than a beggar. That's why your intended's father broke off the marriage contract." Tragus

smirked with deep self-satisfaction. It confirmed Nerissa's guess that Homer suffered from a failed romance. "If you weren't a pauper, you'd have a proper household, with proper slaves to cook and clean for you, instead of that corpse Philemon and that old crone whatshername who fries everything in lard. You'd have someone to warm your bed... or does Philemon do that for you, too?"

Homer reddened furiously. He grabbed his eating knife and slashed it in the direction of his cousin's voice. But Tragus jumped away each time Homer flailed, laughing with derision.

Nerissa grabbed for the empty satchel. She got it in her hands, folded it into a sling, and loaded in the stone she'd dropped. But Tragus lunged and caught her arm. She tried to fight back, but her injuries and the poor diet she'd endured for many months had made her weak.

Tragus stunned her with a fist to the temple. After disarming Homer, too, Tragus knelt over Nerissa's crumpled body. He smiled with the thought of what he'd do to her back at the farm. He brought a chain and leg irons out of his pack attached them to her ankles. He roused Nerissa by pouring the still-hot tea over her face, then dragged her stumbling away.

Nerissa looked back once at Homer, as he stood there helpless by their pleasant breakfast fire. In the end, he'd tried to aid her.

Does that count for anything? she wondered. *Or is Tragus right? He's just a fool, who can't even earn a living with his poems. A brilliant man, but thoroughly incapable to set the least thing right.*

Omicron

Tragus chained Nerissa to the same post in his ewe shed as before. He took her blanket, told her that she'd have no clothes until she learned obedience. He beat her mercilessly until she felt like nothing more than a mound of pain. She was barely recognizable as human. He demanded a full accounting of her night with Homer. When she didn't answer satisfactorily, he pulled her to her knees and violated her bloody orifices with the handle of his staff. When this still failed to produce details of Homer's perversion, Tragus brought out his knife.

"I'll blind you like him, then. You can see the same dark visions as your lover."

"We slept, that's all we did," Nerissa mumbled through her shredded lips.

"You stinking liar of a harlot. I know that damned goat screwed you all night long. I'll bet you told him you were beautiful. That's how you tempted him to help you."

"He didn't help. He was trying to return me, but we got lost."

"I'll bet you sucked his xiphon, and told him it was sweet as honey. Or does he like it rough -- did he get you to kick him in the stones? Is it true what they say -- does he really have a pair the size of lemons?"

"I have no idea. I swear it by the shield and helmet of Athena, who loves those who speak the truth. Homer showed no sign of interest in me."

"That's a stinking pile, and you know it. You'd better start telling me what really happened, or I'll break all your bones."

"I can only tell you what I know. Homer never touched me. He didn't even strip to dry himself after we were drenched."

"Liar!"

Tragus punched her in the face so hard, Nerissa heard her cheekbone crackle. When he brought his knife against the corner of her eye, Nerissa started to invent the most lascivious story her imagination could produce. Except for a single night she was unwilling to defile, her

experience with sex was limited to rape. Still, she'd seen and heard much along her journey.

Nerissa was a lump of misery, but there was one good thing about this. Tragus had done her a strong service. He'd made her realize that she wanted to survive. A fierce desire to slay him took hold. Let this loathsome man represent the many villains who'd cost her so much heartache. By killing Tragus, she hoped in some small way to begin avenging her lost family.

But she couldn't simply murder him. They'd execute her for his death, and she wanted to survive. She still intended to build that shrine, but more, she wanted her story told. That way, the names of all her loved ones would live on. Here on Ithaca, she'd met a poet who could do this. Already, he seemed compelled to turn her travels into verse.

Yes, Homer transmuted every facet to an epic scale. And he insisted on thrusting a warrior called Odysseus into Father's place, but he was right. Audiences best loved heroes who transcended life. They'd remember stories peopled by the boldest men, the fiercest enemies, the strangest lands, and the most powerful Gods. Nerissa didn't mind at all. In fact, as Tragus assaulted her again, she found the one image constantly returning to her thoughts was the half-filled sheet of parchment she'd left in the Grotto of the Nymphs. She hoped Homer had been able to retrieve it. And that some day, he might finish the tale.

He was a deeply flawed man, true -- jealous, vain, self-centered, ineffective. In many ways, he was infuriating. He hadn't cared about her suffering. Again and again, he'd doubted her veracity. And he'd insulted her repeatedly. In the short time they were together, he'd belittled her as female, foreign, unread, common. He'd been adamant that she was nothing but a slave who lacked all rights. He'd couched his insistence on returning her as a matter of principle, but his major reason seemed to be avoiding trouble.

In the end, he'd tried to do the right thing, but was humiliated by a man as dissolute as Tragus. Nerissa couldn't think of a single quality that spoke well for Homer, and yet, she'd like nothing better than to be with him right now.

Maybe it was the wine and food he'd shared. Now that the courtesies of Theoton had turned out to be false, Homer's gesture seemed particularly sincere. Or maybe it was only that she pitied him. Homer struck her as a person even more alone than she.

No, that wasn't it. The man wasn't to be pitied -- he was brilliant. She'd heard it in his verse. This Iliad in which he took such pride, she wished she could hear Homer recite the poem in its entirety. As Nerissa drifted off in thought, she remembered Father's stories of the Trojan War. She didn't feel Tragus any more.

When her eyes came open, it was night. Moonlight entered through the shed's doorway. The ewes were bleating loudly. There was the putrid smell of rotting meat. She turned her neck

to see what caused the stench, but then remembered. Tragus had set Irene's bloated carcass by the post. He'd refused to bury the dead ewe until Nerissa proved her disobedience was over. The smell was worse than anything she'd ever known, worse than the cave of Polyphemus, worse than the slops buckets in the Thallia's hold on the hottest day. The ewes were frightened of it. That's why they were bleating loud enough to wake her.

Nerissa didn't know how long she'd slept. Was it through one afternoon and evening? Judging from the dead ewe's stench, it might have been several days. Or had she been asleep at all? Her body hurt so much, she wouldn't be surprised if Tragus had beaten her unconscious.

The next day, Tragus ordered her to take him inside her mouth. But first, he demanded a reenactment of the things she'd crooned to Homer. Fearful that another beating would kill her, Nerissa obliged. They were only words, and Tragus no more than a cockroach. What did it matter the nonsense that she spouted to an insect?

As Tragus shoved his phallus against her lips, it wasn't a sense of degradation that sickened Nerissa. She felt far past any shame that he could cause. And it wasn't the pain from her cracked cheekbone above her damaged jaw. But the nauseating reek that welled out of his pubic thatch seemed almost like a fist that grabbed her throat. Nerissa retched up the thin gruel that was her only food.

She didn't bother to shrink back to the limits of her chain. Tragus would hit her all the harder for forcing him to move. In the dim light, she watched his angry scowl grow, now twisted with revulsion. He grabbed her by the hair, and used it to wipe the sticky mess out of his crotch. And still, Tragus wouldn't bathe, she knew. From his grinding teeth, she could see that he was planning a harsh punishment.

Not death. Homer had been right. Tragus was far too miserly to waste the fifty drachmai that was her only value in his eyes. His retribution would be something far harder to endure than a knife across the throat.

Without a word, Tragus unchained her from the post. He jerked her at a rapid pace across his unkempt yard. When they passed Hesper coming from the cheese shed, the old woman recoiled sharply. Nerissa's battered face must look even worse than she'd supposed. It didn't make her feel one bit better that Hesper was heavily bruised, too.

Poor old thing. No doubt Tragus beat her harshly for failing to prevent my escape.

Tragus opened the ram pen's gate. He shoved her in so hard, Nerissa sprawled face down in a pile of manure. As she wiped it from her eyes, he entered the pen and closed its gate, then hauled Nerissa to her feet. After marching her to the water trough, Tragus chained her over it face-down. Her wrists were connected to two of its legs and her ankles to the other pair. If she

fell asleep, her head would loll into the water.

This isn't so bad, she thought. The sun's hot, but I won't die of thirst. So maybe the ram butts me when it wants a drink, but there's enough room for him to get his muzzle in. With any luck, he'll get used to the inconvenience after a few times and leave me be. At least I'm outside in fresh air.

Or maybe Tragus means to leave me here for days. I'll slowly go insane as the water level drops. I'll stretch my tongue to wet its tip. I'll pray for rain, knowing that it hardly ever comes this time of year. The storm that drove Homer and me into the cave was a freak thing some bored God dreamed up for amusement. But now, this hot sun will evaporate the water to a level where it's just out of reach. Tragus will watch laughing as I die of thirst. He'll cut out my shriveled tongue and pickle it for a keepsake.

None of this seemed to be the plan, however. Tragus soon returned, smeared something wet over Nerissa's nether parts, then left. It reminded her that she was outside naked for anyone to see. It hadn't occurred to her when Hesper passed. Nerissa found this didn't bother her, either. If a visitor came and saw her like this, the shame would fall on Tragus, not on her.

But as the substance began sliding down her thighs, Nerissa couldn't help fearing what it was. It didn't sting, it just felt slimy, slightly warm. Maybe it was something that would cause Helios to burn her. Or a poison from the oleander bush behind the pen. She wished she'd been able to see the rag that she'd felt Tragus using. She tried to think what substance he might have collected during his brief absence. She knew it couldn't be anything beneficial.

Now as the wind shifted, Nerissa smelled something. It had a sharp tang, but wasn't vile. She sniffed a few times, trying to identify the odor. It was something strange, but in a way familiar. Nerissa knew she'd come across this smell before. It lurked in a close corner of her mind. She couldn't reach it, but sensed it wasn't far back in her memory. Something bloody, but something that told of life as well.

She heard the ram come trotting over. He was snuffling the air. So the scent had reached him, too. But he wasn't making noises of distress. So it couldn't be something like wolf's urine. Which made sense -- instead of causing the ram to attack, that would have only driven him to the pen's far side.

What if it was urine from another ram? He'd think she was a threat. She wouldn't look like a rival to him, but sheep weren't known for brains. After the ram convinced himself this intruder was after his ewes, he'd smash those great curled horns into her buttocks. He'd do it time and time again, until he damaged her internal organs. Or he might come around the trough and ram her head.

She'd had a close look at the ram one time when the lambing ewes were ready to be tupped. Tragus had made her lead them to the pen, where she'd had a good view of the brute. He was an ugly, heavily scarred beast almost the size of a cow. His horns were thick as battle helmets. When she didn't run off like a defeated male was supposed to do, he'd batter her into pulp.

But the ram didn't challenge her, either. He just kept snuffling the air. Finally, he came close, sniffing at her backside. His hooves shuffled in the muck with agitation. She felt his woolly shoulders brush against her. This was maddening. If the ram was going to attack, she wished he'd go ahead and get it over. There was nothing she could do but remain perfectly still.

Finally, the creature thrust his cold nose into her cleft. Nerissa gasped with shock, then recovered enough to feel deep unease. But sheep were herbivores -- they never ate flesh the way that swine will do. Surely it wasn't going after her soft parts.

Then fear prodded at her memory. Suddenly, she knew just what the substance smelled like. It had the iron tang of blood, but with a musky background. Like when she bled each month. It must be the discharge of a ewe in season.

When the ram snuffled deeply again, then rubbed up against her, Nerissa knew that she was right. He was acting like he did around receptive ewes. Now he bleated in a deep rumble, pacing back and forth behind her. Soon, he started bumping her, hard enough to shake the trough. His hooves were never still; they skittered with excitement.

"See -- I told you Trumpet would go for it," came Tragus's voice from the fence.

Oh, sweet Athena, cried Nerissa in her heart. This is too much. You'd let him watch? Can't you send a golden eagle to shred him with its talons?

"You're always right, Master," was the only answer. It was Hesper's voice. He must have ordered her to help him enjoy the fun. "No one knows more about sheep than you."

"Now just you watch when he gets his legs over her back. Trumpet has a pizzle the size of summer squash. He'll make her squeal, all right."

The ram bumped Nerissa a few more times, then groaned again. He probably was confused because he wasn't getting the right signals in return. She should be bumping back against him, prancing in her eagerness for mating. Nerissa continued holding motionless, just like the games of statue she'd once played with Euredon and Nikos. Though what sculptor would waste marble on such a graceless pose, she couldn't say.

Finally, Trumpet decided that hairless ewe or not, Nerissa smelled just fine. All at once, he reared up, and came down on her back. He was so heavy, it knocked the air out of her lungs. As she struggled to regain her breath, Trumpet hooked his front hooves over her shoulders.

Nerissa tried to buck him off, but couldn't. Determined, he scrabbled for a better hold, digging the sharp hooves in so firmly, they felt like a pair of knives.

Still unable to draw more than a shallow breath, Nerissa grunted softly with the pain. But it was nothing compared to the rending jolt she felt when Trumpet thrust his member into her. White heat seemed to radiate from her pelvis through her body, then she felt Trumpet disconnect. Craning back to see, she caught a glimpse of the thing. Unsheathed, it was bright red and very thick. He tried again, and penetrated further. She, of course, was dry with terror and revulsion. Though spread-eagled, she was nowhere near as wide to enter as a ewe. But the ram kept thrusting away until he was deep inside her. It wasn't long before she heard him bellow, loud and ringing like the noise made by a great, curving war trumpet. It was the noise he'd make each time he successfully mated with the ewes. Now, she understood where he'd earned his name.

"I'll be famous!" chortled Tragus. "Would you look at the old boy go. There's many who'd pay good coin to see this."

"You can't," said Hesper, to her credit.

"Who asked you? Do you want another beating?"

"The council will hear about it, Master. It's a great idea, of course, but I'm only worried you might get in trouble. You know they've warned you not to be a public nuisance."

"It needn't be on Ithaca. I'll make a tour of all the festivals this summer. I'll give them something they thought was only fable, like Leda and the Swan. They'll sing of me forever."

"There's law in other places, Master. Don't get me wrong, it's brilliant, it really is. But if one proper woman happens to see your spectacle, you'll be lucky if you're only jailed. You'll probably be stoned to death."

"Maybe so. It's too much risk. Damned interfering prudes... But this is just too good. I've got to share it somehow. Look at Trumpet now -- he's marvelous. Back for another go already. I've never known a ram with such endurance. Usually, they last a few seconds mounted on a ewe, then they're spent. He's really giving her the tuppings of her life."

Tragus was right. The ram's assault went on for hours. Every few minutes, he'd take a rest, then jump on her back again. It hurt much worse than when the sailors or Tragus raped her. Nerissa felt so torn, she wondered if he'd shredded her to sausage meat down there. She feared that she'd lost so much blood, she'd die.

The shadows lengthened as Trumpet scrabbled for a hold again. This must be his twentieth time. His sharp hoof raked her drooping face. It must have cut her deep, because she saw blood splattering into the trough, but she couldn't feel the new wound's sting. Between her body's torment, Trumpet's noxious reek, and the natural urge to escape from misery, it was a

great temptation to give in to exhaustion. But she couldn't let herself black out, because she'd drown in the trough's filthy, blood-streaked water.

The worst part was the running commentary from Tragus. He stayed through the whole ordeal, never at a loss for vulgar observations. He forced Hesper to remain, considering his triumph incomplete without someone to admire his lewd jokes. Again to her credit, Hesper asked three times if she could return to the cheese shed. She complained that the curds would sour if she didn't stir them.

Finally, Tragus released the old woman when she said the new batch needed rennet or it wouldn't set. A day's supply of milk would go to waste. Somewhere in the swimming torment of her thoughts, Nerissa remembered rennet was a substance that came out of a dead calf's stomach. Hesper had told her that it caused milk to curdle into clots. The best kind came from stillborn heifers, but Tragus got it cheap from the cattle butcher in Polis.

Tragus let the ram mount her twice more, but without an audience, he soon tired of the game. He unchained Nerissa from the trough, and since she couldn't straighten, let alone walk, he dragged her back inside the ewe shed. As he refastened her chain around the post, he broke out in a laugh.

"Hah -- that was good," he commented to himself. "Best fun I've had in years. Shame about the council, though. Shit-brained fools. Don't have the sense to understand what's good for commerce. A spectacle like this would make Ithaca famous all around. We could drape Trumpet in a mantle, like he's a God come down to earth."

Before Nerissa passed out, a fresh worry attacked her mind. What if she quickened from this? All right, she understood that ancient tales like Leda and the Swan, or Pasiphae who'd borne the Minotaur after mating with Poseidon's bull, they never happened in the ordinary times of nowadays. They came from a different age, when the immortals freely mixed among the race of men. But oh, compassionate Athena, what if it really came to pass? What if Trumpet was no ordinary ram? After all, his endurance had been otherworldly.

What if some lusty god had taken on this ovine form? What if he'd impregnated her like Zeus did to Europa, in the guise of a white bull? Or when He'd ravished the Spartan Queen Leda after turning into a swan. Now, it was true that Europa's mother Io was already a heifer at the time of her birth. And Leda had borne normal offspring, not some human/avian monstrosity. Though hatched from eggs, the demigods Castor and Pollux both were very manly in appearance. And the great beauty Helen was also Leda's child. Which meant she'd suffered no lingering effects from the swan's rape.

Maybe it won't be so bad, Nerissa thought as haze settled over her bruised mind. *If*

Trumpet is a God, my child will be immortal. Nothing will hurt him, like humans have hurt me and all of those I've loved. And I needn't worry about a mortal child. If Trumpet's only a goat, he can't make me quicken.

Or can he? Mother will know. Oh, that's right -- she can't tell me, she's dead. Unless this kills me, too, I won't get the chance to ask her...



Hesper roused her early in the morning.

"I know you're in a bad way," Hesper said as she unlocked the chain, "but you must milk the ewes."

She looked ashamed to pass along the rest of Tragus's commands. Though Nerissa had trouble even rising, she'd have to resume the same duties as before. Milk the ewes, take half a bucket to the house, lead the flock up the hillside, tend them all day, pluck old rope to fill the oakum barrels, bring back the flock, water them and clean their hooves, service Tragus, then sleep chained to the post for five hours at best, and start again at dawn. All while naked, because Tragus still wouldn't allow her clothing. If anyone happened to come by and see her, that was just too bad. Who cared about a slave girl's feelings or her dignity?

Looking even more ashamed, Hesper told Nerissa exactly what would happen to her if she tried to run again.

"Don't look at me that way. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do. He ordered me to say that. And I'm to keep an even closer watch on you. Now, I have to come outside every half an hour. If I don't see you with the flock, I'm to get Tragus at once." She handed Nerissa a wet cloth. "Here, I brought you this to wipe your face. That new cut on your cheek looks awful. Look, I feel bad about what he's done to you, but you mustn't try anything stupid. It'll be more than my life's worth if you escape this time."

"Don't worry. I can hardly walk. As my mother used to say, 'Mê kinei Kamarinan.'"

"What?"

"It means, 'Don't stir up Kamarina.' And I won't."

"What's Kamarina?"

"A pestilential swamp on Sicily. How Mother knew of Sicily, I never could imagine. What she meant was, 'Leave well alone.' My life has hardly gone well here, but I intend to follow her advice. Just leading the sheep to pasture will take every drop of energy that I have left ... Tragus wouldn't really make me do that with Trumpet at festivals, would he?"

“He’ll forget it, just like all his other crack-brained schemes. Sheep-fucker’s on a massive drunk right now.”

But Nerissa couldn’t trust that either a wine soaked head or fear of the law would make Tragus forget his plan. He’d been so full of self-congratulation. She could recall the lust for drachmai in his laughter. Before she’d let him do that to her again, let alone in front of a crowd, she’d kill him. And before she’d let her lineage be stained with public execution for murder, she’d have to run. No matter the terrible punishment that Tragus had decreed.

For the next four weeks, Nerissa did her best to turn into a model slave. She was humble, obedient, obliging. She filled the oakum barrels well; she made small sounds of pleasure when Tragus judged she’d healed enough to rape her. She allowed them to escape as muffled noise, as if she didn’t want them heard. *Oh, Tragus, she let them say, I just can’t help myself. What girl wouldn’t relish being mounted by such a skillful man?*

It worked. He only beat her twice all month, and those times only on the buttocks. Once for letting a ewe step in a ground squirrel’s hole and lame itself. The other was at the height of sexual excitement. Afterward, Tragus allowed her to wear clothes again and began to feed her better. He finally let her bury Irene’s rotted carcass.

Between the improved food, and gentler treatment, Nerissa started to regain her strength. She gathered rocks and stashed them on the hillside. One day, she found an old sack at the back of the shed. It was when she fetched the tar bucket with which she salved the lame ewe’s ankle. Before Hesper noticed, she quickly tucked the sack down the threadbare chiton that Tragus had provided.

The next morning on the hillside, Nerissa fashioned it into a sling. All day, she stood by her cache of stones and practiced. If Hesper happened to see her, she could say she’d heard a howl. Tragus would learn of it, but he’d believe that she was teaching herself to use a sling in case wolves attacked the flock. He wouldn’t know that she was skilled already. His behavior outside the Grotto of the Nymphs proved he hadn’t heard about her prowess from Jeremos. Otherwise, he never would have come charging at them while she’d breakfasted with Homer.

That night, Nerissa scraped a hole beside the post. She hid the sling, along with six smooth rocks the size of eggs. She still had dozens more cached on the hillside. She didn’t want to be a murderess, but if Tragus showed any sign of returning her to Trumpet’s pen, she wouldn’t hesitate.

She ran at the first opportunity. The night before, Tragus had been one bowl short of collapse when he’d come into the shed. He didn’t rape her, but wanted her to share his last skin of wine. He’d rambled on about his dead wife Daphne, claiming how no man ever loved a

woman better. Tears streaming down his face, he'd reeled a winding path out of the shed. He was so drunk, he'd stay asleep all day.

As soon as she got the sheep up the hillside, Nerissa waved to Hesper down below. She'd tucked some hoarded barley bread into her robe. She left the flock grazing behind her as she climbed to the forest on the upper slope. Along with the bread, she carried her sling with ten well-chosen stones inside it.

"Hey, you!" came the distant voice of Tragus. "Get your ugly hide down here at once or your punishment is double."

Hesper must have poured a full bucket of milk over his head to rouse him. She must have suspected this would be the day. Something in Nerissa's expression must have warned her when she'd unlocked the chain. She hadn't waited half an hour, but checked again only a few minutes later.

Though Nerissa had already reached the ridgeline, she knew she couldn't outdistance Tragus. He might be suffering from a severe hangover, but she still was hobbled by all the injuries she'd suffered. She turned and came out of the trees. Selecting her best stone, she set down the others. She whirled her sling, and let the first stone fly. It struck a lone sapling on the slope. A moment later, she struck the same sapling with a second stone. She hoped this demonstration would deter Tragus from the chase.

Instead, he brandished the mattock he was holding. He brought its rusty head down on the sapling's base, severing its thin stalk in one stroke. There couldn't have been a clearer demonstration of how he'd deal with further disobedience. When she didn't come immediately, Tragus rushed up the hillside. Obviously, he didn't believe she'd have the nerve to fell him.

Nerissa selected her largest stone and launched it. Tragus saw the missile coming just in time and ducked. He had good eyesight, she'd give him that. And good reflexes for a drunk. Too bad it was so early in the morning. He was facing east, but the sun hadn't risen high enough to blind him. As he stood glowering at her, Nerissa rapidly loaded another stone. She fired it, and then another.

Tragus dodged the first, but the second struck his hip. It drove him to one knee. But he got up again, and lurched up the hill. He was either a lot braver than she thought, or such a fool to think that all these shots were flukes.

She fired two more, each slightly wide of murder. They passed the crown of his head at exactly the same height, so he'd know her first three shots hadn't been beginner's luck.

With a gaping look of astonishment, Tragus retreated. Nerissa hurried over the hill's crest, then down into a stony vale like the first time. But now she couldn't go to Polis. He'd

look there first. Though he'd be too hobbled to chase her, Tragus would spread word through the town that an escaped slave was on the loose. An escaped slave who'd tried to kill him. She'd never get onto an outbound vessel now.

Nerissa loped back-country in the opposite direction. Hesper had once mentioned a small settlement at the southern end of Ithaca called Alalcomenae. It was where she'd served Tyrus as a bed slave. Hesper said it was a fishing village.

If I can reach it, some fishermen might help me, Nerissa thought. *I'll be a stranger to them, but maybe they won't act like the fishermen on Imbrus.*

All across the world, most people who depended on the sea learned compassion from its bitter lessons. When she told them about Father and her family's troubles, some good man would help her leave this island.

Nerissa knew she'd have to hurry, before Tragus put out the alarm. But she could hardly move at more than an old woman's pace. Soon there'd be slave hunters searching for her. Unless all of Ithaca thought Tragus lied about her attack, they'd be heavily armed. And though this was a small island, it might take all day to reach Alalcomenae at her shambling speed.

What I need's a horse. But even if I come across one in a rich man's field, even if there's no one preventing me from theft, I'll never be able to catch it. Not to mention that I've never ridden on a horse.

A ride in someone's cart would be much better. But then she'd have to travel on the road. And even if she wasn't stopped as a runaway, who'd give her a ride, looking like she did? She could unfold the sling to veil her face, but the chiton was moth-eaten, stained, and ill-fitting. It must have once belonged to another slave girl. Maybe that poor child mentioned by Hesper, the one who'd died in childbirth. Anyone who wore such a rag could only be a slave.

She'd need better clothes to reach Alalcomenae safely. But who'd give them to her? She couldn't turn to Homer. As soon as Tragus finished searching the port, he'd go to Homer's rented house.

There was Thea, maybe. The plump cook had always been very kind to her. But Praegon might see her, then he'd immediately tell Lady Phyllis. Besides, Dzunga worked there now.

She probably blames me that she's sterilized. She'll think it's all because of me that Aetes sold her off.

Worst of all would be if she ran into Theoton. After his rejection on the street, she couldn't bear him seeing her like this again.

No help for it. Nerissa decided she'd have to reach the main road and hope someone took pity. Along the way, maybe she'd pass a farm with an unattended wash line. Nerissa forced her

legs into a trot, despite all the protests from her many injuries. To take her mind off the sharp pain from her pelvis, she tore off a piece of bread. She still was very sore from Trumpet, but chewing on the stale bread helped. It was as hard as leather, and she could only chew on one side of her mouth, so it lasted until she reached the stream. Here, Nerissa took a deep drink, then set off to the road.

Not a minute after she started south, an oxcart came around the bend. Thinking it might be the same farmer as before, Nerissa put her head down as he passed. He'd paid her no attention the first time, so it should work again. Tragus couldn't possibly have gotten word out about her escape this fast.

"Good morning, miss!" boomed the oxcart's driver. "Nice day to be out in the fresh air."

She peeked up from the makeshift veil, pretending to be shy. It was a different man. Though just as heavy as the other farmer, this one was jovial, not dour.

"Haven't seen you on the road before. I suppose your master doesn't often send you out on errands. Likes to keep you to himself, does he? What's your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

A garrulous sort, exceptionally friendly. Either that, or maybe he liked the look of her legs beneath her too-short robe. Nerissa should just lift the veil and let him see her face. Then he'd stop flirting and she could hurry on.

"A chaste one, is it?" said the man. He barked a laugh, loud enough to echo from the hill. "Your master's trained you well. I wonder who he is? I wonder if he's in a mind to bargain... Still no answer, darling? Ah well, don't mind me. You can't blame a fellow for trying."

He laughed again as he drove off. Nerissa waited a minute, then turned to follow the tracks. Not that she thought he'd help her. A man like this wouldn't be the sort to offer shelter. Especially when he saw she was no beauty.

But she'd recognized his fleshy face. He was the one who'd bought Berenice at the auction that first day. He'd stepped close to admire Berenice's ripe form after the slave dealer slit her peplos. He'd made loud jests to the other men about adding extra bracing to his bed.

He was a rogue, but not a cruel one. She'd noticed that he didn't chain Berenice as he led her away. He'd even offered Berenice a hand to help her down the platform's steps.

Berenice is probably thriving. She's used to being a bed slave. She's attractive and very likeable, so he probably treats her well. Unless her mistress keeps a jealous eye on every scrap, Berenice will have extra clothes to lend me. Maybe she can even talk her master into that ride. The trick will be to keep him from insisting that I remove my veil.

Fortunately, the cart tracks were easy to follow. The dirt was moist from morning dew

and there'd been little other traffic on the road. Nerissa walked at roadside until the tracks turned in at a cattle farm's gate. It was a handsome place, with well-kept fields and a small stream leading to the river. The house was large and made of wood, another sign of wealth. All timber had to be imported, since long ago Ithaca's slopes had been denuded of large trees. Even the wood used at Ithaca's famed shipyard came from abroad. She could see that Berenice's master was doing very well.

"Do you know Berenice?" she called to a boy who sat on a fence rail tending the herd of white-faced kine.

"Sure. Are you a friend?"

"That's right. My name is Dzunga. We came on the same ship to Ithaca. My master sent me on an errand out this way, but it went fast, so I have a little time to visit."

"You'll find her at the stream, behind that stand of willows."

"She isn't with your master, is she?"

It wouldn't be a good time to interrupt, if that's where the plump man took Berenice for his pleasure.

"No, Master Architalos isn't here."

"But he passed me on the road not long ago, coming back from Polis."

"He left again. He went in to town because the jeweler's slave came to say a present for the Mistress was ready. A jeweled fibula to pin her new robe. The Master was so pleased, he went himself to collect it. Then as soon as he got back, the Mistress made him go out again. I think she wants to show the fibula to her sister."

"I take it your master's kind to his wife?"

"He dotes on her."

"And what about the slaves?"

"You mean Berenice? He can't get enough of her."

"Isn't your mistress jealous?"

"No, from what I hear, she shares in the fun."

Nerissa left the cowherd laughing. She found Berenice washing clothes on a smooth rock that jutted from the stream. Her friend looked well-fed and happy. She hummed a lilting tune from Rhodos as she scrubbed linen robes with ash, then beat them with a mallet.

"Nerissa, is that you?" cried Berenice, as she saw her young friend step around the willow. "You look-- I don't know what to say."

"It's all right. You needn't worry about my feelings. I look ten times worse than on the Thallia, you mean."

"But what's happened to you? I mean, people say the man who bought you is a brute, but it looks like he's beaten you half to death."

"He has. And much, much more."

Nerissa quickly recounted everything he'd done.

"That's why I had to escape from Tragus. Can you help me?"

"Of course. What do you need?"

Feeling deeply grateful, Nerissa exhaled with relief. Despite the danger of harsh punishment, Berenice hadn't hesitated for a moment. It felt wonderful to know that there were still good people in the world.

"Would your mistress notice if I took one of these robes?" Nerissa asked.

"She might, but it's all right. I'll say it tore from scrubbing, so I gave it to a passing beggar."

"And she'll believe that?"

"She won't care. If it's old, it doesn't matter to her. They're very rich. Architalos owns a workshop staffed by fifty slaves who all make pots."

"They each sit at a wheel? Why, they must produce hundreds of pots every day."

"No, not so much as that. Some slaves do nothing but collect the clay. Architalos is very particular about its quality. It must be very rich in iron to produce the red color he prefers. Then there are the slaves who throw his pots. Architalos specializes in water jars. Once they're shaped, other slaves dry and bake them. Then some work at varnishing, some paint black silhouettes, and some add bright red details made of crushed cinnabar. Finally, there are slaves who pack the finished product into crates, and others who are draymen. Altogether, Architalos says his workshop produces eighty hydriai a day."

"That must earn him a great deal. I see that he owns cattle."

"Yes, his fortune's many talents."

"But I've heard the rich can be the most miserly of people. Are you sure your mistress won't punish you for the robe's loss?"

"It might cross her mind that I've kept it for myself, but she won't search my things."

"Are they good to you, Berenice? Are you happy here?"

"Ah, you poor lamb. Haven't you learned yet not to look for happiness? You won't find it on this earth."

"But you sounded happy. I heard you humming as I walked to the stream."

"The life I've had, I learned early to make the best of things. There are so many people who mistreat the powerless, why should I add one more? Why should I hurt myself by longing

for a different life? This is the only one I'll have on earth. Why waste any of it brooding over things that have already done their worst?"

"And you can really find contentment in this way? I'd give anything to learn the secret. You always seem so peaceful."

"There's no secret to it, honey. All you need to do is shun misery, like you'd shun their causes if you had any choice. I don't know about contentment, but it allows me to relish the sunshine and the birdsong and the breeze."

"But you don't have much misery to shun here, do you? I saw your Master on the road. He doesn't look like the sort who'd abuse you."

"Architalos doesn't. Neither does the Mistress. They're both devoted to their pleasures, but they treat me well enough. That's all a slave can ask."

"So you don't mind your, um, extra duties?"

"Sleeping with them, you mean? No, why should I? There are much worse things my old master made me do. Besides, I hear a great deal of gossip in their bed. They both love to talk, and they know something about everyone."

She longed to ask about Theoton, but thoughts of his betrayal were still too raw. Even asking about Vasy would lead inevitably to the subject of his father. Nerissa wanted to know that the little boy was doing fine. She'd thought about him every day, but she just couldn't ask.

"Have they ever mentioned a poet called Homer?" she said instead.

"The blind one? Why, what have you to do with him?"

Nerissa related the whole story. When she'd finished, Berenice held out her arms. She comforted Nerissa in a long embrace.

"You poor girl. It sounds like Homer really wanted you to join his household."

"It seemed that way. But he couldn't because he's deep in debt."

"Just as well, you know. They say he's very strange."

"Not really. Brilliant, I'd call him. That and arrogant, but so are many men."

"I've heard he walks the hills, declaiming verse at the top of his lungs."

"Homer's voice is very sonorous, but I wouldn't say it's overloud. He acted perfectly civilized, all the time we were together."

"The Mistress thinks he sleeps with that old slave."

"Philemon? I doubt it very much."

"Then who? Besides one toothless cook, he owns no female slaves. And you know they say that many poets favor boys."

"Homer is unused to female company, but I'd say he likes us very much... Berenice,

did you ever hear anything about Homer breaking off a courtship?"

"You mean Jeremos's cousin Penelope? It was the other way around. They were betrothed soon after his poem *The Iliad* won some sort of prize in Athens. By the time Homer returned from a tour of festivals in the Aegean, he was impoverished."

"Do you know why?"

"He was in a shipwreck. When he finally came back, Homer asked Jeremos to forgive the remainder of Penelope's bride price."

"And Jeremos refused?"

"Of course. Now, Penelope's father Alexandros might have agreed to this. I hear he was a great admirer of Homer's work. Architalos says he'd listen with Penelope on his lap all those years Homer composed his epic. But Alexandros couldn't forgive the debt, because he'd died by the time Homer returned from the Aegean. And fever took Penelope's mother many years ago, so the girl became an orphan and Jeremos took it on himself to be her guardian. I hear he never married, because he was in love with Penelope, himself."

"Is that really true?"

"Who knows? The Mistress thinks so. Anyway, Jeremos insisted that the ancient customs of *gamos di' agoras* must be obeyed. He refused to let Homer marry Penelope without the full contracted price. Which Homer struggled to amass for years, but couldn't. Finally, Jeremos rescinded the contract and tried to marry her off to an elderly neighbor. A man long past it, couldn't get it up, you understand. That way, Jeremos hoped to keep her virginal, or according to the Mistress, keep her for himself."

"Well, that explains a lot... Is she very beautiful?"

"Was."

"What do you mean 'was'? She's dead?"

"That's right. It seems Penelope was faithful in her love for Homer, so she drowned herself."

"Oh, merciful Athena! That's terrible."

"Yes. The worst part was that Jeremos blamed Penelope's death on your poet. He demanded Homer pay the rest of her bride price. It's caused a mortal feud between them. It all will end in bloodshed one dark day. Too bad you didn't settle it with your sling."

"You're right. I'd just as soon be hung for that as for attacking Tragus. Homer's a good man in his way. He didn't deserve what Jeremos did to him."

"No, but it's not your responsibility to avenge him. You just look out for your own skin, honey. I hope we meet again, but I also hope that you get far away."

From the clean laundry, Nerissa chose the driest robe, along with a head scarf. After she wished Berenice good fortune and hugged her close, they said farewell. Fortunately, the cowherd was no longer in sight when Nerissa reached the road.

She soon caught a ride, but kept her eyes modestly averted as she climbed up on the oxcart. When its driver tried to make conversation, she said only that her name was Dzunga. Pressed for details of her errand, she said in broken Ionian that her master had sent her south to Alalcomenae with a message for his uncle.

An hour later, the carter dropped her off outside the stonemason's yard where he worked. It was near the northern tip of Polis Bay. She still had a long way to go to Alalcomenae, and couldn't take the direct road through Polis. So she trudged up a lane that led into the hills. She passed a pit where slaves carried buckets full of red dirt up ladders. At the top, they dumped their loads into a cart. This must be the place where Architalos mined clay for his pottery.

Late into the afternoon, Nerissa stopped to rest at a brook that bubbled down the slope. She felt hungry and exhausted. The bread was long gone. She wished she'd asked Berenice to steal some food out of her master's kitchen. She'd love a handful of olives and a bite of roasted meat. She remembered how good the meal she'd shared with Homer tasted.

She must have drifted off asleep, because it was dusk when a cold wind roused her. Feeling that a storm was coming quickly, Nerissa looked for shelter. She was in luck, because the lane she traveled came to a large cave not far from the brook. Above its entrance, there were painted symbols sacred to Athena, an olive tree, a loom, an owl. On either side, there were also a chariot, a yoke and harness, a spinning wheel, a flute, the things that She'd invented.

Confidant that her trusted Goddess had led her to this place, Nerissa stepped inside. This must be the Cave of Loizos. About a month ago, Hesper had mentioned coming to pray here. It was an annual rite that marked the Virgin springing from Zeus's head.

At last, Olympus turns a kind regard on me, Nerissa thought as she stepped inside. By the last remaining light, she saw a fire pit just past the cave's entrance. It must be where the celebrants burned offerings on feast days. A pile of sticks was stacked beside it. She had nothing with which to light a fire, but that was all right. Rain was coming soon, but the weather still was warm. Inside the cave, she would stay dry. And she had nothing to fear from animals. This place was sacred to aegis-shielded Athena, after all. Unlike the cave of Polyphemus, there was no alarming smell. As lightning began to flash outside, Nerissa lay down on a deerskin that someone had left behind. To the comforting noise of rain falling outside when one is safe inside, she quickly fell asleep.

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Nerissa couldn't move her arms or legs when she awoke. She thought that she was in a dream of snakes that bound her limbs. She tried to scream herself to wakefulness, but couldn't. There was something in her mouth, another serpent. But no, it was unyielding, not alive. When she bit down, it felt like stiffened leather. Whatever it was, the taste was rancid. Realizing that she was already awake, Nerissa flailed on the cave floor. Only bare rock was beneath her. Someone had removed the deerskin.

It still was dark, but embers glowed inside the fire pit. She struggled to a sitting position against the wall. As her eyes adjusted to the meager light, Nerissa made out a human shape lying by the cave mouth. After watching it for minutes, she decided that it was a man. A living man whose chest moved slightly as he slept, not a corpse. And not a giant, either.

He must be a slave catcher who'd caught her here. But how had he tracked her through the storm? How had Tragus learned so fast which way she'd run? She worried that he'd demand her execution. Or simply do the job himself.

But if this was a slave catcher, his behavior seemed very odd. Why bind her with such care that she'd slept through her capture? And why stay in the cave overnight? Despite the rain, you'd think he would have been eager to collect his bounty. Why gag her mouth? What did he care if she screamed? And why use a piece of old leather instead of a cloth?

Another thing -- why hadn't the slave catcher used her body? Most men would have done so, and certainly the sort to be slave catchers. As a matter of course, if not from lust. If this one was squeamish about her face, well, it was dark. Anyway, of the many men who'd raped her during the past year, all but Chymides Eight-Fingers had preferred to take her from behind.

In the dim light, Nerissa peered at the bonds around her arms and legs. They weren't rope, she realized. At least not rope made in the modern way. They were woven from vines. She tried to gnaw at one, but the gag got in the way. Maybe that's why he'd used it.

She wondered if it might be possible to talk her way out of this. Some clever ploy, like Homer's idea of tricking Polyphemus into saying, "Noman attacks me."

Let's see, I can tell him there's a treasure hidden up the hillside. If I offer to lead him to it, he'll have to unbind my legs. My arms, too, so I can climb the slope. Then when we reach a likely spot, I can distract him somehow, grab a rock, and bash him on the head.

No, that will never work. This fellow's much too clever. Look how easily he caught me... Or maybe he's a devotee of Athena. That would explain how he knew about the Cave of Loizos. When it started to storm, he guessed that I'd come here.

Maybe Hesper told him I revere the Goddess -- she's heard me often enough at my prayers. So I could tell him that Athena came to me last night in a dream. She said that we must sleep together, then we'll both be blessed. I'll tell him I must first build up the fire and make an offering. That way, he'll untie my hands. After I satisfy him, it shouldn't be hard to reach my sling. Even if he's removed the stone that I had ready in it, plenty of others are here beside the wall.

Nerissa continued thinking through different plans until light seeped into the cave. *Rhododactylos Eos*, a phrase that Homer had recited, flitted through her mind. The rosy-fingered Goddess of the Dawn.

As the noise of bird calls reached them, Nerissa's captor began to stir. When he awoke, he rose immediately and went outside. To empty his bladder, she guessed. Which supported her guess that he was a devotee. Most men would have simply sent a yellow arc against the wall.

When he returned a while later, the slave catcher poked the coals, ignoring her completely. He built them into flames with kindling, then larger sticks. Turning away, he spitted something on a sharpened stake. He set it between two large stones that flanked the fire. Soon, there came the delicious smell of roasting game. He must have caught some creature in a nearby snare he'd set during the night.

The light was still too dim to see his features, but he had a very strange profile. His face was extremely elongated, and his forehead bulged to an alarming proportion. His beard was long and dense, his clothing heavy for this time of year.

He didn't speak or acknowledge Nerissa's presence in any way. When the meat was done, he ate it all, down to the bones, including every organ. The light had grown strong enough to see that it was something squirrel-sized. He didn't make an offering of the stomach or intestines, as far as she could tell. Then he drank from a container twice the size of an ordinary wineskin. She guessed that it was made from a doe's hide. She sniffed the air, hoping to catch a fermented scent. If this was wine he guzzled, maybe the slave catcher would soon fall over

drunk.

But it turned out to be water. Nerissa knew, because presently, he gave her a drink. As the man knelt beside her, she saw more of his face. His bulging forehead had lumps scattered across it like a collection of knobs on a pumpkin. His hair was tangled with so many thorns and twigs, it looked like a bird's nest. His two eyes were uneven in alignment, the left one noticeably higher than the right. His ears were mangled savagely, looking more like dried pear halves than human features. His nose was twisted to the side so thoroughly, one of the nostrils was pressed closed. He made a wet sigh every time he breathed. Worst of all, his mouth was a ragged gash that seemed a cry of torment.

Oh, sweet Lady, is this why you led me here? Is he to be my husband? Did you find the one man ugly enough to make a proper match for me?

Nerissa blanched at the prospect offered by her beloved Goddess. She was being punished, like Aphrodite forced to marry Hephaestus. Except she was no beauty. She was as hideous as her intended mate. This man was no slave catcher. He was an outcast, dressed in the furs of wild beasts. Their tails hung down haphazardly. There was a rabbit's scut at his right elbow and a badger's tail at his navel. He wore no proper sandals, but had wrapped his feet in buckskin.

Gazing around the cave, she saw no modern items in it -- no pottery, cookware, cutlery, or tools. Her captor didn't possess one item that came from skilled craftsmen. To live like this, he must have renounced all dealings with civilized people.

This man's a hermit, Nerissa realized with dread. He bound me with the vines, not to drag me back to Tragus, but to make me be his mate.



A day and night passed without the hermit touching her. It made Nerissa fear him even more. If he didn't want her body, what did he intend to do with her? Certainly, he couldn't plan to return her as a captured slave. Not if he was hiding here away from men. Though he seemed to be an expert trapper, she saw no evidence that he'd ever traded furs for goods.

After the man went out, Nerissa sat shivering for hours. It wasn't hard to imagine many ways that he might kill her. A slab of granite pressing down on her prostrate form, with more rocks added slowly, until the last few drops of blood oozed from her pores... Vines twisted tight around her throat, then released each time light left her eyes... A stake skewered through her body from one end to the other. A slow roast in the fire. Maybe as an offering to his savage

Gods. Or maybe as a welcome change to his diet. She could picture him splitting her bones like he'd done with his akratismos after finishing the meat. She could hear him sucking out the marrow.

I shouldn't fear death after all I've seen, Nerissa told herself. I'll be reunited with my family. Wherever they might be, it can't be worse than this.

But she couldn't make her limbs stop trembling. It was one thing to die beside her loved ones. If she'd perished with Nikos and Philippos in the cave of Polyphemos, at least she would have had the comfort of traveling to Hades in their staunch company. Or if she'd been slain in battle on Imbrus, alongside Kestides and the elder cousins, she never would have had to endure all that followed.

But to die alone here, friendless and forgotten, to be the victim of this ogre, to suffer whatever death his tortured thoughts produced, to have her entrails studied before he savored them, to have the few scraps that he didn't eat tossed out for the ravens, to have to bear the fear of it for weeks, until he settled on a pleasing method... it was unmercifully cruel for the Fates to spin such a bitter end to her hard life.

He finally returned as dusk approached. By the fading light, Nerissa saw he carried two limp hares, their long ears trailing in the dirt. He skinned then spit them, built up the fire, and cooked them in its flames. Again, he didn't speak a word or even look her way.

When the hares were blackened on the outside, he lifted the spit and began to eat. He didn't bother to pull them off or let them cool. He ate quickly, greedily, taking large bites from each hare. If they burned his mouth at all, he gave no sign. He seemed to particularly enjoy their brains, smacking his lips with pleasure before guzzling a long drink from his water skin.

As it grew dark outside, Nerissa listened to him snapping bones and sucking marrow. She couldn't help but cringe, knowing that he'd make the same noises when she was the meal he finished down to crumbs.

Oh merciful Athena, how did I offend You? It must have been unpardonable, for one as generous as You to turn Your loving face away. Yes, You needn't remind me, I can't pretend I don't know when it was. It was that bitter morning I abandoned Euredon, wasn't it? You're right -- though he ordered me to leave him lying by the dead bullock, I've felt despoiled ever since. I know that I deserve whatever happens here, but I'm so afraid to die like this.

She heard the hermit take another drink, then rise. She couldn't see him because he'd let his fire die to embers. His footsteps crossed the cave toward her. She shuddered violently. She tried to wrap her arms across her chest, but couldn't. She'd forgotten they were bound. She wished that she could free them, if only to wipe the snot seeping from her nose.

Nerissa clamped her teeth shut. She didn't want the man to hear them chattering with fear. Her bladder almost gave way, but she kept the leakage to a drop that slithered down her thigh. Through the sides of her mouth, she sucked in a deep breath. She prepared herself to die.

She wanted to find one good thing of Earth to bring with her. It might sustain her on the journey. But the darkness was complete in here. She couldn't see a thing. And the savory aroma of roasted hare had faded now. The cave's dominant scents of must and guano had returned. The air was quickly growing cold. The rock against her back was jagged and unyielding. None of these things were pleasant. So she turned to her best memories, of Father's valor and his wisdom, of Vasy learning how to swim, of the bittersweet joy from loving brave Andrastus...

Something struck her on the chest. A tiny moan of fear escaped. Before she even braced for the next stone, Nerissa grimaced in disgust. She'd felt determined not to cry out from pain or dread or anguish. Now she'd revealed her cowardice at the first blow. And it wasn't even heavy. In fact, the thing was very light. She could feel it sitting in her lap, no larger than a hemlock's cone.

Nerissa waited for the next. If he meant to crush her slowly, by piling small stones into a mound, this would take all night. She vowed to remain silent. She mustn't shame her family further.

She heard the hermit step away. She saw the silhouette of his legs pass by the fire's coals. She heard him settle on his pile of furs across the cave.

Leaning down as far as the bindings allowed, Nerissa touched the object with her chin. It felt warm and greasy. After smelling the thing, she realized that it was the carcass of a hare. So he'd only cracked the bones of one. He'd given her this other for deipnon! But why would he do that? Was he fattening her before he feasted on her flesh, as they'd feared with Polyphemus? If her captor really was a cannibal, this torment might go on for months. She should just roll away, and leave the hare there in the dirt. If he saw she wouldn't eat, he might decide to get it over quickly.

Still, the hare's aroma was impossible to ignore. This close, it wafted to her nostrils, promising the best meal that she'd ever known. Nerissa felt so hungry, she couldn't resist. She'd eaten nothing since that heel of bread. But her hands were bound, so she had to manage with her teeth alone. It took an hour, but she gnawed most of the meat. In fact, he'd left her quite a bit.

Nerissa managed little sleep, agonizing over every choice she'd made since that disastrous morning in Laedron's field. She'd committed so many mistakes, and more than a few

sins. If this torment was a judgment on her from Olympus, so be it. From this moment on, she vowed to bear her punishment without complaint. When the Fates finally decreed she might rejoin her loved ones, she must be able to meet their blameful eyes.

The hermit left again that morning, returned that night with animals he'd trapped, cooked them, and shared a carcass with her. Though bound and tethered to a thick stalagmite at the back end of the cave, Nerissa had enough room to relieve herself over a fissure. It was very deep and far enough from the altar that this didn't seem a sacrilege.

Their routine went along unbroken for ten days. Nerissa learned to open her mouth when the hermit approached. After setting down her food, he'd give her a long drink from his water skin.

On the tenth morning, he released Nerissa's bindings. He grunted loudly when he saw the places where she'd tried chewing through the vines. As it was, she'd made little progress, because the vines were very tough and something toxic in them numbed her lips. But it was impossible to tell if she'd enraged him by trying to escape. His expression always looked like fury.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her out into the day. Accustomed to the murky cave, the brightness outside hurt her eyes. She raised her hands to shield them. He turned and pushed them down. He stared at her intently. He reached out, almost tenderly, and touched the thick scab that had formed over the cut across her cheek from Trumpet.

Nerissa flinched, though the hermit's light touch didn't hurt. He dropped his arm, then stared again. As she reddened with shame, he tilted his head, as if with perplexity.

Suddenly, he whistled. It sounded like a mistle thrush. When she didn't move, he whistled again, jerked his arm, and headed off into the forest. It must be his signal to tell her she must follow. Nerissa reluctantly obeyed, but at a shambling walk. She felt too sore to move any quicker.

The man kept turning back and whistling at her. Sometimes the thrush noise, sometimes a whitethroat warbler, that seemed to mean turn left, or a woodlark that meant right. If he did a goshawk, it meant to stop immediately and stay perfectly still.

By midday, they'd checked all his snares. They found one hedgehog, still alive, but he quickly twisted its neck. They rested at a spring, where he refilled the water skin. Here, he also gathered a low-growing plant. It looked a lot like the colt's foot she used to find for Mother at the spring that gave rise to the Meles. They checked more snares all through the afternoon, collecting two dead wood rats and a badger. They ranged over the high ridgeline, where the slope grew much gentler. Nerissa gazed across a wide swath of fertile land all the way to the

eastern shore. Beyond an azure sea, she could make out the faint line of the mainland's coast.

The first chance that I get, she vowed silently, I'll escape and sail for freedom.

As the day grew long, the hermit set about collecting greenery. He had an expert understanding of just which plants were edible. He gathered leaves, roots, stalks and mushrooms in a wide variety of places. Along the way, he let Nerissa forage for nuts and berries. He found some boneset and also stripped some willow bark. Nerissa knew from Mother that this could be ground and brewed into a tisane that eased many aches. He next collected curling ferns and a type of mold growing at the base of an oak tree.

When they returned at dusk, something seemed different about the cave. She couldn't think what had struck her as a change until the hermit began to cook. Ah, yes. There'd been a slight smell of incense when they'd entered. This must have been a feast day. People had visited the cave that morning. He must have known they'd come -- that's why he'd brought her out along his route.

But he'd made no effort to move the stones that ringed his fire pit, or scatter the ashes, or hide the coals. The deerskin that he used as a pad for sleeping, and the furs that were his blankets, he'd left them where they lay. So the local Ithacans must know he lived here. They must tolerate his presence, believing that the Goddess inhabited this lunatic. The fire pit where he cooked must be the same one where they burnt their offerings. He didn't want them learning of her -- that's why he'd brought her with him.

Nerissa heard him grinding something on a stone. When he brought her food and water later, he also smeared a wet paste on her cheek. It smelled dreadful, but by now she didn't fear he meant her injury. He'd heated the water this time, too. Probably, he'd infused it with boneset and willow.

What the hermit wanted was a mystery. Though he still bound her to the lyre-shaped stalagmite every night, the man was never rough. He showed no pleasure when he had to kill an animal, so she doubted he was planning some ritual murder for her. Because he also seemed to savor the food he caught, she'd stopped believing that he was fattening her to eat. He never raped her. If he satisfied himself some other way, it was never in the cave. And on those days he took her to the spring, he'd avert his eyes when she bathed.

This went on for months. The hermit continued to share all the meat he trapped. He made tisanes for her to drink and salved her wounds, the same as he salved his own. One day when it snowed heavily, he stayed inside all day and Nerissa had the chance to watch him mix one of his ointments. He made it from ground burdock root, oak gall, and the mashed liver of a fox.

In time, he came to trust her more. He'd leave her hands free when she'd eat. On cold nights, he'd let her sleep close to the fire. And though he still tied her far back in a descending tunnel when he went out alone, he'd leave a water skin close enough to reach with her mouth. Better yet, he no longer made her wear the gag.

But on feast days, which he always anticipated though she never saw him make calendar markings, he'd lead her early from the cave. And if she even touched a pelt, he'd snatch it from her immediately. Nerissa guessed he feared she'd make another sling, like the one he'd taken from her that first night.

A few times, he heard people approaching on an unexpected day. Then he'd race across the cave and gag her, throw her over a shoulder, and hurry out. They'd hide for many hours high up the mountain, until he was convinced the visitors had left.

On one of these occasions, Nerissa managed a brief cry before he could get the leather band into her mouth. He struck her chin, his fist shooting out so fast she never saw it. When she came to in the forest, he was rubbing salve onto the cut. It was the only time he hit her during these long months.

She never ran, because she never had the slightest chance. On the days her captor brought Nerissa outside, he never let her get more than two stadia away. She'd seen his speed and watchfulness. If she managed a few steps away, he'd overtake her in an instant. Inside the cave, she was either bound or sitting right beside him. And all the many days he left her alone in the deep tunnel, there were no sounds of anyone's approach.

Nerissa never learned the hermit's name. Or what he wanted, for that matter. Maybe her first thought was the same one he formed upon discovering her asleep. That Athena had sent her to him. That she was to be his mate. But not by force, which would be anathema to the Goddess. Could it be this hermit expected patience and kind treatment would make Nerissa fall in love?

The seasons turned. Though they sometimes came in view of the road, she never saw another person during all this time. How Nerissa longed that she might be discovered. She feared that some survivor from her clan would track her all the way to Ithaca, and then conclude she'd perished. She might as well be dead, enduring month after month of this minimal existence.

What if Andrastus were alive? What if he killed himself in grief over her disappearance? She tried to picture his handsome face. She saw it sag despondently.

Or Homer. What if he'd finished his poem and restored his reputation? Was it possible he'd summoned enough courage to face down Tragus? Not much chance that he'd remember

her. It had been two years and their encounter no more than an unpleasant day to Homer. But what if his substantial pride had made him return to his cousin?

She could readily imagine the proud poet demanding that Tragus sell him his shepherdess, only to be told of her escape. Hearing that the slave hunters had given up the search, Homer would conclude she'd died fallen down some mountain chasm or maybe wolves had eaten her.

Though he wouldn't care much for the opinion of a girl, she'd dearly like to hear Homer's finished work. In Nerissa's profound isolation, she'd spend entire days imagining how his epic sounded. And she could hear it well. Despite what Homer thought about her feeling for heroic verse, the same Muse spoke to her.

One day, she began setting line after line until they stretched to hundreds. She didn't need parchment or even light. Inside her mind, she could see exactly how Homer would invent them. She had his meter and his language captured. She knew just how he'd twist her family's banishment from Smyrna, the fight on Imbrus, their capture by Circe and the enchantress's defeat. Nerissa composed all this in the poet's style, then the lair of Polyphemus and the music-loving brigands, too.

Today, she'd described her imprisonment inside the Cave of Loizos. Which would have made a long and uneventful tale, except she related it as Homer would have done. He'd make this place an isle that Odysseus reached after a shipwreck. To him, the hermit would become a Goddess. Who'd force the hero to sleep with her, of course. And she'd be beautiful -- what man would refuse her? What man would even consider such a fate a hardship?

Only if he languished there for years. Then he'd weep, breaking his heart in tears and grief and lamentation. Nerissa remembered her phrase, the one that Homer had admired. Yes, it was the only time he'd praised her.

Maybe he did think something of her intellect. But in the end, Homer would decide to change these words, too. Something more suitable for a man. Because a girl could never be the protagonist of his tale. Though, when freedom finally came, the rescuer must be female, another Goddess. Who'd melt for Odysseus, as well. The abundance of his courage and his vigor would win her sympathy at last. So she'd insist the mortal must be freed. She'd send Hermes as her messenger -- that's what Homer had made of Tenes, the youth who'd gathered herbs on Buskados. And Hermes would convince Odysseus's love-smitten captor to relent.

When the hermit unbound her that evening, Nerissa took a thorn out of her hair and scratched her arm. Then using blood as ink, she inscribed lines on her robe. The hermit watched her do this in the firelight, but since she left no evidence on the cave walls or the floor, he didn't

take away her thorn. Maybe he thought the markings were intended for decoration, so he made no objection. Before the fire's light grew low, Nerissa finished scratching out these words that twisted all day in her mind:

*Unhappy man! to wasting woes a prey,
No more in sorrows languish life away:
Free as the winds I give thee now to rove:
Go, fell the timber of yon lofty grove,
And form a raft, and build the rising ship,
Sublime to bear thee o'er the gloomy deep.*

*To stock the vessel let the care be mine,
With water from the rock and rosy wine,
And life-sustaining bread, and fair array,
And helpful gales to waft thee on the way.
These, if the Gods with my request comply
(The Gods, alas, more mighty far than I,
And better skilled in dark events to come,
In peace shall land thee at thy native home.*

For the first time in months, Nerissa felt content as she lay down to sleep. Freed from her pent soul, she could almost see the lines glowing red on the fabric of her gown. She resolved to set down all the verses she'd composed. Her greatest hope was that some day she might read them to Homer.

At once, Nerissa heard another verse. It longed, as she did, to be free. It painted all the doubts she had about her future. Would she even wish to leave this cave if she knew what lay ahead?

*Odysseus! Ah, wert thou allowed to know
What Fate yet dooms thee still to undergo,
Thy heart might settle in this vale of ease.
And O, these slighted charms might learn to please.
A willing Goddess, and immortal life.
Might banish from thy thoughts an absent wife.*

Nerissa wrote many more verses over the next five years. She now was twenty-two, at the middle of a mortal's span of life. She only knew her age by keeping careful track on the passing seasons. The hermit certainly wouldn't let her mark off days on the cave walls. She couldn't keep a calendar on her chiton, either. During that first year of writing, she'd covered both sides of it with verse, but it had long since worn away to tatters. Besides, rain had smeared the thorn-drawn ink so thoroughly, she couldn't read a word. Four years ago, the hermit had presented her with a warm robe made of furs. He'd burned the ragged chiton.

It mattered not a bit. Nerissa had each line of her epic firmly committed to memory. By now, she'd traced Odysseus's path all the way from Troy to Ithaca, blending his ordeal with her own.

She dreamed of reciting this to Homer, watching his haughty lips creep up with reluctant pleasure. She wondered if he'd made much progress on his work. She longed to flee before he finished. She doubted he'd accept any of her suggestions, but still... it would be a consolation if he did. Something to make sense of all the time she'd languished here.

Today, she'd finally allowed Odysseus to sail away. Though he might refuse to accept a single line, Homer would have to acknowledge there was some slight merit in her verse:

*Wretch that I am! what farther fates attend
This fearsome life, and what my destined end?
Too well, alas! the island goddess knew
On the dark sea what perils should ensue.
New horrors now this destiny enclose;
Untilled is yet the measure of my woes;
With what a cloud the brow of Heaven's crowned;
What raging winds! what roaring waters round!
'Tis Zeus himself the vengeful tempest rears;
Death, present death, on every side appears.*

*Joyous! thrice joyous! who, in battle slain,
Pressed our great cause upon the Trojan plain!
Oh! had I died before that famous wall!
Had some distinguished day renowned my fall
(Such as the morn when raining javelins fled*

*From gallant Troy around Achilles dead),
All Hellas paid me solemn homage then,
And spread my glory to all sons of men.
A shameful fate now hides my hapless head,
Unwept, unnoted, and forever dead.*

With the hermit busy grinding another batch of salve, Nerissa used a twig to write these lines in the fire pit's warm ashes. She wanted to check her verse's scansion. Doing this was never easy in her head. The iambic decameter was impeccable, she saw. Her absent and unwilling patron could have no complaint. She allowed herself a bitter laugh as she scattered the ashes.

The hermit looked up because it was unusual for Nerissa to make a sound. She only shrugged and pointed at the dying fire. It was useless trying to explain anything to this simple man, let alone the cause of her outburst. Imagine, she'd not only elevated Homer to a God, but a female one at that. By making the caustic poet her personal Muse, she'd emasculated him into the immortal sisterhood.

Rho

Winter lay about the cave in silence. It was too cold for icicles to drip, for birds to sing, for deer to browse, even for fresh snow to fall. Yesterday, there'd been a stiff wind shrieking through the trees' bare limbs, and frequent groans from boughs laden with ice, but now, the air and wood were frozen mute.

Nerissa slumbered in the hidden chamber. Though it was noon outside, the gray light didn't penetrate down here. Her poem was finished, polished, purified, and then reworked again. Lying in the darkness, she had nothing more to occupy her mind. She'd long since forced herself to stop grieving for her obliterated family. If she allowed them back into her thoughts, she'd succumb to despair.

And so Nerissa slept away the long, dark days, her heart and hopes and soul benumbed. But no, she couldn't even claim the frozen solace of a hibernating bear. Each evening she woke to the hermit's padding step. Once freed from her bindings, she'd follow to his warm fire in the cave mouth. There, she'd stretch her meal to hours while gazing deep into the coals.

It was a kind of marriage, she supposed. Far better than the one shared by Theoton and Phyllis. Or if she'd become Theoton's courtesan, would the bond have been a fraction as secure as this?

Back home, she'd overheard talk of many households where the wife and husband had a difficult relationship. But here, the hermit was never cruel to her, never demanded anything, never tried to crush her with belittlement. He didn't threaten their security with drink or gambling or vice. He never shamed them both by lusting after other women.

After all these years, Nerissa found his company a comfort. A silent company, admittedly. If he was capable of speech, she'd never heard his voice. Still, she much preferred the nighttime to the days. Her greatest dread was that he'd fail to return one evening, killed in a rock fall maybe, or run off by the townsmen. Then she'd slowly die alone down here, invisible,

unloved by a single living human. She knew she couldn't gnaw through her bonds. Each time she heard those padding footsteps come down the passageway, a warm sense of relief flooded through her. Though the hermit was her captor, he was also her protector.

He still hadn't so much as tried to see her body. Sometimes, when handing her a roasted haunch of venison or an entire hare, he'd spread his lips, exposing his misshapen teeth. It was his version of a smile. Then he'd go back to his tasks. Mending a trap, perhaps, or sharpening his spear point. He seemed perfectly content with their arrangement. She still couldn't say exactly why he'd captured her, but part of it must be that he liked to see her sitting there beside him.

Nerissa had to wonder if he'd ever led a normal life. Had speech been driven from his mind by some catastrophe? Had it been the same horror that destroyed his face? Had he lost his wife and all his family? Or had he never known the comfort of a loving home? Had he been born this way, then abandoned by his parents when they could bear his ugliness no more? Or had he been cast out so early, he had no memories of them? Was it possible her presence satisfied that absence in his mind? Had she become both father and mother to him? The father he longed to punish and the mother he longed to love?

All afternoon, Nerissa dreamed of Smyrna beneath her bearskin cover. She was a mother with four children of her own. The kingdom was at peace; no one had died. Though he wasn't in the house, her husband Andrastus had a rich presence both in her heart and in her children's faces. They owned a farm. The bullock Atlas pulled a plow through their deep soil. At their table, she kneaded dough made from the wheat they raised. Her infant daughter slept close by in the cradle. Andrastus had carved it lovingly from myrtle wood. Her toddler son played on the floor. Her older two were outside at their chores. That evening, she'd read to them again from Father's Hesiod, the scroll that he'd presented as a wedding gift.

After Nerissa set aside the dough to rise, she took up her sewing. It would be Baron Iadros's birthday feast soon, the one time every year he welcomed villagers inside his hall. She was making a new robe for the occasion. The material was dyed to a deep crimson. It was a beautifully textured Damascus wool that felt so soft, she loved to run her fingers over it. Kestides, now grown fat and prosperous, had acquired many bolts of it during a recent voyage. She knew this gown would draw the eye of every man. Andrastus might be jealous, but she'd show him later that he alone possessed Smyrna's greatest treasure. Once the children were asleep, she'd demonstrate why the only envy he should feel was that directed at him by all the other men.

Immediately, they were at the celebration. Enthusiastic voices rose over spirited music in

the crowded hall. Though Baron Iadros was more feared than loved, he never stinted on his annual feast. Nerissa's entire clan had come. It was so good to see them all.

There was barrel after barrel of good wine and platters of rich food. She danced all night with Andrastus, laughing with him as they whirled. Her parents joined the professional musicians for a round of lays. The new music commemorated Smyrna's victory over the Lydians. Father played his lyre and Mother played her harp. Euredon and Uncle Xolon added their superb voices. Nerissa was delighted to discover that the words came from a poem she'd written. And all night long, merry Nikos and Philippos chased the pretty girls.

Suddenly, a man threw her over his shoulder. It wasn't Andrastus, because she saw him reel away. She twisted in the man's strong grasp, trying to see who it was. If this was Baron Iadros, she knew there would be trouble. Andrastus would never stand for the insult. He'd have to fight the Baron. Whether Andrastus won or lost, he'd die. She had to stop this outrage, before it hurtled into tragedy.

Nerissa struggled to writhe free, but couldn't. Her hands and feet were tied. She realized that she wasn't dreaming any more. Someone really was carrying her up the cold, dark tunnel.

But it wasn't dark entirely. The man carried a lantern. From its dim light, she could see his back and legs. Her first thought was Theoton, but this man wore a heavy shearling robe. It was thoroughly unlike Theoton's cape. Certainly, he would have replaced the one trimmed with a lion's mane during the last seven years, but it wouldn't be anything as coarse as this.

She remembered that Polyphemus once wore a shearling robe. She tried to remember if Father had taken it from him after they'd blinded the one-eyed giant. She didn't think so, but this man's wiry build was very similar to Father's. *But no*, she remembered. *Father's dead*.

And it couldn't be Andrastus, could it? She'd prayed so many times for him to come, to have survived the fall from Scylla's cliff, to have washed upon some scrap of beach after they'd been blown out of the channel, to have tracked her all the way to Ithaca. But the man who carried her had narrow shoulders. When she'd last seen Andrastus as a youth, he'd already been much brawnier.

Of course, it was possible that the labor of his search had worn down Andrastus. But why would he treat her so roughly, hauling her out of the cave without even a word? At the very least, Andrastus would have untied her first.

Or maybe he'd felt there wasn't time. That he must hurry before his rescue mission was discovered. He couldn't know the hermit was a gentle man. Remembering Polyphemus, he'd think they were in mortal peril.

"Andrastus?" she whispered. It had been so long since she'd spoken to another person,

Nerissa's voice came out very small. Even so, it echoed from the tunnel's walls. She heard the hopeless doubt that filled her intonation as her beloved's name returned.

The man didn't answer, only paused to shift her weight, then hurried into the cave's main chamber. Now she could see his clothing better. It was indeed the skin of a shearling ram. His worn sandals were made of ox hide. Odd, because with snow covering the slope outside, you'd think that he'd wear boots. Then she remembered Homer had a pair of sandals like this. And lost in verse, he might be oblivious to the cold.

"Homer?" she tried...

She still received no answer. No, of course it couldn't be the poet. This man was carrying a lantern. Why would a blind man need one?

As they passed the fire pit, Nerissa caught a glimpse of the hermit's neatly piled sleeping robes. A warm tear slid down her cheek before it turned cold welling at her jaw. Seven years she'd spent here. She should feel overjoyed at rescue, but instead, Nerissa knew she'd miss this place. She'd miss the hermit and his timid strangeness. She'd never have the chance to say goodbye.

Outside, the man threw her over a donkey's back. Still without a word, he led them down the mountain. Now she knew with certainty it wasn't Homer. Though he may have been familiar with the cave's passageways, and though the lantern may have been intended for her benefit, Homer would have needed a guide to bring him here. But it was clear her savior was alone.

She couldn't see his face, but he descended the track with a determined stride. Along with the donkey, he left broad tracks in the snow. Evidently, he had no fear of the hermit following.

Finally, they reached the road. Nerissa recognized the place. They'd come down the same path she took that stormy day seven years before. Soon, they came in sight of the clay pit belonging to Berenice's friendly master Architalos. She knew this wasn't him. He'd been a portly man. No amount of deprivation could have made him be this thin. And he was incapable of silence. She tried to think who else this might be.

What man knew that she was on this island? Many had seen her at Evander's trial, but they'd hardly care about her. Anapater who'd flirted with her at Theoton's feast? No, he was barrel chested and his hands were very big. Philemon? No, if still alive, he'd be very old. What if it were someone who'd grown obsessed with having her? Captain Hycron? He was taller than this man and vain about the way he dressed. It couldn't be Chymides from the Thallia because this man had all his fingers. Or Hematheus, because he was blond. The slave dealer Antechron?

She wouldn't put it past him to profit by selling escaped slaves at distant markets, but she had little value. She thought of Theoton again. Maybe he'd disguised himself by wearing this rude coat. No, it seemed impossible. Why would Theoton want her now, when she was even uglier than the last time he'd seen her? He'd shown nothing but scorn and then self-interest that day she approached him on the street.

Nerissa turned her thoughts to how she'd been discovered. She'd never managed to leave a mark on the cave walls. Her hands were only free those times she'd sit beside the hermit at his fire. Had someone captured him? Had he revealed her presence? Or before the hermit burned it, maybe a scrap from her tattered gown was found clinging to a brier bush. Maybe someone noticed the smeared writing on it. But that was long ago. Why wait until now to rescue her? It seemed more likely that a devotee of Athena had noticed the hermit and her on a feast day. Maybe he hadn't left the cave early enough last time. Or someone may have seen them foraging together in the woods.

An hour later, the man turned off the road. As they crossed a pebbled ford over a greenish brook, Nerissa knew who this must be. A shiver crawled across her skin. It hadn't occurred to her before because this man didn't stink.

When they reached the farm, Tragus confirmed she had good cause for fear. He threw her from the donkey, clamped irons on her ankles, attached a chain, and dragged her to the wood pile. She was momentarily heartened to see that Trumpet no longer occupied the ram pen. This relief faded quickly as she recalled the other punishment that Tragus had promised seven years ago. The consequence of her escape would be very painful.

Nerissa willed her heart to bear this bravely. She remembered Father's tale of Cadmus, who'd overcome so many obstacles. She must defeat her terror. She must remain as staunch as that great hero. She let herself enjoy the sunshine as it broke free of iron colored clouds. She could still enjoy its warmth before mutilation drove every thought of comfort from her mind.

But Tragus didn't lift his axe. He just kept staring at her. Now that she could see his face, he looked more dissolute than ever. His hair was patchy, salted with white. The veins on his face looked like a tracery of tiny worms. His eyes were bloodshot and several of his teeth were black. For such a man to gape as if he faced a monster, she must have become completely gruesome. Now that her hands were free, Nerissa reached to touch her scar. Odd, she hadn't thought of it in years.

"This is too hard to bear," she said. "I beg you, do it now before my horror grows too great. You don't really want me soiling myself, do you? I knew the price you promised when I ran. I'm ready to accept it."

But Tragus only stood there looking at her, his thick tongue working the gaps between his ruined teeth.

"I know that you're a man who keeps proper respect for all Olympus." Nerissa's knees were trembling beneath her robe of fur. She felt ashamed she couldn't still them. And that she couldn't bear to wait in silence. "If you expect me to plead with you for mercy, it would only demean both of us further. Owners have a right to discipline their slaves, but you must fear eternal punishment if you leave me standing here in dread."

"Your fear's unnecessary," Tragus said. "I could never do that to you."

"That only means you've thought of something worse."

"I've changed. You must forgive me as I've forgiven you. I only want you to be happy here. Let's go into the house. You can bathe if you like. I've hauled in the sheep dip basin and many buckets of well water. I only used it once. I'll even heat the water for you. And I know you must be hungry. There's bread and Hesper's made fresh cheese."

So Hesper still was here. It explained why Tragus hadn't fallen apart completely. He continued to earn a living from Hesper's work. Though the old woman had never been exactly kind to Nerissa, she'd never been cruel, either. She'd only done what she had to in order to avoid beatings. Nerissa found herself pleased to hear she was alive.

"Where's Hesper?" she asked. "I'd like to see her."

"You will. We'll probably find her in the cheese shed when we go to get some. And tonight, we'll roast a lamb to celebrate your return."

"To celebrate? I'm gone for seven years, and there's to be no punishment? I'm sure you suffered many jokes at the tavern after I escaped. Why are you being kind to me?"

"I regret the things I did to you before. You must believe me. I was a bitter man... But now, I'm ready to be healed. Seeing you, I realize that it's easy to take joy in life. A beautiful woman is the Gods' greatest gift to man."

"What? You know I'm ugly. Why do you mock me?"

"I don't. You're beautiful, Nerissa. Please, I only want to make you happy. Let's go into the house. After you bathe, you can wear something from my late wife's chest. I've saved all her clothing. You look about her size. Daphne had some fine robes I'm sure you'll like."

"I don't know why you say these things. We both know that I'm hideous. And seven years spent in that cave could have only made my face look worse... Please, Master, stop tormenting me. Just lift the axe, I beg you."

"I swear by all the Gods this isn't mockery. You're beautiful - you could be Daphne's twin."

"I don't believe you. What about my scar? Don't tell me she had one just like it."

"Of course not. Daphne was a celebrated beauty. And so will you be, too. Sculptors will battle each other to gain the honor of immortalizing your profile."

"Impossible. You used to call me a Gorgon. And that was before Trumpet gave me this scar across my cheek."

"Your scar has faded to a coral colored line that's barely visible. The way your hair curls over it just now, I don't see it at all. And all your other wounds have healed. The hermit must have treated you extremely well. Your body has filled out to perfection and your hair glows with a lustrous sheen."

Nerissa still didn't believe him. And yet... she longed to see her reflection in a glass. She reached to feel her cheek again. Her jaw felt fine, except for a small bump. He was right about her hair. It had grown a great deal from the thin, lank strands that illness and the meager rations on the voyage left it. Now it was long and thick and full of curls. The hermit had given her a paste of ground roots with which she washed it every time he took her to the spring. Afterwards, she'd braid it into a long plait, then bind the end, but the leather cord had come loose during her struggle with Tragus in the cave. After bouncing on the donkey's back for hours, it had come completely loose.

She pushed it back to feel the scar. Now that Tragus mentioned it, there wasn't much of a raised welt any more. Only a thin line that she could barely feel beneath her fingertip. It must have been the hermit's salve and his tisane that caused such a thorough healing. He'd be a rich man if he ever got it in his mind to sell his preparations.

"What happened to the man who held me?" asked Nerissa. "You haven't hurt him, have you?"

"I've never seen him. I assume he'll return to the Cave of Loizos, find you gone, and carry on just as he's always done."

"If you've never seen the hermit, how did you know where to find me?"

"Hesper's seen him. She goes there on feast days. She told me of the rumors that he captured a woman to live with him."

"I've been there seven years. How did these rumors suddenly start?"

"The sandal maker Petrolakis noticed two sets of footprints in the snow. One pair was much smaller. And both prints appeared to come from rough made shoes."

"But how did you know where to find me in the hidden chamber?"

"I didn't when I first entered. But I followed your voice. At first I thought that you'd gone mad, but then I realized you were singing in your dreams. First crooning to a baby, then

something brighter, like it was a festival.”

“It was. Back home in Smyrna... All right, I believe you now. I'd like to bathe, if you're still willing to heat water. But if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not wear Daphne's clothes.”

“That's fine. I understand. She's dead and buried. I know that you're not her. I'll treat you very well, you'll see. Let's go into the house.”



Nerissa ran at the first opportunity. She'd behaved docilely all evening, then pleased him as best she could atop his musty bed. Just as she'd hoped, Tragus hadn't chained her in the ewe shed for the night. In fact, he'd simply grunted something that may have been a word of thanks before he turned away and fell asleep. As he lay snoring, thick with wine, she'd crept out of the house.

Nerissa was relieved to see he hadn't thought to post Hesper outside, either. She walked silently until she reached the road. Then she loped at a steady pace for half an hour. In much better condition than the last time, she didn't ache or tire. She only stopped when she reached a lane that split off to the south.

She knew she couldn't head back to the cave. Tragus would go there first thing after he awoke and found her gone. She couldn't go to Berenice, either. During the long years of her absence, he'd probably learned that they were friends. And though she longed to see Homer, to hear the progress on his poem, to recite her own work for him, she couldn't go there, either. Tragus would remember that they'd been together the first time she escaped. And even though she'd regained her looks, she had no wish to see Theoton ever again.

She decided that she must go to Alalcomenae, the fishing village at the island's southern end. That's where she'd been headed before, when the storm had stranded her inside the Cave of Loizos.

This time, I won't stop until I get there, vowed Nerissa. I can trade this fine peplos Tragus gave me for passage on a vessel to the mainland. I don't look like a slave any more. I'm freshly washed, well dressed, and best of all, not ugly.

She still hadn't seen a glass, or passed by water smooth enough to see her face, but it must be true. Tragus never would have acted as he did if she hadn't regained her beauty. If it were really true, she knew that men would all wish to accommodate her. Though a stranger in Alalcomenae, she'd easily find some fisherman to get her far away from Ithaca without delay.

Nerissa set off at an easy lope again. She fit the cadence of her epic to her footsteps. She let it roll out softly on her lips, verse after verse, from the starving times in Smyrna to rescue by fleet Hermes in the cave...

Tragus caught up halfway to Alalcomenae. Though Nerissa's pace was fast, the donkey's was much faster. She had only seconds after hearing its hooves to bend and grab a rock.

You stupid girl, she berated herself. Have you learned nothing? Why didn't you think to make another sling before you ran?

She flung the rock, but Tragus ducked it in the moonlight. Before she could throw another, he was on her.

As Tragus beat her mercilessly, Nerissa realized that he must have posted Hesper as a lookout after all.

From her shed's window, she saw me leave. She woke Tragus at once. She knows just how to rouse him when he's in his cups. Though I had a head start, he's used to riding drunk. Now I'll never get another chance. Athena wasn't sending Hermes, after all.

Homer would approve, at least. Didn't he once tell me the only worthwhile epics must be tragic?

It was Nerissa's last thought before blacking out.

Sigma

Nerissa screamed an instant after the axe came down. The pain she'd dreaded didn't come -- or maybe it all was in her curling toes. Over by the ram's pen, the severed half of her right foot seemed to writhe in torment. She knew it must have been propelled there by the force of Tragus's swing, but it might as well have bolted on its own.

She didn't fall. She wouldn't let herself. Instead, she forced her vision back to the gushing stump. Tragus watched it, too, tight lipped with what looked like jealous rage. It was if he hated her for forcing him to do this. He spat onto the ground, grimaced one last time, then marched away.

Hesper rushed forward with an iron stave. Tragus had said nothing about a death sentence, but Nerissa only wondered if Hesper meant to stab or brain her. Typical of her cruel master to leave the eternal stain of murder on a slave. She'd probably done for Daphne, too. On that first day when she'd explained the range of punishments in this evil place, Hesper had known all the details.

As the old woman stopped in front of her, Nerissa saw that the stave's top third glowed red with heat. Without a word, Hesper pressed it against Nerissa's wound. This time, the pain was like all the world's suffering compressed into a moment. A moment that only intensified as it went on. There was a swirl of acrid smoke, accompanied by a horrifying hiss. Moisture condensed against her face. The stench that filled her nostrils brought a rush of bile up her throat. She forced it down, unwilling to let Hesper see her vomit.

"Put your weight on me and hop," said Hesper. "I'll take you to the ewe shed."

"Why are you helping me?" Nerissa asked between clenched teeth. She savored the agony to keep from blacking out. Remaining alert to hear Hesper's answer seemed more important. "Did Tragus order you?"

"He didn't say a word. But I knew he'd blame me if I let you bleed to death. Just like

when a ewe is injured. You still have value to him. He'll expect you to resume your duties once you can walk."

"He never replaced me with another girl?"

"I've done all the work alone for seven years. Except serving in his bed. Even Tragus isn't so hard up, he'd touch this shriveled flesh. When he feels the need, he uses harlots at the tavern. But he's vicious for days afterward. It's obvious he wanted you. When he'd stagger home, I often heard him cry your name just like a lovesick boy."

"So you did everything? The flock, the rope, the cheese, and all the housekeeping?"

"I did. You can't blame me for not wanting to continue. It wasn't right. Sheep-fucker doesn't care if I live or die, just that I earn money for him to piss away."

"That's why you kept watch last night. Tragus never ordered that. You woke him when you saw me leave."

"I know what you must think of me, but even a broken hag still loves her life. Is it too much to want a bit of ease in my last years?"

They'd reached the shed. They went inside, then Hesper let her sink down by the post. The same place where she'd spent so many hateful nights. The old woman went to a shelf in back, then returned with the tar bucket. She brushed a glob onto Nerissa's wound, just as she'd treat an injured sheep. Then refusing to meet Nerissa's eyes, she reattached the chain.

"Thank you for stopping the bleeding, Hesper... you're right -- I can't blame you."

She could only blame herself for this. After all, hadn't Tragus given her the choice of what he'd cut?

"I couldn't let him steal the chance I'll ever have children to love, could I?" Nerissa mumbled before she gave in to a flood of darkness.



Nerissa spent the next month drifting in and out of dreams. Hesper had acted in time to prevent her life draining away, but the cauterization failed to deter fever. Within a day, Nerissa lay shivering so violently, her chain's rattle unnerved the ewes. The next morning, she was so hot, sweat dripped off her brow. Mother would have known what to do, or the hermit might have worked a cure, but Hesper had no knowledge of nature's medicine.

Some days, Nerissa woke sputtering for air, because the old woman dripped milk into her mouth. Though she had no appetite, Nerissa choked it down. It was easier than spitting out the warm liquid -- Hesper would only force more into her mouth. It felt like drowning many times,

only to be pulled back to the world. Nerissa could well remember this terrible sensation from the shipwreck. She had no wish to experience it again. All the while, Hesper's cracked voice insisted that she take another swallow.

Nerissa also remembered sometimes waking to the scrape of a rough sea sponge, soaked with icy water from the stream. On rare days, she felt ravenous, gulping ladle after ladle of warmed barley mush. But mostly, food's aroma sickened her. She'd push it away, clamp her teeth shut, then return to Morpheus. The most capricious of all Gods, he'd bring joy one minute, sheer terror the next:

Trembling, Nerissa held her knife above Mother's bloody throat. Her hand shook so badly, the blade looked like a shiny blur. Or maybe this was just the thick tears welling in her eyes. Somehow, they refused to fall.

"Do it," Mother whispered. "I didn't cut deeply enough."

"I can't... I don't want you to die."

"Wanting has nothing to do with what's required. I taught you better than that, Nerissa. When will you learn that duty and honor are two halves of the same face? If they're out of balance, all you have is ugliness."

"But I need you, Mother. We all need you to stay."

"Do you think I want to leave? I go, because we have no other choice. Just finish the cut. Do it deep and quick -- that's the best way."

"I can't. My hand won't move."

"You must find strength. I know it's in you, just as it's been there through all our line."

"I do have strength. Enough to find some prey. Let me bind your wound, and then I'll search the forest."

"You've tried for days. There's no game here on Laestrygon, and no fish in the bay. You know that's why I led you off the beach, where the others wouldn't see." Even now, there was an iron tone in Mother's failing voice. "Your father's sinking fast. He won't recover from his fever without fresh meat. But if your heart's too hard to care about the man who gave you life, think of your baby brother. He's skin and bones. Mavros won't last another week without food. Chloe and Aristides, too. Not to mention you. Someone must stay alive to tend the family altar."

"I will. I promise, if it comes to that. But don't leave us. I can save you, if you let me. I know the herbs that will build back your strength. You've taught me that, and so much more."

"Nerissa. You're a woman. It's time to act like one. Our lives are nothing without sacrifice."

I'm sure that there's a lion here on Laestrygon. I've heard it roar. I'll find its tracks, hunt down its lair, and kill it with my sling."

"A lion? Good. They might believe that... None of them have ever tasted such meat... You can tell them that... you slew a stringy patriarch... It was too big... to drag back the... whole carcass... so you cut off... portions... from the... loins."

Mother's breath was ragged now. Nerissa stared at the blade in her numb hand. Its vibrations had slowed to a small shiver. If she just waited a few more minutes, she wouldn't have to do this unpardonable thing.

But no, she realized. I'll still have to cut up the flesh and haul it back. I'll have to convince the others that a lion killed Mother. That I buried her out in the forest before tracking it down. I'll have to cook and eat the meat, myself, pretend that it's delicious.

And then there was a lion. A massive, creature with a great black mane. Just like the one on Theoton's cape. When it snarled, strings of drool looped between teeth as long as knives. It turned to come at her, but Nerissa drove it off with a stone flung square into its nose. It sprang away, then bounded up a rock-strewn slope.

She tracked it to its lair between two boulders. When she entered the dim place, the creature changed into a human giant. Suddenly, a blue light glowed behind this man. He stepped toward her, crunching Mother in his jaws. And though it made Nerissa despise herself, she ran. She couldn't stop her legs as they crashed down the broken slope and through the forest. Heart quaking at the thunderous noise pursuing her, she reached the bay. But a troop of giants broke off boulders from Laestrygon's mountaintops. Hurling them, they smashed the ship, then ate Mavros and Aristides.

Before the first one's dripping jaws reached Nerissa, before he could grind her into pulp and swallow her to mix with Mother's gore, she jumped down a gaping shaft that opened on the beach. She slid all the way through the vast blackness of Erebus. So it was true -- there was an ancient void that each dead soul must traverse before reaching Charon's ferry. It seemed to stretch for years.

Finally, she landed on the Styx's somber beach. She was surprised to find that Mother hadn't yet crossed over.

"How did I taste?" asked Mother.

"Taste? What are you saying? You don't think I asked the giant back on Laestrygon?"

"Stop speaking nonsense, Nerissa. You know there were no giants. That isn't how I died. And that isn't who ate me."

"What? You can't mean--"

"Of course I do. It took hours before you used your knife. You made me suffer gravely. But I won't complain. For once, you carried out your duty. Stop slouching and look me in the eye. You can hold your head with pride. The next time you make the journey here, I can claim you as a daughter. By obeying me, by bringing food to save your family, you've earned the right to join those who came before us."

As Charon's lantern approached, cutting through the murky atmosphere, Nerissa saw the arm band sparkling on Mother's wrist. It was the one carved with Persephone eating six pomegranate seeds, the one that Mother had sold in Smyrna to buy a day of food, the last possession handed down through all their foremothers back to Colophon.

"What are their names?" Nerissa asked. "You've never told me that. Other than Aunt Cythera, the hetaera, I never met one person from your side. You always refused to say anything of them."

"Of course I did. That's how your father wanted it."

"But why?"

"Before we married, I vowed their names would never pass my lips again while I drew breath."

"You aren't alive now. You'll break no oath if you tell me my grandparents' names."

"That's true," Mother relented. "Very well. My father was Peraton of Smyrna and my mother was Selitia of Sardis."

"But weren't they-?"

"That's right. Laedron's parents. He's my brother."

"So Baron Iadros is your uncle?"

"Yes."

"That makes you noble, Mother."

"It makes you noble, too. Now do you understand why I always insisted on propriety?"

"It never occurred to me to wonder. It's the essential part of who you are. Whether nobility or not."

But it chafed all the more to know that Mother had always held her up to an impossible standard. An invisible one at that, one she'd vowed never to disclose. She'd expected Nerissa both to be a paragon of high born virtue, and the hardest working daughter in their peasant village.

"That reminds me," she said. "Why did your parents let you marry Father?"

"They didn't. Your grandfather was killed fighting against the Lydians. Your grandmother came under the protection of Baron Iadros. And he never would have allowed a

fisherman into the family. But I'd fallen in love after I saw your father at the blessing of the boats. He was so handsome and so self-assured. When he tossed me a garland from his deck, it was like Adonis reaching out to me."

Father as Adonis? thought Nerissa. She knew that Mother revered the ever youthful god. The son of Phoenix, according to Hesiod. Like many Smyrnan women, Mother planted a fast-growing herb garden each spring. At midsummer's day, she'd sow lettuce and fennel, then join other women mourning with loud lamentations. They wore diadems of blood-red anemones to mark the death of beautiful Adonis on the tusks of jealous Artemis's boar.

But Nerissa couldn't picture Father reborn as a deity, even at his height of youthful power. He was a scholar, not the sort of great beguiler that Goddesses fought over. Yes, he had a smile full of gleaming teeth, but Nerissa simply couldn't see him as the sort of seducer who'd carry off a fair young woman's heart. She loved him, too, but couldn't understand why a haughty daughter of nobility would fall for a poor fisherman.

"So you and Father managed to see each other secretly?" she asked.

"See' is a nice way of putting it," laughed Mother.

Her tone was so unusually bright, Nerissa could only gape. She'd never once heard Mother jest in life. If any of Father's friends passed a ribald word, she'd glare hard enough to turn the man to stone. Naturally, the children never dared to use strong language anywhere near Mother. She'd never told them what the punishment would be, but hardly needed to. They'd all feared being the first to discover it.

"Didn't the Baron ever learn about your trysts?" Nerissa asked.

"He did. That's when we ran off and were married at the Temple of the Sphinx on Chios. By the time my uncle's men found us, I'd already given birth to Kestides. Iadros couldn't have your father killed, so he offered him a captaincy. Not on a fishing boat, you understand, but in his naval fleet."

"And Father refused?"

"Of course. So they sent him to the wars as a common soldier. But your father not only survived, he fought with great distinction. After that, Iadros left us alone. That is, until you failed to stop Andrastus and Euredon from trying to take that cursed bullock."

"You still blame me? I was just a girl. How was I to stop them?"

"I blame you for everything," said Mother's shade as it began to drift across the Styx with Charon. "You're the last scion of a once great family. It was always the women of our line who preserved the clan. I'd hoped enough strength and intelligence made its way to you..."

The waves were down to light swells in a quiet sea. Nerissa could rest her head against the timber without water rushing down her nose. For some reason, the wood was painted olive green, the same shade as Andrastus's eyes. She couldn't remember when Father made this change. As far back as she could remember, the ship's mast had been white.

Andrastus nudged her in the shoulder.

"We mustn't fall asleep," he said. "We'll let go and drift off. Tired as we are, we might not notice as we sink. We'd better talk some more."

"All right. What do you want to talk about?"

Nerissa couldn't think of anything. They'd been clinging to the mast for days, ever since it broke loose in the storm. She'd never forget the feeling as it dragged her overboard with a loop of tattered sail. She went under many times, each time filled with terror, each time dying then reborn at the last moment with a choking gasp of air. Nerissa couldn't disentangle herself before another huge wave crashed over her head, swirled her in the darkness without top or bottom, made her breathe its water.

She would have drowned if Andrastus hadn't leaped into the sea to save her. He freed her from the twisted sail, laid her over the mast at its crosstree, and pressed the brine out of her lungs. But they couldn't get back to the boat and Father couldn't turn it.

"I don't know," said Andrastus now. It was five blistering days and five interminable nights since the storm. If it hadn't rained on the third morning, they would have died of thirst. "We've talked of everything from the Lydian wars to milking cows. But I do know we must think of something interesting if we want to stay awake."

Oh, I know something interesting, *thought Nerissa*, if you can call a love-bound maiden's hopeless wishes interesting. Do you even have the slightest notion how I feel about you? Do you know I'd chance the wrath of all the Gods for just one taste of your cracked lips? Do you know I'd trade my life for just one moment in your arms?

But she could never say these things. Not even in this enchanted sea, now sparkling bright gold. Rising from its depths, winged Nereids arced through the glittering sky. Triton's chariot shot past, pulled by a brace of armored dolphins.

She couldn't say she loved him. Especially since the storm had torn away most of their clothing. Though only their heads and arms were exposed out of the dark sea, she could sense his body right beside her. She knew this melting hunger at her core was sinful.

Andrastus was her brother now. He'd gone through the ceremony known as poiesis. It was every bit as binding as when Smyrna accepted immigrant metics as citizens. The only way that they could marry was if Father renounced the adoption. Which he'd never do. Andrastus

was admirable in every way. He was brave and kind and clever and hardworking. Not to mention beautiful. Remembering the glancing blow she'd taken from the mast, Nerissa turned her face away to hide the ugly swelling on her temple. But then it only sprouted an antler. Though the good side of her profile was toward him, she feared that Andrastus could see the highest tine above her head. When a mermaid's splash distracted him, she plaited hair over the horn.

But restoring herself to beauty would scarcely improve her chances with Andrastus. She'd overheard Father and Uncle Clemon discussing the auspicious prospect of a marriage between him and Chloe. They'd make a very handsome pair, Andrastus strong and tall, Chloe ripe with womanly perfection. Better still, both were favored by the goddess Demeter. While they were cousins now, they weren't blood related. And they'd long looked at one another with desire, according to Aunt Melissa.

But wait. Wasn't Aunt Melissa dead already? And Uncle Clemon lost on Tenedos to Circe? Or had that all been in a different life? Nerissa didn't know.

Even if there were no plans for Chloe to wed Andrastus, he's never shown the least amorous sign toward me. He's never blushed, he's never stammered. He's completely comfortable around me. He teases gently, exchanges news of the day, watches out for me as any good brother would do.

He always thanked her politely for the food she made, the clothes she washed, the rips she mended, but never took the opportunity to gaze into her eyes. They'd wrestled many times as children, but now he avoided the slightest touch. When she'd hand him something, Andrastus took it quickly, as if it were improper for a brother and sister to let their fingers come in contact. So even here in this magical sea, even as warm wine misted down from heaven, she couldn't talk to Andrastus of a future together.

"What do you want to do with your life?" she asked instead. "When we reach land, that is. Or do you wish to stay upon the sea forever?"

"As a fisherman, you mean? No, I'd rather have a farm. Not that I don't love the life your family's given me. I'd work forever for your father if he needs my help. But I've long dreamed of buying back the land my parents owned. Or if that isn't possible, then another farm much like it. Hauling fish out of the sea is marvelous, don't get me wrong, but there's nothing so satisfying as growing a crop from start to finish. For a man, it must be the closest thing to giving birth."

"I suppose. Except, you don't have to pass this thing you cherish through your--" Mother's disapproving face loomed at Nerissa from the sky. *"Well, never mind how the child's*

born. What I meant to say was that a crop doesn't come forth with pain."

"Oh, but it does. A farmer fights the elements, the heat, the hail, the dearth of rain or sometimes too much rain, a late thaw, or wind storms. And then you have the insects and the blights, the rodents, deer, and birds, and every other threat imaginable. A fire could sweep across your land or drought or flood could ruin it. Your bullock could die just when you need his strength to pull your plow, leaving you no way to make the crop and earn the coin to buy another beast. Worst of all, marauding soldiers could steal every grain of wheat you've stored and lead off all the livestock. But in the rare event that none of these hazards come to pass, a good year simply means that all the granaries are full and then the price drops very low. Of all the folk inhabiting the earth, I think that farmers live with pain the most."

"Then why do you want this daunting life?"

"It's who I am. It's who my father was and all of our ancestors. I can no more change my blood than fish can sing."

"The nerve!" said a large mackerel, his mustaches twitching with pique. "As if your voice is so melodious."

"My apologies," said Andrastus. "We farmers are simple people. We sometimes forget how to speak politely."

"More like it," grumbled the mackerel as he turned into a Persian dignitary with an elaborately curled beard. "But watch your tongue in future."

Nerissa watched him bound away across the golden sea.

"So you're to be a farmer," she said to Andrastus. "I understand the hardships now, but I'm glad you told me of the satisfactions, too. There must be nothing so fine as feeding your children with food you've grown yourself. Didn't you once tell me your father raised a small plot of melons in addition to the grain?"

"That's right. They were the green fleshed ones called kasabas. He got the seeds from a trader, who said his caravan brought them from an Anatolian town of that same name."

"If you grew melons like your father, you could eat them any time you wanted. And never tire of them. Unlike we fishing folk, who sometimes cannot bear to eat another bite of herring. In summer, there'd always be ripe fruit to eat, topped with fresh cream from your cow. And in winter, there'd be pickled rinds, or maybe melon slices stored in honey."

What she meant was that as his wife, she could make a wonderful tragemata from preserved fruit. As Andrastus well knew, it was her favorite food.

"That does sound very good," he said. "And you, what sort of life do you see for yourself? If you could do anything, I mean."

Wasn't it obvious? Was he really so blind? Or was he even better than her at pretending? Nerissa much preferred this interpretation. That Andrastus adored her, not as a brother, but a suitor. That only their close kinship prevented him from covering her with kisses, from her mouth down to her neck and chest, and then... The ocean turned into a heated bath. Steam rose from it, fortunately, covering her flushed face.

"I'd never thought much about it," she lied. "I've always assumed I'd live this sort of life forever. When the time comes, I suppose I'll marry a fisherman. I'll help like I help Father, until our sons are big enough to fish."

"But is that really what you want?" asked Andrastus, now in the guise of his dead bullock Atlas. "I wasn't asking what life you expect. I meant the one you'd pick, the one that's closest to your heart."

"It's you, you fool!" she shouted. But fortunately, Triton blew an enormous conch shell at this moment, drowning out her answer. As the echoes faded, Nerissa had a moment to find safer words. "I said, I'd be a scholar if the choice were up to me."

"But that's for men."

"I know. But you asked me to choose anything at all. And when I study Father's scrolls, that's when I feel the best about myself. There's so much wisdom in them, and they seem to speak to me so well, it's like I gain something of these great philosophers' insight. I'd like to read every poem and play and treatise ever written. I'd like to master the languages in which they were composed."

"And when you've done all that?"

"Why, I suppose I'd pass this knowledge on to others."

"You'd have a school? Has a female ever run one?"

"I don't know. Anyway, it's just a dream. I'll never really be a teacher."

"If I were rich, I'd gladly send my sons," Andrastus said. "I've always thought your mind's as brilliant as all the stars together."

Then in a lucid moment, Nerissa remembered what had really happened. They'd washed onto a beach that evening. With only enough energy to pull themselves out of the water, they'd laid huddled on the sand. There was rain again that night, relieving their thirst, but it also made Nerissa shiver hard. So Andrastus used the last of his strength to untie a piece of sail cloth still clinging to the mast. He gently spread it over her.

When she woke hours later, Nerissa rearranged the cloth to cover them both. She slid alongside Andrastus, then fit herself into the Σ shape of his legs and back. The rain had stopped

and she'd stayed dry under the piece of sail. Feeling warm and replenished now, she wrapped her arms around his chest to warm the slumbering Andrastus, too.

As heat and moisture built within, she put a leg over his thigh. She stroked herself with one hand, while she ran her fingers across his shoulders with the other. She stilled her motion briefly when her sighing made him turn.

She let him fall back into sound sleep with his left arm draped around her waist. She took his right hand and placed it where her own had been. She pressed it there as her moist cleft parted. She felt his member stiffening against her thigh.

She reached and stroked it into full attention. She had an urge to kiss it, but feared that this would wake Andrastus. So she only kissed his mouth with light brushes of her lips. But these developed into something more, their tongues exploring passionately. Groaning now, Andrastus found her nearest breast. In the six months since Tenedos, her breasts had plumped to a nice size, maybe not ripe melons like Chloe's, but they were now as big and firm as pomegranates.

Andrastus grasped it eagerly, rougher than Nerissa had expected. She drew back, inhaling sharply, but then decided that she liked this. She held still for several seconds, watching the flutter of his eyelids in the moonlight.

Relieved he didn't come awake, she pushed her groin against his right hand's fingers as his left hand squeezed her breast. Now making urgent noises, Andrastus rolled on top of her.

He had both hands on her breasts. He kissed her mouth with urgent hunger. He kissed her eyes, her mouth again, her neck, and then her nipples. He ground his hard erection's shaft against her ready cleft. She reached down and guided him to the right place.

"Aah, Chloe," he moaned as the swollen tip slid into her.

Nerissa knew she was deceiving him, but it felt too wonderful to stop. She knew Andrastus didn't love her. That she'd be punished for eternity because he was her brother. She told herself that it could be forgiven because they'd have to live together on this deserted isle for the remainder of their lives. That Father's boat would never find them. That it had probably capsized in the storm. That they'd need a son and daughter to carry on some day. That Andrastus wasn't really her brother any more, not with her parents dead...

Twelve days later, she sat against a tall palm's gracefully curving trunk. Side by side with her, Father leaned back on its partner. The two trees had the comfortable familiarity of long married mates. Like she'd pretended with Andrastus until Father's battered boat limped into the bay. Nerissa wondered if there were male and female in the world of plants.

Father munched on dates, savoring the sweetness after so much loss. To get the fruit, Nerissa had rolled the hem of her chiton past her knees, then climbed the jagged trunk of a shorter palm nearby. Most indecorous, but a lot better than her naked state when Father's boat first came. Besides, Mother wasn't on the beach and Father's characteristically buoyant mood was back.

Though she'd failed to crush these wishes that her idyll with Andrastus could continue, Nerissa also felt elation. She surged with happiness to learn her family had survived the storm. Better yet, they'd finally come to an hospitable island. Once they explored past the beach, they'd discovered that the inhabitants were friendly and food plentiful.

Apparently, the storm had blown them far to the south. The weather here was very mild. Overhead, the sky was ceiled with streaks of purple. A warm breeze carried the fragrance of blue lotus. Best of all, she'd just spent an hour discussing Hesiod with Father. It was the first time since he'd given her the sling six years before that Nerissa had Father's sole attention for more than a few minutes.

"Ah, it's grand to lie here on this gentle beach. The only thing sweeter than eating these exotic fruits is your sweet company." Father turned his weathered face toward her, the bronze curls of his hair and beard shining in the sunlight. "But I suppose it's time to get back to the boat's repair. We have to scrape the keel as soon as the tide's out. Once more, luminous Hesiod has written wisdom: 'Both Gods and men are angry with a man who lives idle.'"

"'For in nature he is like the stingless drones who waste the labor of the bees, eating without working.'" Nerissa finished the quotation from Works and Days.

"Very good, my little Nereid. As smart as you are beautiful. It's a wonder where you get such brains."

"From you, of course."

"Me? I'm just the son of a sail maker. A peasant who's read too many books. Good thing I've got such an oversized head to hold in the ideas of greater men."

Father grinned at her as he rose. He offered a thick arm to help Nerissa up. It felt so good to feel its warmth as he wrapped it lightly around her back, spun her in the air, then set her down.

"I know you're only joking about your head," she said as they walked back. "But you shouldn't say these things. People will repeat them, then start to think they're true."

"What's wrong with that? I know I have a huge head, always full of poetry, when I should be studying the sea."

"That's not true. You're the wisest man I've ever known. And it makes me even prouder

that we come from common stock. What have rich people ever done to help the world? Nothing but start wars, hoard treasure, and murder the innocent. I'd much rather be an honest peasant than a thieving noble."

"Would you now, Nerissa? Well, it's true that Hesiod was a commoner like us, the son of a smallholder. Whereas most poets spring from the aristocracy. That's why they write from such a lofty viewpoint. We've learned so much from Hesiod, about ordinary life and honest labor."

"Not to mention the five Ages of Man. There's everything one needs to know, from birth until we die..."

Except, of course, how to survive this crushing jealousy now that Chloe had returned. But she mustn't foul yet another glorious day with such thoughts. She must pretend that poetry and knowledge were the things that mattered to her above all. If she couldn't deceive herself, at least she could please Father. The finest man who'd ever lived, he'd done so much for her.

"Father?" she asked. "Is it true the Delphic oracle warned Hesiod that he'd die in Nemea?"

"Yes, or so I've heard it told. That's why he fled to Locris."

"But wasn't he killed there?"

"Just so. At their temple to Nemean Zeus. I sometimes think Hesiod must have planned it this way. To teach us once again that man cannot escape his fate. We can only honor the Gods through hard work and justice to our fellow men."

"Verily upon the earth are thrice ten thousand immortals of the host of Zeus, guardians of mortal man," Nerissa quoted. "They watch both justice and injustice, robed in mist, roaming abroad upon the earth."

If she couldn't have Andrastus, she wished this time with Father would go on forever. Discussing the great classics, happy in each other's love. But as they approached the ship, she saw Mother waving her arm in rapid circles, urging them to hurry.

After running up the beach, they discovered that none of the others had returned from foraging. Mother had discovered them lolling in a glade with several of the locals. Except for baby Mavros and Geneia, both held firmly in her arms, they all were drunk on an extract from the blue lotus. Even Mother's stern reproofs couldn't make them move. They laughed as if she jested. All thoughts of patching the ship and sailing home flown off, they wanted only to drink more. Nerissa was especially appalled to see Andrastus and Chloe lying naked, feeding petals to each other.

Father had to carry them away. And still they wanted to drift back, so he had to tie them

in the ship. With Nerissa's help, he managed the essential repairs before they sailed on the next tide. What a great shame. The only land in all the world that offered shelter, and it was impossible to stay...

Nerissa saw Scylla snatch Andrastus in her teeth. She saw the monster fling him from the cliff. She saw him plummet, smash into the outlying tower, then fall into the sea. She dove for the spot where he'd vanished, kicked down into the foaming water, but could find no sign of her beloved. She searched for minutes, refusing to heed her shrieking lungs. At last, the instinct to remain alive forced her to the surface.

What she saw was a fresh torment.

Scylla chose that moment to attack. Each of her six heads bent down in the strait, and plucked a man from each of the six ships. She held her victims long enough for Nerissa to recognize them as Father and her uncles.

Nerissa had to watch in horror as Scylla slowly chewed them. The monster intentionally made a long meal of the six mouthfuls. Her pleasure seemed to depend less on their juices than on their grievous screams.

Wait, Nerissa realized. This can't be right. We have only one ship left. And each of my uncles has met his doom already.

But she had no time to resolve the contradiction. It was at this moment that the water surged out of its channel. The outrush threw their boat toward the rocks. Father wrestled with the wheel, shouting mightily to overcome the shriek of tearing muscles. Ship timbers scraped stone with a rending crunch, but Father managed to avoid disaster.

The next instant, a backflow shot his vessel far away, while she was swept into a deep fissure in the cliff. Nerissa couldn't see any of the fleet. She feared that all the boats had gone down in the swirling water. Then she heard Geneia. The little girl, who often sang just like a lark despite their darkest trials, screamed like a harpy now.

Geneia spun around a vast whirlpool. Though she swam well, she could make no progress to escape. She was drawn inexorably into the eddy's center. At its midst, Nerissa saw a black tube leading down to Triton's airless realm. There, another monstrous siren called Charybdis lived in a vast cavern.

Nerissa left the fissure on the next outflowing tide. Before the waves could sweep her back inside, she grabbed a fig tree's branch that bent over the water. When the channel once again surged out, Nerissa swung far from the crack towards Geneia's muffled voice.

"Hold on, I'm coming, sweetie," she called to her little sister. "Swim with all your

might. Athena's turned me into a dolphin to guide you out. When you see me, reach for the big fin on my back. I'm just ahead."

She sliced through the boiling water, still calling encouragement to Geneia. She'd been too late to save Andrastus, just as she'd failed Euredon and all the others. She didn't need the censure in Mother's eyes to know the fault was hers alone. Above the roar of surf, Nerissa could hear that high-born voice.

"You mustn't let your sister drown," it said.

Fate was merciless, but Nerissa knew it could be altered. She swam into the whirlpool, prepared to trade her life for innocent Geneia's. Her teeth ground with resentment at whatever spirit had carried Mother's message. But it was wrong to blame the Gods. The voice wouldn't have reached her without Mother's belief that, even now, she needed to be reminded about honor.

Nerissa vowed she wouldn't let Charybdis suck Geneia down into the deep. She had far better reasons than obedience to Mother. Her strength came from a sister's bond. A loving, older sister. Like the one she'd never had, who would have shielded her from Mother's constant scorn... Besides, the world would be a cheerless place to lose Geneia's songs.

Nerissa struggled through the mist, determined to use her last remaining energy to heave Geneia free from terrible Charybdis.

She arrived just in time to see Geneia's arm slide down the spinning chute. Her plump little hand clenched at the air, while all the rest of her was under the black water. Nerissa dove, and stretched her hand. She brushed Geneia's fingertips. But the spinning water separated them. She fought its grip, until she was deep below the waves. She fought against the need to breath as she gyrated down into the dark abyss. It seemed to go on for hours. The air inside her lungs wanted to explode.

Nerissa came awake, drenched in cold sweat. Her heart raced with pain and terror. She let it slow, realizing that she was alive, and poor Geneia dead. She'd had this dream many times before. It always ended this way, with nothing she could do to save her little sister. The part about diving to find Andrastus, this was new, however.

She wondered if Morpheus's message about Scylla meant that Andrastus was really dead. Or maybe it was like Persephone's six pomegranate seeds. Maybe like the Iron Queen, he'd only have to spend half the year with Hades. She wondered what Homer would make of it. She hoped she'd have the chance some day to ask him.

Tau

Nerissa woke up very hungry. It was full light outside the shed and all the ewes were gone. But not sold off, she gathered, because there were fresh droppings in the straw. Hesper must have led them up the hill to graze in the lemon grove. The last thing Nerissa remembered clearly was Hesper explaining that Tragus wouldn't buy another slave. Which meant the old woman had to be his shepherdess, along with all her other duties.

Then Nerissa remembered why.

Surprisingly, there was no pain. She pulled the filthy blanket off to see her foot. It was a stump, of course. She hadn't dreamed that part. But it had healed. As much as it was going to, that is. A puckered kind of skin covered the end. It was pink, much cleaner than the rest of her foot and leg. Hesper must have washed it recently. And she hadn't reapplied the tar. Probably so the wound could benefit from air and fire, the elements of sunshine coming through the doorway. That's what they'd always done with sheep's wounds once the swelling ebbed.

Nerissa bent her knee and reached to touch the stump. Pressing on its wrinkled skin, she felt no soreness. No pus leaked from the edges. So Hesper must have been a capable herbalist, after all.

Either that, or she's determined to save the one person who can ease her workload. She must have nursed me every moment she could spare.

Nerissa felt ravenous, but Hesper must have fed her well. She looked plumper than she'd ever been, her breasts were full and round, and those parts of her skin that weren't streaked with grime glowed with a healthy shine. As soon as Hesper returned, she'd tell the old woman that she was truly grateful.

What's this? As Nerissa sat up, her belly looked more than full, and her breasts seemed enormous. They were larger than Chloe's had ever been. Nerissa realized she was pregnant!

She gaped with astonishment. Then smiled with deep pleasure. The choice of forfeiting

her foot had been correct. It seemed miraculous. After all these years of bitter hardship, the Gods had turned their favor on her. During her long sleep, they'd sent a child. Someone to love, someone to replace all those she'd lost. Maybe a son with Euredon's valor, Nikos's laughter, Mavros's innocence, and Father's wisdom. Or a daughter with Geneia's purity, Aunt Melissa's goodness, and Mother's strength.

Nerissa could hardly believe her good fortune. What a joy it would be to raise the child. She'd call it Andros if it was a boy, Andrea for a girl. These were fitting names to honor Andrastus, who must have been involved. After all, his cherished goddess Demeter had the power to grant pregnancy. He must have interceded with her.

Then Nerissa realized that her pregnancy all but proved that Andrastus was really dead. As a shade, he'd have much greater access to Demeter.

Nerissa felt sad for her lost love, but he'd never really been hers, had he? In her heart, she'd long known that he must be dead. All those dreams of bold Andrastus came flooding back. Her heart brimming with warmth, Nerissa savored every one.

Now she struggled to sit up against the post, then checked her body carefully. Except for her maimed foot, everything seemed fine. No swollen joints, no soreness in her nipples, no aching back, no nausea, and certainly no lack of appetite. All these things had plagued Mother and her aunts during their many pregnancies. Nerissa realized that she must be past the point of morning sickness.

Judging from her size, the healing of her stump, and the summer weather, she'd slept through most of the worst part. She hadn't had to do any work. Even had she been free, a married woman on a Smyrnan farm or in a fishing village, she would have needed to bake and weave and clean and launder clothes and tend small children all day long, while feeling tired, sick, and irritable, and carrying this extra weight. All this time, she'd been well fed and well rested. It had to bode well for the child's health. She probably had about three months to go. In another month or two, she'd need to use the privy every hour. As a matter of fact, she needed to pee now.

Holding onto the post, Nerissa pulled herself up. She saw she wasn't chained. Tragus must have decided that it wasn't necessary. He was right. She wasn't even sure if she could walk, let alone run. Holding the post with one hand now, she tried a careful step with her maimed foot.

Not bad. It wasn't difficult. Nerissa shifted weight to her right leg. *Perfect.* She exhaled with relief. There still was no pain. But now for something much harder. She knew the real test was whether she could support herself on half a right foot while taking a step with her

left leg.

She tried a tiny one, still holding to the post. It worked! Now she tried another while withdrawing her hand a little. She didn't stumble. She tried another and another, each one a bit further. She could walk! Nerissa felt so happy. Her pace was slow and halting, but it served. She might be a cripple, but she could manage everything necessary to take care of her baby.

In fact, she walked so much better than expected, Nerissa realized this couldn't be the first time she'd tried. There must have been periods during her illness when she'd felt well enough to practice. But all those long months were a haze. She'd have to ask about it when Hesper came back with the ewes.

She hobbled outside, crossed the farm yard, and used the privy. When she came out, she spotted Hesper in the neglected orchard with the flock. She waved, but Hesper didn't see her. Since the wind was blowing in her face, it was probably too far to call. Anyway, if she shouted at the top of her lungs, she might wake Tragus from a drunk.

So she slowly made her way to the cheese shed to get some akratismos. She'd never done this before; she'd never had the freedom. But surely it wouldn't anger Tragus. Cheese was part of her normal diet here. He must want her to eat, so she could work. Since Hesper was up the hillside, what objection could there be to a hungry slave getting her own meal?

She passed the ram's pen. Still empty, praise Almighty Zeus. Old Trumpet must be dead and not replaced. She felt great relief that Tragus hadn't revived his idea of exhibiting her at festivals as the bedmate of a beast.

Coming to the wood pile, Nerissa blanched with revulsion when she saw the axe. The same one that had cleaved her foot. Was it her imagination or was there still a rust colored stain on the blade? A sickening memory of the pain and fear suffused her mind. She saw the severed toes curling slowly. The blood that gushed out of her stump. The cloud of acrid smoke when Hesper cauterized her wound.

And then she recalled something else. It made her slump down on a log with horror. That first night before the fever gripped her in its haze. Tragus entering the shed. Tragus gazing at her, not with anger now, or lust, or even with contempt. The look was unmistakable, a lovesick kind of hunger. He'd forced her legs open the same as ever, but hadn't turned her on her knees. Unlike those other times seven years earlier, he didn't take her from behind while raping her, but stared into her face.

All the while, there was a desperation in his eyes. It shouted, "Please Nerissa, I know I'm worthless, but if you could just love me a little, I'd become the kindest man in all the world."

He'd kept it up for many days. Nerissa remembered it all clearly now. Even after she'd

grown hot with fever, he'd taken her sweat-drenched body night after night. He'd brought her food from his own table, food she couldn't eat. She remembered a black pudding's smell particularly. The blood and fat roasted in a pig's bladder had sickened her so badly, she spewed until it felt like pieces of her empty stomach were torn loose.

It hadn't done a thing to deter Tragus. He'd purchased herbs from the most learned physician in Polis, or so he'd claimed. He'd mixed them into heated wine to treat her. He'd had Hesper cover her with blankets and stay with her all night to keep wet linen on her forehead and change the dressings on her foot and empty her bedpan. Later when the fever broke, he'd come regularly to make sure she was eating.

With a cry of rage toward the sky, Nerissa cursed the Gods. She'd been so wrong about them. They hadn't turned merciful at all. Instead, they'd chosen Tragus as the father of her child.



During the remainder of her pregnancy, Nerissa resumed her duties. Except for servicing Tragus, of course. Even her debauched master didn't dare break the ancient prohibition against bedding a woman heavy with child. So she was left alone to milk the ewes and tend the flock and fill the oakum barrels. It took much longer to walk up the hillside, and getting down was even slower, but the ewes didn't seem to mind. Nerissa didn't worry that she couldn't protect them from wolves. She'd made another sling and practiced with it until she was as accurate as ever, despite her altered stance. Tragus knew about the weapon -- she'd seen him staring at her from the farm yard -- but he never said a word about it.

He'd even loaned a shepherd's staff to help her balance as she walked. Not the one with which he'd once defiled her, thank all the Gods. It was a beautifully polished piece of olive wood, deep brown in color, carved into a ram's head at its crook. It must be very old, she thought. Two-thirds up its length were four concentric grooves, as if fingers had been gripping there for centuries. She wondered if it had passed through countless generations of Tragus's ancestors.

He hadn't presented it in person; he'd made the gift through Hesper. For the last three months, in fact, he hadn't come near Nerissa once. She decided that Tragus must be ashamed of what he'd done.

She'd long since forgiven him. It wasn't only so she might know some peace. She'd given the rape a much improved position in her mind. She wanted this baby very much. If she

must be a slave, if she was never to be granted a husband's love, then Tragus had done her the service of enabling a child. Something that none of those sailors on the Thallia had accomplished.

Already, Nerissa cherished the baby with all her heart. She hummed Smyrnan melodies as he slept, singing louder when he stirred within her belly. She had fond memories of Mother doing this while carrying Geneia and Mavros. Maybe that's why Geneia had developed such a sweet voice and Mavros such a gentle nature.

But Nerissa knew she didn't have nearly as melodious a voice as Mother. The Muses spoke to her with poetry rather than their Music strains. So she recited every poem she could remember. Day after day, she began with words of gratitude to numerous immortals, including Father for his gift of Hesiod and all the others.

The child seemed to enjoy *Aspis Herakleous* best. He kicked boldly whenever Nerissa recited the Shield of Heracles. He seemed more restless when Nerissa did her own favorite *Theogony*. Apparently, he didn't find the lineage of Gods an interesting topic. Unlike her, he wasn't fascinated with the world's origins, either. But he liked the poem that she'd composed those long years in the cave. He'd always settle when she'd recite another episode.

All right, she knew that Mother would say it was inappropriate, hardly the cheerful sort of verse one should croon to an infant, but Nerissa could tell he enjoyed its tragic themes, its far-flung scenes, its encounters with strange enemies.

She caught herself thinking of the child as a boy again. Somehow, Nerissa knew he was. It was her strong preference. A female's lot was much too precarious in this harsh world. Sadness came in far too many forms. But a male, though born a slave, could overcome his mean condition. He could rise to prominence and wealth and power. He could be a warrior like brave Euredon and valiant Andrastus. Or a leader of men like she felt certain that charismatic Philippos would have been. Or a rich merchant like adventurous Nikos. Or even a great scholar like Father.

Two weeks later, Nerissa's feeling proved correct. The infant was a boy, a very lusty one who screamed from the moment Hesper cleared the mucous from his airways. He continued through the cutting of his cord and the washing of his skin. He became even louder as Hesper swaddled him in a clean linen sheet. He only ceased when the old woman placed him in his mother's arms, whereupon he firmly clamped his gums around Nerissa's swollen nipple.

At first, she thought him very ugly. Not that she didn't love him. What she'd felt before, what she'd thought was absolute, it was a minor infatuation compared to this enveloping bliss as she held him to her breast. Still, she was surprised to see what a squashed face he had. Not to

mention the brick red color, like Captain Hycron just before he'd slashed her. This tiny boy, her precious son, seemed full of fury at the world.

He looked so much like his angry father, Nerissa almost changed her mind and named him Tragophagus. Maybe Tragus would acknowledge him. Then he'd be no slave, but a citizen with full rights.

By the next day, the child's complexion had cleared to a normal infant shade like parchment. His features had coalesced into a pretty little face. Nerissa loved to touch the softness of his cheeks. His eyes were the same gray shade as his father's, but they were anything but shifty. Though Mother said that newborns could see little, he'd stare for minutes at her as he nursed with perfect trust and love.

At one month, he looked very little like Tragus. He had Aunt Irene's hair and Father's nose and the same dimple in his chin as Mavros. Most of all, he looked like Euredon, so that's what Nerissa named him. As she performed the ceremony, Nerissa murmured an apology heavenward to Andrastus.

I know I said I'd call my child after you, but that wouldn't be right, would it? There's nothing of you in him. You were never meant to be my lover or my husband. I see that now. You didn't send this child. I'll love you always, but I need to let you go.

Andrastus sent no answer. She listened for at least half an hour while Euredon nursed, but the only sounds there on the hillside were bird calls, the chirr of crickets, and an occasional bleat from one of the ewes. Nerissa hadn't really expected that Andrastus might reply. He'd been silent for almost eight years. Why should the birth of her son make any difference to him? Andrastus didn't care about her. No one did, except for little Euredon.

As for Tragus, he paid no more attention to their son than he did to Nerissa. He still didn't come near her. He relayed any necessary instructions through Hesper. Nerissa continued to milk the ewes and tend the flock and fill the oakum barrels. The only difference was that Euredon was strapped to her back now. That, and her much slower step.

After nearly three months of this, Nerissa knew she might see Tragus very soon. When an infant passed its first quarter, that's when men were allowed to resume sleeping with their women. Whether they were wives or slaves. In Smyrna, anyway. She assumed the rule was similar on Ithaca.

In fact, Tragus entered the ewe shed two days early. Maybe he'd counted wrong. Or maybe he wanted a good look at his child in the sunlight, before deciding what to do with Nerissa in the night.

He stepped inside just as Nerissa finished milking the last ewe. By now, the morning

light was strong. Tragus stood staring at his son. Euredon had gone back to sleep after Nerissa nursed him first thing at dawn. Tragus frowned, then knelt down in the straw. He lifted Euredon from his blanket, not taking any particular care to cradle the child's head. Nerissa started to say something, but she'd learned enough to hold her tongue.

Tragus stood, holding his son with two stiff arms. He stared into little Euredon's features, then strode outside to get a better look. Not taking the time to get her staff, Nerissa hobbled after him. Riled as he looked, she knew that Tragus was capable of anything. At this hour especially, when he'd be suffering a deep hangover.

"WHORE!" he shouted at her.

He spat into her face. The glob slid down her cheek, tracing the faint path where her scar had been. Tragus looked so angry, she feared he'd hurl down Euredon. She lurched toward them, holding her arms out.

"Master, no," she pleaded. "We haven't done anything wrong. I beg you, give him to me. Euredon's a good baby, a fine and handsome son for you."

"This whelp's no son of mine. Whose is he really? Who fucked you when you ran away?"

"No one. I spent seven years in that cave with the hermit. Except when he made me come out in the forest on feast days, I never went anywhere else."

"Then it was him. I knew it! You let that madman plow your field."

"He never touched me. Not that I had any choice about it. Just as I've had no choice with you. This child is your son. You're the only one I've lain with since I came to Ithaca."

"That's a lie, you stinking slut. I know my cousin Homer fucked you. I could see it in his smirking expression outside the Grotto of the Nymphs. And Architalos, too. That's right -- I discovered who your friends were among the slaves. And I remembered Architalos buying that one called Berenice, the one with the huge udders. So I thought you might run to her when you escaped. I went to Architalos and demanded where you were. That rich goat lied and said he never saw you, but he could hardly hide his satisfaction. I could see exactly what you gave him in exchange for food and clothing."

"It wasn't like that, Master. Architalos wasn't even there. May great Zeus turn me into the foulest of all creatures if I haven't told the truth. Euredon's your son."

"Liar! All the time you let Architalos screw you, you were laughing at me. Then every night for seven years, it was like you were shoving it up my ass when you and that madman made the beast with two heads and two backs."

"He never touched me. I don't know why, but he didn't. You have no cause to doubt

me. If the hermit bedded me for seven years, wouldn't I have quickened before this?"

"Maybe you did. Maybe he ate the others."

"He's not a monster. Just a hermit. And Euredon's your son."

"Why should I believe you? Just look at him. The brat looks nothing like me."

"He has your eyes. And he's extremely clever. See how he watches everything?"

Tragus held the child out again. He stared into those soft brown eyes, never breaking his frown. At last, he handed Euredon back to Nerissa.

"I don't know. Maybe. But there's one way to be sure the next one will be mine."

He pushed Nerissa toward the shed. She stumbled, but fought hard to keep from falling. She turned and let her back slam into the wooden wall, protecting Euredon. Though scraped and pierced with splinters, she regained her balance, went inside, and shuffled to the post, murmuring softly to the baby all the while. She gently laid him on his blanket, then pushed him behind a stall. She hoped this would prevent him from seeing what his father did to his compliant mother.

Tragus finished very quickly. He scowled as he refastened his chiton, but he didn't beat Nerissa. Without a word, he paced into the stall, scooped up Euredon, and marched out the doorway.

"No, wait!" Nerissa cried, hobbling after Tragus. "What are you going to do to him?"

"Take him in the house, of course. If he's my son, he isn't living in a filthy byre."

"But what about me? He needs my milk."

"Sheep's milk will do. I grew up on it and I turned out just fine."

"But Master, he's my baby. He needs my love."

"You can see him when you learn how to treat me right."

"Treat you right? I don't understand. I do everything you say."

"I shouldn't have to order you."

"What is it that you want?"

Tragus stared directly at her. For once, his eyes didn't dart about. He held the gaze so long, Nerissa felt sure he'd do something unspeakable if she didn't find the answer. But she couldn't think of anything. If she gave the wrong response, he'd do something even worse. Finally, his eyes shifted. He muttered something, then stormed away.

For a long time afterward, she thought about it. No matter how she tried, the mumbled words kept resolving into, "I want you to be nice to me."

Upsilon

Nerissa had never felt so desperate. She was frantic to get back little Euredon before Tragus hurt him. Her mind reeled with the many horrors that might take place in the house, either due to negligence or outright malice. But she knew Tragus wouldn't easily return her son. He never relented once he seethed at some perceived offense. There wasn't a speck of pity in him. The only change might be if he devised an even harsher punishment.

She had no allies here. Even if she could reach Polis, the law wasn't on her side. The council would say that Tragus had every right to do as he pleased with his slaves. More so, if he acknowledged Euredon was his son. But if she involved Theoton and the other councilmen, Tragus would become infuriated. She'd never see her child again.

Nerissa prayed all day as she worked. She invoked every God who might have some reason to care. As the day stretched and she received no answer, her desolation grew intense. When summer's dusk descended suddenly, she beseeched Athena, promising to abandon all claim of a future with her family.

I'll become a star to light your crown, if only you'll aid me, she vowed to the goddess. Your help needn't be direct. I ask only for the wisdom to get around Tragus.

That night, when Tragus came into the shed, Nerissa stood there placidly. She longed to throw herself around his knees, but found the strength to remain still. She knew that it would do no good to beg for a few minutes with her baby. Even asking if Euredon was well might incite Tragus into some new cruelty. So she masked the tremor in her legs by stepping forward, released her chiton's clasp, and let the garment drop onto the floor.

She knelt, on all fours in the manner of a sheep. Yesterday, that's how he'd taken her. While he didn't mind looking at her face now, Tragus liked it best when she acted like a ewe. He got the most excited when she butted back against him. So she stopped clenching her thighs and let the tremor loose. She knelt there quivering while Tragus pulled off his robe. She hoped

he'd think that she was trembling with readiness.

She'd worked herself into a trance as soon as it grew dark. By thinking of Andrastus, she'd almost managed to recreate the scene that night after they'd washed ashore on the isle of the blue lotus. But she couldn't bear to think about Andrastus now. The separation between bliss and torment was too much.

She changed the image to Tenes, the handsome youth on Tenedos who'd taught her how to defeat Circe. Though she'd only been a girl back then, Nerissa knew that Tenes had thought her very beautiful. If it weren't for the need to save her family, she would have liked to talk with him all afternoon... and maybe do a lot more than talk when night succeeded day.

Tragus was surprised to find her moist. Always before, he'd had to wet her with saliva spat onto his fingers. He grunted with satisfaction. Glancing back over her shoulder, Nerissa managed a small smile. She saw he'd quickly grown aroused. She kept her focus dilated, in order to preserve the lie that he was Tenes. That evening as Nerissa brought the sheep back in the shed, Athena had finally relented. When She'd told Nerissa how, the Goddess's voice couldn't have been clearer if they stood side by side.

Tragus plunged into her very hard. Nerissa met it as she always did, without complaint, without a sound at all. After a few more thrusts, she began pushing back against him. This wasn't new. After those first few times when disgust prevented her, she'd always moved her hips to make him finish faster. But as his pace increased, Nerissa slid her hands toward the post. She shifted weight onto her forearms. It made her rump tilt higher and now she spread her knees. Tragus became even more excited, pumping with great speed. He moaned on every beat. He gripped her by the hips.

Nerissa began to move with her own urgency. She made sounds in rhythm with the noises from behind. She kept them soft. Tragus was vile, but he wasn't stupid. Even in his keen excitement, he wouldn't believe that she was equally aroused. He knew she loathed him. Her transition to desire would have to develop gradually. In Tragus's mind, it would have to be the unwilling product of his great virility.

Tragus responded to the noises. He leaned his greasy forehead against Nerissa's back, wrapped his arms around her waist, pulled her hard against him as he ground into her. She let a muffled groan escape. She made it ring with self-censure.

Oh, heartless man, it said. How can you make me feel this ecstasy when I hate you so much?

As Tragus spilled his seed into her, Nerissa kept pushing back against him. She made the motion violent, compelled. She kept it up for half a minute, panting hard, unable to muffle her

cries now. Then she called out to Hera. She used the words she'd heard at times from Mother. Though their house in Smyrna only had two rooms, and usually they all slept in the kitchen by the fire, sometimes when Father returned from sea, her parents had gone into the other room and shut the door.

Now, she rocked against Tragus with a swaying motion, as she imagined a loving Mother did with Father. She continued all the time that Tragus lay sweating against her back.

There, Nerissa thought. How's that for nice?

She didn't look back now. A woman ashamed of her rebellious libido would be unable to meet his eye, she sensed. Eventually, Tragus got up and pulled his robe back on. He grunted something that might have passed for satisfaction. She knew better than to ask him about Euredon yet. Staying silent was the hardest trial of her life, but she knew it would only impede her progress. Then Tragus would realize she'd only pretended to enjoy coupling with him and that it still was rape. She merely kept her face down as he left.

But in the morning when she brought milk to the house, Nerissa stayed and cleaned the front room thoroughly. She'd known that Euredon wouldn't be inside, because Tragus hadn't forbidden her to enter. He'd probably ordered Hesper to keep the baby with her. Nerissa felt frantic to know how Euredon fared, but forced herself to stay away from the cheese shed. She knew it would all come to grief if she didn't get permission first from Tragus.

He still snored in his bedchamber. Maybe if she went in there and cleaned, the noise would rouse him. The urge was very powerful, but again Nerissa managed to refrain. He'd be angry if she woke him. Besides, today was much too soon to ask, she knew.

Nerissa left the house carrying his robe. The same filthy chiton he'd worn last night. She'd found it lying on the kitchen floor. Now she limped down to the stream and washed the garment. Then she returned to the farm yard, and hung it in the sun to dry.

As she went through her day of tending the sheep and filling the oakum barrels, Nerissa thought only of ways to reclaim Euredon. That night, she acted much the same when Tragus came to rape her. But her cries were a little louder and she managed to look at him as he left.

The next morning, she washed the fabric that sealed his windows. In most houses, such cloths let in sunlight when the shutters weren't closed. Tragus had let them get so grimy, his house had a perpetual gloom. When Nerissa brought them back and hung them, the room became surprisingly bright. It also smelled better now, since a fresh breeze had blown through while she'd been at the stream.

That night, she didn't simply kneel in the straw, but stepped toward Tragus and eagerly pulled off his robe. For the first time, she touched his member. It stiffened at once in her hand.

She reacted with a guilty look of pleasure. She responded passionately as he took her from behind, then took her from in front, as well.

She left flowers on his table in the morning. She'd found narcissi growing by the stream. She arranged them in an empty wine jar. She'd also brought ripe lemons from the orchard. She cut them into sections, squeezed their juice into a basin, and mixed it with some honey. She'd found a hive behind the ram's pen, and used a smoking brand to quiet the bees. In Smyrna, Nikos had taught her how to do this. And Mother had showed her how to make this drink, one of the great summer pleasures. She hoped Tragus would like it.

The next day, she made him a soup from wild herbs and parsnips that she found growing on the hillside. His eating bowl was empty when she returned in the morning, though Tragus hadn't said a word about it. She collected eggs and made an omelet, flavoring it with garlic and onions she found growing where there'd once been a garden.

As she came outside that day, she saw Hesper crossing the farm yard. She decided to risk a greeting. Tragus couldn't object to such a little thing, could he?

"A fine morning," she called to Hesper. "I hope you slept well?"

"Not for years. My bones ache always now."

"I'm sorry. My mother knew a remedy. If I can find the right herbs on the hillside, I'll make it for you."

"I doubt it will work. Nothing gives me ease."

"I hope this does... I meant to thank you, Hesper, but I haven't seen you until now. You must've worked tirelessly to bring me through my fever."

"I told you why. The same reason I stopped your foot from bleeding. I'm too old to tend the sheep again."

"I'm glad to have them back. In their own way, they're admirable creatures. It's surprising, but I missed them in the years that I was gone."

"Yes, well... just be sure you do nothing to provoke Tragus. He'll chop off your whole leg next time, then where will we be? It'll be the death of me if I have to tend those sheep again."

"Not to mention taking care of a child. He's forced that on you, has he?"

"Just the feeding. Sheep-fucker says I don't have to carry the baby around with me."

"So he lies there in your shed all day?" Nerissa blanched. It was almost as bad as she'd imagined. "I haven't heard him crying."

"He doesn't mind the floor."

Maybe this was true. Maybe he liked watching whatever mice and insects happened to

pass by. In Nerissa's few months with Euredon, she'd learned he had a very contemplative nature. He'd stare at her as if he were pondering the mystery of life. On the hillside, his head turned at each motion of birds and butterflies and flowers swaying in the breeze. He seemed to thirst for knowledge about all the things that made this world. Maybe little Euredon harbored a scholar's soul.

"Then he's really fine?"

"Well enough. But I'm not to let you see him, so don't ask."

"I won't. Just to know he's all right, that feels like a great blessing from Olympus... But what about, you know, when he messes? Does Tragus let you wash him?"

"It isn't necessary. In this warm weather, I don't wrap him. He's at the age where he can roll. So after he does his business, he just moves away.

You let him roll all over the floor and never even wash him? Nerissa wanted to shout. But she contained her anger.

"Thank you for watching Euredon," she said instead. "With all you do already, I know you don't need extra work. I'm praying that it won't be for very long."

That night, after she'd satisfied Tragus, Nerissa looked into his eyes. He seemed to be in a particularly good mood. He'd even touched Nerissa's face with tenderness.

"Uh, that was good," he managed to say as he got up.

Tragus was so unused to thanking anyone, the words made a ripple of irritation cross his mouth. But he forced it back into a thin-lipped smile.

"Thank you, Master. For everything, I mean."

"The food you cooked was good, too. And I liked that drink you made with lemon."

"It was my favorite as a child," Nerissa gathered that Tragus had a sweet tooth. She'd have to make him more things flavored with honey. "When we got lemons as a special treat, my brothers and I would try to find bee's nests in the forest."

"Yes, honey makes the fruit delicious."

"You have many lemons on the trees this year, you know. I've kept the sheep from eating them. I could harvest them, then sell them in the market. You'd make a lot of extra money."

"Daphne used to do that..." A pained expression creased his jaw. "We'll see."

"If you liked the food and lemon drink, I can make many other things, too." Nerissa knew she'd better change the subject fast. "My mother taught me how. She was considered the best cook in our village."

"Mutton and bread is good enough for me." But Tragus looked interested. He pursed his

lips with hunger. "What else can you make?"

"Nothing fancy. Just good, simple food. Lamb stew with onions, for instance. Do you like that?"

"I might. It's just the time of year for lamb. When we'd cull the he-lambs, my father used to save one for our midsummer feast. He'd have Hesper roast it, but she'd usually manage to burn the cursed thing."

"I wouldn't do that, Master. I'm always very careful when I cook. I can make a lamb roast very savory with thyme and chick peas. I can use the lesser cuts for many tasty soups and stews and cutlets. If you bring figs and grapes and mint leaves from the market, I'll make a nice compote with lemon rind to go along."

"All right. I'll give it a try. Tomorrow, I'll slaughter one of the culls."

"There'll be plenty for guests, if you'd like to invite your friends from the tavern."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"But you've tasted my food, Master. You know that I can cook. I'm sure that they'll enjoy it."

"Those swine? Do you really think I'd have them in my home? Especially now that it's clean. They'd spill food and wine all over. No, we'd be lucky if that's all they'd spill. I can just see that oaf Jeremos spewing on the floor."

"I guess it wasn't a very good idea... How about your father?"

"That evil demon? Never."

"But wouldn't you like him to see how well you've done? I mean, I can fix the house up very nice. I'll clip and wash the sheep. And prune the lemon trees. Maybe straighten up the farm yard, too."

"For that old shit? You're crazy if you think I'd lift a finger for him."

Never mind that all the work would be Nerissa's.

"You'd show him that you're better than him, Master. A profitable farm. The finest cheese in Ithaca. And a household staff that honors you."

"Maybe..." Tragus's face screwed up with competing emotions. Finally, one of them won out. "All right, we'll do it. I'd like to see the envy on that bastard's face."



In the morning, Tragus sent Hesper to Alalcomenae with a message. She returned that evening with an answer from Tyrus. He'd visit in nine days on the Feast of Aphrodite. In an

unusually good mood, Tragus showed Nerissa an amulet he'd bought. It was for little Euredon to protect him from the evil eye. When Tragus went out to the tavern, Nerissa set to work sprucing his house. She cleaned the bedchamber, scrubbed all the cookware, and fixed the wobbly table.

That afternoon, she emptied a huge pile of ashes from the hearth, then set right its shamelessly neglected altar for Hestia. Since the fire had long since died, she rebuilt a pile of kindling sticks. It would be improper to relight the fire from Tragus's lamp or brazier, so she went outside with a scrap of tinder and a copper knife. While she went about her milking, Nerissa patiently let the sun's rays concentrate from the bright metal to the tinder. When smoke finally appeared, she blew this into a flame, then shepherded it inside to the waiting hearth. Mother would barely approve, Nerissa knew. She'd say the flame should come from Tragus's ancestral home. Or failing that, a temple. But both of those originated from Helios, didn't they? It was the best that she could do.

With permission from Tragus, she made curtains the next evening. For material, Tragus provided one of Daphne's robes that he'd stored in a chest of cedar.

In the morning, Nerissa cleared and hoed the garden. She fertilized it with dung collected from the sheep. Tragus questioned this odd practice, but Nerissa explained she'd heard of the technique from her adopted brother. In Ionia, farmers used manure from oxen and could reap two crops of wheat a year.

Tragus said that only wealthy men owned cattle here. Still, his father had once claimed the land was much richer in the old days, so maybe that's how all farmers used to do it. He let Nerissa spread the sheep dung, then chop it into the soil. Though it was late in the season, she planted tomatoes, cucumbers, herbs, and lettuce.

The next day, she fixed the house's shutters, straightened all the clutter from the yard, and even got Tragus to help shore up the ewe shed's sagging walls.

She cooked a hearty supper each night, then encouraged Tragus to reveal the things that he liked best. Nerissa told him that she knew how to bake bread, if he'd buy a cask of wheaten flour and a footed kiln. While sweeping out the hearth, she'd found clay pieces of the old one. It must have shattered years before. But now she could make loaves for Tragus, far tastier than the cheap sort of barley bread he bought. It would cost him much less, too. Tragus agreed to this, and also brought the produce she'd requested from the Polis market.

Nerissa sheared the sheep, washed and carded the wool, then baled it. She would have spun it, too, if Tragus had a loom. She spent the late afternoon opening his mattress and his pillows, filling them with some of the new wool while she burnt the fetid pile of old stuffing,

then sewing them up again.

In the morning, she pruned the orchard, harvested the lemons, and carried a basketful into the house for cooking. She beamed with pleasure when Tragus mentioned how much profit he'd made by having Hesper sell the rest in Polis. Nerissa showed even greater pleasure when Tragus let her back into his bed.

Her reward for all this was a brief visit with little Euredon. He was brown with dirt and covered with bits of straw, but obviously healthy. Maybe it wasn't so bad to let him crawl around without the tight folds of a swathing cloth. His arms and legs seemed to have grown stronger than most babies. She wouldn't be surprised if he started walking much earlier than the normal age of two.

When Nerissa picked him up, she was delighted to see how plump he'd grown. He might be unwashed, but he'd been eating very well. He beamed a toothless grin at seeing her and reached to touch her face. He made a sound of pleasure that she hadn't heard before. He'd changed so much in the half month since she'd last held him. Happiness and grief spilled from her heart.

It was over all too soon. Tragus made her hand Euredon back to Hesper, then take the sheep up to the hillside. Nerissa felt despondent, fearing it might be another month or two before she saw her son again. Or never. Her plan might come to tears. Tragus might sell her away and keep little Euredon. They were chattel slaves, no different than captives taken in a war. The power Tragus held over them was almost absolute. He might still decide to kill her.

By the letter of the law, a master who murdered his slave could suffer banishment or sometimes death. But in practice, masters usually escaped harsh punishment by claiming that the slave died accidentally. It was generally felt that slaves provoked their masters into anger. Loss of the slave's services was considered punishment enough. In Smyrna, a blood price sufficed as restitution, as if one had killed a neighbor's cow. But Nerissa remembered one case where a particularly valuable silversmith belonging to Baron Iadros had been killed by thieves. Iadros demanded hanging for these murderers, declaring that they'd offended the Gods by shedding blood during a time of peace.

Nerissa couldn't sleep that night, though it was a new moon and very dark. She tried to feel more positive the next day, because it was the Feast of Aphrodite. She decked the house with myrtle boughs. She wove fragrant sprigs into her hair. Since it was a holiday, Tragus said she didn't have to fill the oakum barrels. There were lightning showers, so the sheep stayed in their shed. She cooked all morning and cleaned the house again. Outside, despite the gray weather, the farm looked better than it had in years. The garden that she'd hoed and watered

every day sprouted now with neat green rows.

The house smelled wonderful with the myrtle and the food. It smelled even better when Nerissa brought in the roasted lamb. She'd dodged the lightning to turn its spit each quarter hour. Last night, she'd built up a deep bed of hot coals, burning the lemon branches that she'd pruned. Today, despite the intermittent rain, the fire had burned strong and the lamb was roasted to perfection.

The weather cleared that afternoon, but for the next two hours, there was no sign of Tyrus. Tragus stared out the window. He tapped on the table with increasing agitation.

Maybe I should coax him into the bedchamber to ease his tension, Nerissa thought. Last night, she'd done something new he really liked. He'll want it again, of course. And now, he'll get even more excited to watch me do it in the daylight. Maybe it won't be so bad if I imagine Tenes.

But Tragus went outside to pace from the cheese shed to the ram's pen. By the bitter look on his face, Nerissa knew he was working himself into a fury. She knew better than to approach him now.

Finally, as dusk was dying, an oxcart turned in from the lane. An old man pulled up by the wood pile. He had an egg shaped head, a few wisps of ash colored hair, and a curving nose that looked like it wanted to touch his chin.

"Hesper!" he shouted in a surprisingly strong voice. "Get out here and take care of this ox."

The old woman scurried from her cheese shed. Nerissa had never seen Hesper move so fast. But since she'd once belonged to Tyrus, Hesper undoubtedly knew that punishment would fall on her in seconds if she didn't hurry to obey his order.

Tyrus didn't greet his son. Jumping down, he ignored the hand that Tragus held out to help. Nerissa almost pitied Tragus, he looked so uncomfortable. It was pathetic. He desperately craved approval, but loathed the source from which it wouldn't come. He didn't know what to do with the hand he'd offered. He just stood with it extended as if to show the farmyard.

"You're hours late," Tragus said at last. His voice was like a humiliated child, wheedling for sympathy.

"You didn't expect me to travel in the storm?"

"Many others went out on the road. I saw them dressed in finery, on their way to join their families."

"What do I care if fools risk their deaths. I came when the time was more propitious."

"The food's grown cold."

“Then tell your girl to warm it. Or are you such a weakling you can't even control a maimed slave?” The old man grinned evilly. “That's right. Did you think I hadn't heard about the seven years that she was missing. But the real wonder is she didn't use an axe, herself, and let death free her from the shame of being your bed slave.”

“In fact, she likes it very much. If you don't believe me, we can wager and I'll prove it. You'll see how well my slave obeys me.”

“Are you trying to disgust me? I haven't eaten yet.”

They wrangled all through the meal. As Nerissa served, she saw why Tragus never had a chance to become a decent man. His father was despicable. He sneered at every word from Tragus. He had nothing but complaints about the food, yet he ate serving after serving. He stuck his face down in the expensive metal plates that Tragus had bought to impress him.

When she brought the next course, Tyrus stood and farted in her face, then grinned at Tragus like it was the height of wit. He spat across the table. It slithered down the wall. He hadn't bothered aiming for the window. He urinated out the doorway, rather than walk a few steps to the privy. It wasn't even raining any more. He blew his nose into his hand, and though she'd also seen Tragus do this many times, he'd at least step outside, fling off the snot, then wipe his hand on his chiton. But Tyrus actually licked his fingers with enjoyment. Nerissa gaped, then had to quickly turn away when Tyrus noticed.

“Get over here!” he shouted.

“I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that we don't have that habit where I come from.” He continued glaring at her like a viper. Nerissa felt compelled to say something more. “I mean, my father and my brothers, on our boat, they'd press a nostril closed and empty the other one over the rail. I imagine all men have coarse ways. I meant no disrespect.”

“Of course you did. How dare you look at me like I'm repulsive. I'll teach you better manners.”

“Nerissa is my slave,” said Tragus in a firmer voice than he'd managed all night. “I'll be the one to discipline her, when required.”

“And you don't think it's necessary now? No wonder your slaves run off whenever they want.”

“I got her back, didn't I? I punished her and now I have her full respect.”

“You're an even bigger fool than I thought. You let your slaves scoff at the man who raised you? Right in your own house? Right to our faces? Imagine what they say behind your back.”

“I don't have to imagine. I know exactly what they said about you in Alalcomenae. And

it wasn't only slaves. Everybody thought you were disgusting. Eating your own snot was just the start."

"That happens to be a sensible and healthy habit. You never learned anything I taught you. It preserves the body's fluids."

"That's not the only fluid you preserve, I hear."

"You little shit! What are you trying to imply?"

"Hesper told me what you like to do. And she served so long as your bed slave, she ought to know."

"She lies. She wants revenge, because I used to make her do the thing that she accuses me of doing."

"Between the two of you, I'll take her word."

"I wouldn't expect otherwise. You have the loyalty of a bloodsucking vermin, Tragophagus."

"People call me Tragus now."

"Yes, I've heard, and I despise it. I gave you a perfectly respectable name, and you chop it like you chopped that insolent girl's foot... I'll tell you what. Sell her to me, and there'll be no question of who's to discipline her. You paid, what, fifty drachmai? I'll give you sixty, though she's older now."

"Older, but much better looking."

"Yes, and with half a foot. Didn't I just say that? Or is that too much for your addled mind to remember?"

"No, I remember. I also remember that you have such tastes. I heard you bought a one-legged girl to replace Hesper. Whatever happened to her?"

"Sold her at a goodly profit. You're right about one thing. There are men who pay handsomely for amputees."

"May Hades put your shade into a deep cess pit! You won't be selling this one. She stays with me."

"You're soft. You always were. Haven't you learned that only fools allow themselves to care about a woman? They're only put on earth to punish men, ever since that first one Pandora. This one will plague you just the same."

"This dinner's over. You're welcome to stay the night, but I don't think you'll get much sleep. Not with the noises I'll be making with Nerissa."

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Though the evening had seemed a disaster to Nerissa, Tragus regarded it as a great triumph. He'd proved himself the head of a thriving household. He'd routed his tyrant of a father. He'd forced Tyrus to slink away and cross the island in total darkness. Best of all, as he'd enjoyed Nerissa in his comfortable bedchamber, a driving rain began again.

"If my father comes back knocking," he'd said with a delighted grin, "we'll knock the headboard even louder and pretend that we don't hear him. He can sleep out in the ewe shed. That old bastard made me do it often enough when I was young. Or he can try squeezing in with Hesper. Now wouldn't that make an interesting wager? Which one do you guess would climb upon the other's sagging bones?"

Tragus remained in an elated mood all month. He rarely went out to the tavern. He bought new clothes and had a barber cut his hair. He got his bad teeth pulled. He took an interest in the farm. He painted the house and dredged the well. With his profit from the wool and lemons, he replaced the dilapidated equipment in the cheese shed. At Nerissa's suggestion, he also bought a loom. Now each evening, she wove woolen fabric from thread she'd spun that day. Until Tragus finished carving another figurine in a set of hoplites he was making for Euredon. Then he'd extend a hand and lead Nerissa into the bedchamber.

In short, Nerissa was performing all the duties of a wife. She cooked his food, and wove his cloth, and warmed his bed at night. She no longer found Tragus so revolting that she needed to put herself into a trance and think of Tenes. She didn't have to invent noises. She simply let her body do as it liked. Yes, Tragus was still a pig, but her lot wasn't much different than most women, whether free or slave.

How many were as lucky as Mother, after all? How many marriages were love matches? Most were more like Theoton and Phyllis. Or Aunt Melissa, who'd tolerated Uncle Clemon's many faults because that's what the Fates decreed.

After three months, Tragus bought another slave to tend the sheep. He made a point of asking Nerissa to train and supervise the *pais*, as they called slave boys in Ionian. He wanted her to appreciate that he hadn't bought a girl. The implication was clear, since Tragus had never shown a sexual interest in boys. It proved that he desired no other bed mate. But he merely said the new slave Miklos would free Nerissa to concentrate on running his household.

It felt strange to have a slave put in her charge. Back home, though there was a steady supply of captives from the Lydian wars, no one in her village was prosperous enough to own one. The first thing that she did was ask Tragus to remove the boy's chains. She believed that if Miklos were well treated, he wouldn't run away. She fed him amply and prepared a soft pallet where he could sleep in comfort. She made him understand that the shed would be a much nicer place for both him and the sheep if he shoveled out the manure each day. She had Miklos spread it in her garden, and rewarded him with fresh vegetables.

Nerissa taught him patiently how to milk and tend the sheep. When he made mistakes, she certainly didn't chastise him with hand or stick. She phrased her instructions as polite requests. There seemed something almost... *wrong* about owning another human. But it also felt wrong to question an arrangement that the Gods had allowed since the beginning. Just as some people were poor and others rich, some wise and others stupid, people had always been fated to be free or bondsmen. She decided that the best she could do about Miklos was to treat him as a member of the family. He soon became more like a nephew than a slave.

Tragus never questioned this arrangement. In fact, he never yelled about anything at all. Nerissa realized that what she'd dreaded on that first day after Theoton's betrayal had turned out to be true. Athena in her wisdom had decided that she and Tragus were an ideal match. Not because they both were ugly. Because they needed one another. Tragus longed for a woman who'd be nice to him. In his mind, voluntary courtesy meant that she admired him. And Nerissa needed a father for her child. Say what you wanted about Tragus -- despite his long list of failings, he'd created a fine boy in Euredon.

And he doted on Eury, as he'd begun to call their son. He often took Eury into town on errands, eager for people to see his heir. At home, he'd play games with the boy, rolling a trochos back and forth for instance, or even a complicated contest that larger boys played with this hoop. Another favorite game was Chytrinda, in which the "pot" sat in the middle, while the other players ran around tapping at him until he caught one to replace him. In this, Tragus would enlist Nerissa as the pot, because she couldn't run. Of course, they didn't pinch or strike her as boys do in the real game, and they never made her wear a real pot over her head. Tragus was very sweet, in fact, never kicking loose when she managed to get her hands around his ankle.

In addition to the soldiers that he'd carved, he also made Eury a leather chariot, a wooden horse, and a frog made from a pomegranate rind. He now was working on carving a set of sheep.

He never accused Nerissa of sleeping with the hermit anymore. Or Homer or Theoton or Berenice's master Architalos, either. He'd all but acknowledged Euredon as his son and heir. He praised the boy at every opportunity.

Tragus still feared water, so he wouldn't let Nerissa bathe their son. But he allowed a compromise when Nerissa suggested wiping Eury with a cloth soaked in cheap wine. It was an old Smyrnan tradition, mostly out of favor in this modern era, but back home the old grandmothers claimed it kept children free of sickness.

It didn't seem to harm Eury, at any rate. In fact, Nerissa noticed that his scrapes and cuts healed very fast. The boy was crawling now, getting into everything. Still fascinated with the workings of the world. Many times, Nerissa had to scurry to take away a warm coal from Eury. He'd lift them from the hearth and try to break them apart. From the curious look on his face, it was clear he wanted to know how the glowing ember got inside them. Outside, he'd pick up any bug he found and put it in his mouth. He never chewed them, only wanted to know how their wriggling legs felt on his tongue before he set them down.

Once the weather cooled, Tragus allowed Nerissa to dress the boy in warm clothes. Eury no longer had to sleep in the cheese shed with Hesper, either. Tragus made him a cradle from expensive cypress wood and kept it in their bedchamber. He bought a coverlet woven from the best Milesian wool. Every night, he rubbed fresh figs over Eury's eyes, to prevent future problems. He also bought boots for Nerissa, and remembered to select two very different sizes. She felt touched at his thoughtfulness. Yes, she never forgot that he'd been the one to force her choice, leaving her with only half a right foot, but she could see that he felt sorry for it.

Domestic life continued well all winter. Tragus remained in a fine mood, showing particular pleasure each time he persuaded Eury to repeat a new word. Though a month of cold rains kept them at close quarters, he didn't once grow angry with Nerissa. If she broke a dish, he didn't berate her. When she accidentally scorched some clothes drying over the hearth, he didn't beat her. When she bled each month, he didn't insist on coupling. He took her and little Eury into Polis for the festival of Anestherion. He hoisted Eury on his shoulders to watch the procession of amphorai full of wine from last fall's harvest. He didn't participate in the drinking contests, but bought Eury sweets from a confectioner's stall in the agora.

Early that spring, Tragus bought a new ram. It worried Nerissa at first. She still had nightmares about old Trumpet. But then she realized that Tragus was so enamored of her body, he'd never share her with an animal again. There was no danger that he'd exhibit her at festivals.

She no longer feared he'd rent her out to wine shop patrons, either. She had a safe place in his household. She even found herself disappointed each time her monthly flow occurred. She wanted to build a large family, not so much to replace the one she'd lost but to honor the happiness she'd known with them.

Nerissa felt secure that Tragus would never sell her. He might some day grow bored with their arrangement, he might want a younger woman as she aged, but he'd keep her anyway. Tragus was far too jealous to bear the thought of another man bedding her.



When Nerissa quickened again that summer, Tragus was delighted. He took her to the Temple of Demeter and paid a priest to bless her belly. He had her drink white wine, which he said would fill her breasts with milk. He insisted that she eat only foods that don't cause farting. He often brought home rabbit brains, which he insisted were the best food for pregnant mothers. He bought a lyre for her, so she could play songs to their growing child. It wasn't that Tragus didn't approve of poetry. He said that he'd enjoyed listening to the recitations during her pregnancy with Eury. Which Nerissa realized meant that he'd prowled outside the shed to listen in. She found this both disturbing and endearing.

"But the new one won't bloom well on rhymes," he said. "My dreams have told me this will be a girl. She should learn the womanly arts instead of verse."

That's why Nerissa played Smyrnan airs between her weaving and the bedchamber. She'd had no lessons as a girl, but watched Father often enough to learn the basics. It turned out that Tragus had a handsome voice. He taught her Ionian melodies, then sang along.

With the profits from another bountiful lemon crop and many bales of wool, Tragus bought two more slaves. They were grown men this time, muscular specimens with pale blond hair from somewhere in the far northlands. Tragus set them to clearing his overgrown fields, then planting a crop of flax. He even bought an iron plowshare for the donkey to pull. It was so much more efficient than the old wooden *aratrum*. Having seen Nerissa's success with the garden, he not only directed the slaves to plow all of the donkey's droppings into the land, but he persuaded neighbors to let his slaves shovel out their byres, too. They thought him even madder than before, but were only too happy to let Tragus's slaves remove this dung for nothing.

While Tragus supervised the farm, Nerissa had much time alone with Eury. The boy was walking now, following Nerissa everywhere. With her limp, they had nearly the same pace. Eury was becoming voluble, as well, often piping in his loud, pure voice the dozen or so words

he'd mastered.

His favorite was bubu, which to him meant "bug." Outside, he'd pick up ants and grubs and any other crawling insects he could catch. He'd let them travel across his palm or hold them close to study them, but no longer tried to put them in his mouth. Nerissa had made it clear this scared the bugs. It was the last thing Eury wanted. He liked them better than any other creature, though he was also very fond of sheep.

Nerissa continued to value the ewes' company, so she did most of the shearing. She had Miklos bring her any that needed salving. She also bathed them on the eve of feast days, and let Eury "help." This meant, of course, he'd always get a good soaking. It was her way around Tragus's ban on bathing.

Whenever they did chores together, whether it was sheep tending or house cleaning or gardening, Nerissa always entertained Eury with verse. He continued to like Hesiod, but he enjoyed it best when she told episodes from her own story. Though Eury was only eighteen months, Nerissa could tell from his big eyes that he understood the tales.

"Let's see," she said that day as Eury helped her at the wash line. He loved to hand her wooden pegs that Tragus had carved. "I've never told you of Aeolus, have I, that bug-eyed, big-cheeked blowhard?"

"Bubu?" he said.

"No, not a bug. Aeolus is one of the immortals. He is the God of wind." She made a whooshing sound, puffing out her cheeks so Eury would understand. "He once helped your grandfather Asclemeleon, but refused to do it twice."

Eury looked up expectantly while handing Nerissa another peg, so she plunged into the tale:

After we escaped from Polyphemus and before we reached the isle of the Brigand Choir, all your great-uncles were still alive. Though of course Clemon had stayed behind with Circe. We had five boats remaining in our fleet. A year had passed since we'd left Smyrna. My father thought it time that we return. We'd do it carefully, he said, and see which way the ground lay. As he knew well, a lot could happen in a year. Maybe Baron Iadros had died in the Lydian wars. If not, maybe our clan's losses would satisfy the punishment decreed upon our house.

We were far from home, however. A storm had pushed us south into a sea of many islands. Father thought these were the Cyclades, though he'd never sailed these waters. But he'd heard many descriptions from merchant captains. Alone, he went ashore on an island that turned out to be Siros.

That night, Father returned with a long wooden box. It looked like it might contain a sword. To get it, Father said he'd traded a silver arm band that Kestides had taken from the elder's son on Imros. Father promised that its contents would bring us safely home.

That night, I heard him praying to Aeolus. He asked the God to fill our sails toward Smyrna. He promised four rams in sacrifice when we arrived, one for each of the chief winds. His prayer was answered favorably, for the next morning a strong wind rose from the southeast. Though Father didn't know this sea, its currents or its shoals, he was able to navigate unerringly past hundreds of islands. Some were large, some small, some had towns that we could see, some had ruins of long departed civilizations studding their hillsides.

Father read the water like a well-loved scroll, and never faltered once. If we were out of sight of land, he'd steer by the color of the waves, or maybe the direction of the birds above. Sometimes, I'd see him lean over the rail and dip his hand into a swell. From the water's taste alone, he was able to adjust our course. At night, he never lacked for stars. Aeolus continued to sweep the sky clear of all clouds.

Three days later, we passed the last of the Cyclades, the fabled land of Mikonos. Leading my uncles' boats, Father headed across the wider sea toward Chios. Past this stalwart island of the Ionic League, he knew that we'd reach Smyrna. Now, as the wind continued strong from the southwest, Father lay down for a rest. He hadn't slept in all this time as we'd maneuvered through the archipelago. It was a straight run through deep water now. He trusted Andrastus to man the helm.

For once, I wish Andrastus had paid more attention to Chloe. As Father slept, she crept into the cabin. Chloe had no self control and couldn't contain her urges... Oh, that sounds awful, doesn't it? I didn't mean it that way. Chloe didn't want to sleep with Father. That's not a story I would tell you, honey. Besides, her heart was set on Andrastus. What I meant was Chloe couldn't contain her curiosity about the box.

We all wondered, naturally. Some still thought that Father had traded for a sword on Siros. But Andrastus thought it was an ancient staff possessed of wondrous magic. Young Aristides said it was a folded sounding rod, which means a long, marked stick that can divine the ocean's depth. When I asked if he'd ever seen Father use it, Aristides admitted that he hadn't.

My uncles talked about this, too. We heard them when we'd lash our boats together in the darkness.

"Why should it be a sword?" said Xolon. "Asclemeleon already has a perfectly good axe for fighting."

"That's true," agreed Demetrios. "Besides, he has no reason to expect another battle."

Father never said a word about the box. He never opened it while anyone was present. I knew its contents must be very precious. Father was taking no chances with it. As he said, we needed it to steer us safely home. Aeolus clearly approved, because He'd sent the winds right after Father traded for it. And Aeolus approved about the secrecy, as well. After all, it was very rare for a steady and favorable wind to continue for so long.

But that bitch Chloe-- No, I shouldn't say that. Forget you heard that word. I meant to say, my beautiful cousin Chloe, she had to open Father's box. Aristides told me that he saw her do it. Maybe my uncles put her up to it. Maybe they resented Father's secrecy. Maybe they thought he should share whatever precious thing he'd acquired on Siros.

Chloe didn't dare light a lantern in the cabin, so she carried the box on deck to see its contents in the moonlight. She waited for the wind to gust, so no one would hear the box creak when she opened it. Many of our family would be alive today, had she been able to resist the mysterious box's lure. The moment Chloe held up Father's treasure, the strong wind blew it overboard.

No, of course a sword or staff or sounding rod is too heavy for anything less than a great tempest to lift. But this was no heavy object. Aristides saw a thin sheet flutter in the wind. Many marks were inked on it, he said. He couldn't see the writing before it sank beneath a wave. He'd seen Chloe unroll it like a scroll, so he told me that it must have been a poem.

We all knew how Father loved collecting verse. He'd been forced to sell all of his scrolls during the starving times in Smyrna. When Xolon heard of this, he grouched that Father must have been offered some ancient epic on Siros.

"To all our peril," claimed my uncle, "Asclmelion couldn't bring himself to refuse."

I knew Father would never do this. A poem couldn't get us home. Father never told us what it was, and I certainly wasn't such a thankless daughter to demand an explanation. Still, to this day, I think it was a map. A much used sheet of parchment, worn thin by time.

What I do know is that Aeolus grew furious at us. The winds reversed that night and grew into a gale. In sight of flickering lights at the southern tip of Chios, we were blown due west.

Father begged Aeolus to reconsider. But the raging God wouldn't relent. We'd given in to temptation. We'd wasted His gift, and by doing so, we'd scorned it. Or as my one time friend Homer would say, we'd loosed the foul winds on the world. We'd proven ourselves too unlucky and unworthy to be loved by Gods...

"That's right, Eury, we're out of pegs. It's fine, I don't need any more. I've hung up all the clothes. Now run along and find yourself some bubus."



The flax crop flourished as the summer turned. After harvest, it would be spun into fine thread. Tragus was well on his way to prosperity. He became yet more generous with Nerissa. He bought her clothes, both fine and practical, new crockery, a silver fibula to bind her gown. Though he couldn't read, himself, he surprised her with a scroll on the occasion of her birthday. He stayed in each night for a month as she read verses of it to him and Eury.

Tragus replaced the donkey with a horse. He was very proud of it, because only rich men owned horses on Ithaca. He felt that it reclaimed his family's old connection to the aristocracy. He also bought a cart that Nerissa could ride to town when it wasn't being used for farm work. He hired carpenters to build an extension on the house, so that their growing family would have ample room.

He bought a young slave called Eugenia, for Hesper to train in the cheese shed. She was from Phrygia, but had been captured five years ago and spoke passable Ionian. The name Eugenia seemed an odd choice for a slave, since it meant well-born. Tragus said that Eugenia's first master had chosen it. Since the girl responded well to orders, he saw no reason to change her name. The idea was that once Eugenia was able to take over the cheese making, Hesper could have an easier old age as a sort of nursemaid to the children.

Tragus had become a happy man, even a pleasant one. He trusted Nerissa now, allowing her to travel into Polis unescorted. She enjoyed taking Eury along when she went to pray at the Temple of Athena or purchased foodstuffs in the market. Now that she was well dressed, the priests and shopkeepers treated her politely. Some remembered her from Evander's trial. Because Tragus's reputation had improved, townsfolk even acknowledged her with civil nods. The shipyard owner Anapater winked at her in the agora. Nerissa remembered he was the one who'd pulled her onto his lap in Theoton's banquet hall. Anapater was with his wife, so he didn't say hello, but he smiled very pleasantly.

One time at the spice merchant's shop, a customer surprised her by holding the door open while she entered. After studying her face for several seconds, he broke into a broad smile. He greeted her with an exaggerated flourish of his colorful sleeve.

"It's Nerissa, isn't it?" he asked. "I must say, time has done you wonders. And who's this fine lad?"

"His name is Euredon... But I'm sorry, you have the advantage."

"Ah, you don't recognize me. I'm afraid the years haven't been as kind to my

appearance. I wasn't bald when we shared a voyage on the Thallia. I'm the navigator Psatos."

"Now I remember," said Nerissa. "I don't think I ever knew your name. But now that I look back, I can picture you thanking Poseidon for your safe return. You must be native born to Ithaca."

This wasn't the only thing she recalled about Psatos. He'd been the only member of the crew who hadn't raped her. Then again, the fussy slave Aphion used to be called above to assist in the chart room. He'd passed the voyage noticeably well fed. Likely, Psatos had been his patron.

"Did you retire here?" she asked.

"No, I still work the trade routes, but I'm a captain now."

"Then we've both risen in the world." There was little enthusiasm in Nerissa's voice. "Allow me to extend my congratulations."

"I rarely accept slave cargoes," Psatos added. He seemed embarrassed about it. "In fact, only once in the last three years. After I became established, it hasn't been necessary."

"What's your ship called?" Nerissa quickly changed the subject.

"I don't have one yet. Maybe someday, if golden Tyche smiles on me, but for now I'm just a hireling."

"I'm sure the Goddess will. After all, She's seen you safe and prosperous through all your travels."

"True enough. My present ship Euphremia is newly arrived from Tyre. I took a portion of my share in cloves, which I'm told came all the way from India. I've just sold them to the spice merchant for a tidy sum."

"How nice. Cloves are wonderful. I tasted ham baked with orange peel and cloves one time on the Feast Day of Minerva."

"Orange peel, you say? I suppose that would be dried? They have wonderful oranges in Tyre, you know, not bitter like ours. What a shame the voyage is too long to bring them here before they rot. But now that you mention it, dried peel might be a good investment. In two days, we sail again for the Levant."

"I think you'd do well with orange peel. It compliments many foods, especially when combined with cloves. Except that cloves are very expensive, so most people rarely buy them."

"Here, allow me. I've kept one bag for my own use. Let me give you some. Back on the Thallia, I admired you, you know. I felt bad for what they did to you. But the way you bore up, I've never forgotten that through all my voyages. Especially when you climbed up on the rail. I watched you as you perched there. I saw the Goddess glowing in your eyes. It seemed a

sacrilege when Chymides Eight-fingers snatched you from your leap... Say, did you hear what happened to him?"

"No."

"I had it from Hematheus. Ran into him in Crete. Remember him, the talkative sailor who could play a kithara?"

"Yes, I remember."

Nerissa didn't mention that Hematheus had been one of the most frequent visitors to her berth. Unlike Psatos, she harbored no pleasant memories of the voyage. She only wanted to conclude this conversation as rapidly as possible.

"Hematheus was a funny sort. One minute he'd be playing a jolly tune, grinning while he plucked his kithara. The next minute he'd be in a rage over some imagined insult. I once treaded on his foot by accident, and he threatened to cut out my liver. But there you are. They're all pirates at heart, those Cretans... Anyway, he told me Chymides had all of his extremities hacked off in Sicily, including his nose and ears. Since he'd cheated the executioner by two fingers, they took his lips as well."

"Why, what was his crime?" Nerissa asked, despite herself. Fortunately, Eury was fascinated with the scales, as the spice merchant weighed out grains of pepper.

"Murder. Death by dismemberment is how they punish the condemned on Sicily. Hematheus says our old friend stayed alive for hours, more or less a woman after they also took his--"

"Who'd he kill?" Nerissa interrupted. She was never sure how much Eury could understand, but she certainly didn't want him hearing of any man's castration.

"Ah, the boy. Well, I'll forgive you cutting me off. That is to say, my words. As for the other, better Chymides than me. You'll never guess his victim. You knew him, too."

Nerissa only wanted to leave, but Psatos had treated her with rare respect. It would be rude to simply turn and go.

"Who?" she asked reluctantly.

"Captain Hycron. Chymides stuck a boat hook down his throat and out the back. Hycron sold off a girl who'd besotted Chymides en route to Crete. Goes to show, the Fates will weave their circlets."

As quickly as possible, Nerissa thanked Psatos for the news and wished him well on his next voyage. Before he could start in on another story, she made an excuse about needing to get home soon to prepare a meal for guests. She accepted the cloves that Psatos pressed on her, purchased the fenugreek seeds for which she'd come, collected her little boy, and left.

While she completed her other errands, Nerissa tried not to think about Chymides or Hycron. Still, she couldn't help picturing their deaths. In a way, it did feel like a small measure of justice that these two vermin had met brutal ends. Mostly, though, it saddened Nerissa to be reminded of the voyage.

She could only remain glum for a short while. Eury's fascination with ducklings in the market saw to that. By afternoon, she'd lost all trace of melancholy. Her days were so filled with satisfaction now, it would be a discredit to all of those who'd died to claim she wasn't exceptionally fortunate.

When she returned home, the two field slaves were cutting this season's crop of flax. If things continued well for another year or two, she intended to propose a small workshop to Tragus. Then instead of selling the flax, they could earn much more by producing linen. With a small part of the profits, she'd build the shrine that she'd long promised her family. Nerissa had no doubt that Tragus would allow her this.

He was so grateful that his life had turned around, he agreed to nearly everything she asked. He'd entered Eury on the town roll as his freeborn son. He'd promised to do the same for their daughter after she was born. And he allowed Nerissa the great pleasure of entertaining guests. Though what she'd told Psatos wasn't strictly true -- no one was expected today. But the wool merchant Leptos and his wife Theodora had come last month. They'd offered many compliments about the house, the decorations, and the food. They'd readily reciprocated, never once showing any trace of bigotry despite Nerissa's continued status as a slave.

Tragus even allowed her to see Berenice. Though not, of course, when Architalos was present. Tragus waited until he knew Berenice's randy master was inspecting his barley fields on Kefallinia. Nerissa was so pleased when Tragus suggested tomorrow would be a fine day to visit, she threw her arms around him. She surprised both of them with this unusual display, especially since Hesper happened to be present. Tragus colored deeply, like he used to during one of his rages. But then he smiled and sent Miklos with a message, so Berenice would expect Nerissa's visit. He patted her round belly, and walked off with a jaunty step.

After cooking most of the next morning, Nerissa took the cart. She allowed Euredon to hold the reins while sitting on her lap. Their horse Arion was very well behaved. She'd never known him to bolt, even one time when a viper crossed the road. Euredon beamed the whole way, delighted to be allowed this big-boy duty.

Halfway there, Nerissa even let go of the reins' back loop, because she spotted a doe rabbit browsing in a roadside field. She brought out the sling and stone she still carried everywhere, stopped Arion, set Eury on the bench beside her, then stood up and took aim.

Tragus liked a good rabbit stew. She could make him one for supper.

Just as quickly, Nerissa changed her mind. Eury loved animals so much, he'd cry for hours if he saw the rabbit killed. Nerissa had learned that it was best to slaughter lambs or chickens only when he was asleep. When Eury was older, she'd train him with the sling, but for now, there was no harm in letting the little boy enjoy his innocence.

She could easily give Tragus something else for supper. She'd brought twice as much food as she and Berenice could possibly eat, even considering the copious appetite that pregnancy produced. In terra cotta bowls covered with tied cloths, she'd brought lentil soup, a tomato, lamb, and basil pie, chicken stewed with onions, eggplant, and a pinch of the fenugreek seeds, fresh garden greens with kalamatas, feta cheese, wine vinegar and olive oil, batter-fried salt cod with a sauce of pureed walnuts, garlic, and potatoes, a refreshing dish of ripe cucumbers, mint, and yoghurt that Aunt Melissa had taught her, and a flaky pastry layered with raisins and ground almonds. She'd also brought a large amphora of the honeyed lemon drink that was so popular every time she made it.

Berenice was there to greet her at the gate. They had a lovely reunion in the beautiful courtyard at the house's center. Through the long, warm afternoon, they caught up on all their years since Nerissa's second flight. They were joined by two of Berenice's three children. Five year old Veronica sat cross legged on the sunny tiles arranging her doll's horsehair tresses with a pretty little comb made out of ivory. Three year old Petros ran between the columns of the peristylon, trailed everywhere by Euredon.

Berenice's older son Stavros, now almost nine years old, had accompanied his father to the neighboring island of Kefallinia. Architalos felt it was time Stavros learned to supervise the plantation. He'd inherit everything, the estate, the pottery workshop, and all the lands, because Architalos only had daughters by his wife.

"She isn't jealous?" asked Nerissa.

"No, Belinda and I get along like sisters."

"Many sisters fight."

"Did you with yours?" asked Berenice. "On the ship, I used to hear you curse someone named Chloe in your dreams."

"She was my cousin."

"Was? You mean she's dead."

"I don't know. But even if she were the only of my Smyrnan kinfolk left alive, Chloe's dead to me."

The unpleasant statement hung in the air for many seconds. Berenice was kind enough to

probe no further.

“My own sister was named Geneia,” continued Nerissa, relieved to change the subject. “She was the sweetest child. I loved her very much... If this baby is a girl, I'd like to name her for Geneia. I think Tragus will agree, though it might be confusing, since we already have an old ewe I call by that name.”

“And if it's a boy? Will Tragus want a namesake?”

“No, I don't think he much cares for his name. He despised the long form Tragophagus, and Tragus isn't much better. It reminds him of the, er-”

“The thing that people used to call him? I wondered if you'd heard of that.”

“Yes, and according to Hesper, it was true.” She giggled now. In addition to the lemon drink, they'd each drunk a large bowl of excellent wine during the meal. “Tragus did enjoy the ewes. And claimed that it improved the cheese. This was before he had me, of course. These days, Hesper stirs the milk the normal way.”

They both laughed with pleasure. Topsy, they fell sputtering against each other. To Nerissa, the afternoon felt like living in Elysium. To have a well loved friend. To joke about her husband. Well, not a husband exactly, but she felt so safe in his regard, that's how she thought of Tragus now. While she was still his concubine in terms of law, he treated her far more like a wife.

“So what will you name the child, if it's a boy?” asked Berenice.

“I was thinking of Asclemelion. It was my father's name.”

“I never heard that in your dreams. Though I did hear you call out ‘Andrastus’ a lot.”

“He was my adopted brother.”

“Oh, I thought that he must be your lover.”

“Berenice! I was only fourteen when I was taken as a slave.”

“That's more than old enough to have a lover. I was only ten my first time. Of course, it wasn't until eighteen that I learned what it's like to have a man you wanted.”

“Who, Architalos?”

“No, I was twenty-four, by then. But thank you for imagining it possible that I was younger. I'm sure I didn't look much like a maiden after our rough voyage, but you're sweet to say so... No, it was the slave who toted barrels in the wine shop where I worked on Rhodos. I think the child that I lost was his, and not my master's.”

“Oh, that is so sad. I'm very sorry for your loss. I know that it's been years, but the pain never really leaves you, does it? At least, that's true about the loved ones taken from me.”

Nerissa squeezed her friend's warm hands. “But mostly, we've been lucky, haven't we? The

last time we met, I never would have believed life could get so much better.”

“For both of us, Nerissa. Considering where I came from, it feels miraculous to have so much.”

“Especially in a world so full of sorrow.”

“It’s true. Like last year, when I had another miscarriage. And the three children I lost to sickness in the years before... But to have three others survive, to be valued by Architalos, to be not only accepted but loved by his wife, these are wonderful blessings to be savored.”

“That’s why I like you so much, Berenice. You’re the most buoyant person I’ve ever known. In the cave, I always remembered what you told me that day I ran away. I used to recite it word for word as best I could remember: ‘There are so many people who mistreat the powerless, why add one more? Why hurt myself by longing for a different life? This is the only one I’ll have on earth. Why waste any of it brooding over things that have already done their worst? I must shun misery like I’d shun its causes if I had any choice.’”

“I said that? Really?”

“Don’t you remember? It was so optimistic, it did me a world of good. Ever since, I’ve done my best to shun the bad things, and take pleasure in the good.”

“It’s fine advice, of course. But goodness, I must have been in a strange mood that day. It sounds so pompous the way I put it. I’m not usually such a blowhard. I leave that to philosophers. Though with my children, I often catch myself saying things I remember made me roll my eyes when my own mother said them.”

“I do that, too! Why, only yesterday, Euredon dropped bread on the floor, and I said, ‘Don’t eat that, Eury, it’s for the snakes.’”

“So of course he had to sit there watching for the snakes to come. My own Petros does exactly that.”

“Yes, and I had a hard time explaining I meant heroes turned immortal.”

“On Rhodos, we’d say demigods. Like satyrs, or the Minotaur. We didn’t hold snakes equally with Gods.”

“No, we didn’t either. I must have picked that up from Homer.”

“Ah, your old friend the poet. Have you seen him again?”

“No, not for nine years. I think of him a lot, but Tragus would never allow a meeting. That’s one thing I don’t dare to ask. Though they’re related, Homer is never mentioned in our house. I haven’t even heard a bit of news.”

“I have.”

“Really? What is it? Has he finished his poem?”

“What poem’s that? Not that moldy old thing about the Trojan War? The one he claims has won him prizes?”

“No. When I met him, Homer was starting a new one about the hero Odysseus. The one who stole into Troy disguised as a beggar, and stole the Palladium.”

“The what?”

“The Palladium. It was a magical image of Athena that protected Troy. Odysseus was also the commander who conceived the Trojan Horse.”

“He sounds like quite a hero.”

“He was. In many ways, he was the smartest and most cunning of all the Hellenes who allied against Troy. He was the only one who knew how to draw Achilles into the war. And after Achilles died, Odysseus was awarded that supreme warrior’s armor.”

“So what’s this new poem about? More ancient wars?”

“No, it’s an epic journey as Odysseus returns from Troy. I’ve been longing to learn if Homer has completed it.”

“I’ve heard nothing about that.”

“Then what? Come on, out with it. I’m dying to hear.”

“It’s just that Homer was in a law suit. Boring, really. Sorry, I know you were hoping for something much juicier. This was just another court case in a long series of disputes with Jeremos.”

“Then Homer still has debts?”

“To put it mildly. He’s practically a servant. He’s lost his house, he had to sell his cook, and now he’s forced to live by tutoring children of the rich.”

“Oh. That’s a shame. He’s such a proud man, it must be humiliating.”

“I’m sure it is. They say when he’s not tutoring, he orates at the top of his lungs while wandering the hills.”

“By himself? Did Homer recover his sight?”

“No, he’s still blind the last I heard. He takes a slave, a decrepit old man called Philemon.”

“He’s still alive? But he was old nine years ago.”

“He’s bent like a war bow now.”

“I wonder if he still can scribe. Goodness, I’d like to see them both. Have you heard whose house they live at now?”

“Homer’s charges are the two sons of Theoton.”

Nerissa’s stomach clenched to hear that name. She felt a momentary panic, fearing that

she'd hurt the baby. But then she felt it roll inside. Everything was fine. She exhaled with relief.

"Theoton has a second son? I thought that there was only Vasiledes."

She longed to see the boy. She'd thought so many times of Vasy over the years, but of course even now that she was firmly established with Tragus, she could never ask him if she might visit Theoton's household.

"Oh that's right, you once belonged to Theoton. I remember when Lady Phyllis bought you. And Architalos was full of gossip after that trial when you, er, translated."

Berenice blushed, ashamed that she'd almost reminded Nerissa about her painful testimony.

"That's all right. Don't worry. It's not a memory that hurts me, any more... But tell me more about these sons of Theoton. I was very close to Vasiledes when I was his gerula. What have you heard of him?"

"Nothing, really. He's four years older than my Stavros. They're not in the gymnasium at the same time. Oh, but Dzunga could tell you all about him. Dzunga from our ship, she still serves there. Do you remember her?"

"Of course. But I don't think she'll talk to me. She threatened me one time about her first master Aetes. She'll probably turn me away if I go asking for Homer."

Nerissa didn't want to get into her real reasons for not going - Tragus's jealousy, Lady Phyllis's hatred, and Theoton's betrayal.

"Dzunga might. They say she's become extremely spiteful, ever since Lady Phyllis had her sterilized."

"I thought so. I guessed as much, after seeing her one time. Dzunga isn't a nice woman, but I feel bad for her. She'll never know the joy of children. Mutilating her was heartless."

"No, dear, it's quite normal. Remember, we've both been very lucky. Owners fear we'll outbreed and outnumber them. That's the real reason, not because slave children are expensive, like they claim. So they've written in their laws that our blood is inferior and our progeny must be kept down to a minimum."



As they rode home, Nerissa sang one of Father's favorite tunes. Though it was in Aeolian, Eury had picked up the simple chorus. He "steered" their cart again, swinging the reins with every beat. Fortunately, Arion stuck to the lane, understanding that these jerks meant

nothing. Nerissa glowed with warmth, not just from the wine and the strong sun. She couldn't remember ever feeling this happy. Even in Smyrna before its times of trouble, there'd always been the tension of living up to Mother's standards.

But now she understood why Athena had led her through so much to Ithaca. The things she'd gained were worth every hardship. If offered a chance to go back in time, she'd never choose an easier path. Not if following it meant she wouldn't have her cheerful little boy. What's more, another child on the way. A happy home with a man who respected her. A wonderful friend in Berenice. All proof of her acceptance by the Gods. Yes, it would be even better if her family were alive and here, but Nerissa trusted they'd all be reunited one day in the next life.

The wine had mostly worn off and the sun was lower as she turned onto the track that led between the two flax fields. Eury had fallen asleep and lay nestled on her lap. Though it was the height of summer, Nerissa felt a chill. She wished she'd brought her wrap. When she'd carried Eury those last three months, she'd always been hot, but this time she was often cold. Back home, grandmothers would say this confirmed the baby was a girl. She didn't know, but Tragus seemed so sure of it. That would be very nice, she thought.

When Nerissa pulled up in the farm yard, she saw Hesper at the wood pile. The old woman was sitting on a log, gazing toward the setting sun. That was odd. Hesper didn't come out of her cheese shed much these days, except to use the privy. She waved and said something. It was loud, but Nerissa didn't catch it. She hadn't expected a greeting. Hesper usually ignored everyone, speaking only to herself.

Nerissa got down carefully, so as not to wake up Eury, then handed Hesper the boy. She had to put Arion in his stall. Though she was tired and her back ached, Nerissa didn't mind doing it herself. He was a fine horse. She'd make sure he got a good feed, fresh water, and a nice rub down. With their flax crop stacked to dry, Tragus had leased the field slaves for a week to one of his old friends from the tavern. Miklos was with the sheep up in the new pasture.

"I said, 'You're back early,'" repeated Hesper. She was half deaf, and so spoke very loudly. "Your visit went poorly?"

"It was wonderful. I was there for hours. How long did you think I'd stay? I have to start deipnon for Tragus soon. In these summer months, he likes to eat well before the sun goes down."

"He ate already. Since you weren't here, he came and took some of my cheese. I saw him with a big round of that wheaten bread you bake."

Hesper's voice still was very loud. Nerissa wanted to shush her, fearing that she'd wake

up Eury. It was a good time for his nap. She could give the house a thorough cleaning. But Hesper yammered on as Nerissa started to unhitch Arion. Then she heard someone talking even louder.

It was Tragus. His voice was coming from the cheese shed. He was bellowing, the way he used to do when she'd first been his slave. A young girl screamed shrilly. It silenced Tragus for a moment. Nerissa flushed with a sickened feeling as it echoed eerily across the yard. Then Tragus resumed his shouting, angrier than ever.

As fast as possible, Nerissa hobbled past the wood pile and the ram pen. She wanted to accelerate into the lurching trot that she could manage, but only if she had her staff for balance. These days, she only carried it when she had to climb the hillside. She hurried toward the cheese shed. Its door was closed, but another scream made her push it open.

The new slave girl Eugenia was lying naked. Her face was bloody and her torn clothes were on the ground. Tragus was straddling her, holding down her shoulders. His chiton was undone.

Now Nerissa understood why he'd been eager for her to leave the farm today. For two months now, with her belly rounded, long established mores prevented her from satisfying him. He'd reverted to his old lusts, craving a young girl like his dead wife Daphne. Or maybe the hunger had never left him.

"Tragus!" she shouted at him.

He looked back, but didn't get off the girl. Guilt flashed across his face, then hatred, then scorn. He said nothing, but his meaning was very clear. You have no right to interfere. You're just a slave.

"Tragus, stop this now!" Nerissa yelled as he turned back around.

Ignoring her, he cuffed the struggling child. He forced her legs apart and knelt between them. Nerissa didn't know if he'd raped little Eugenia yet, but her mind filled with black rage. Eugenia was even younger than Nerissa had been when she first came here. Her body was a child's.

Nerissa only noticed the empty sling dangling from her grip after she'd already used it. She let it fall as she bent to comfort the still screaming Eugenia. She checked Tragus for a pulse or breath, but there could be no doubt that he was dead. The whole back of his head was smashed in by her stone. Of all the warriors she'd ever slain, no strike was as true.

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Nerissa wrapped Eugenia in her torn chiton, took her by the hand, picked up her sling, and walked out of the cheese shed. She retrieved the still sleeping Eury from Hesper, then went into the house. She wanted nothing from here, but knew she'd need the clothes and fibula and lyre that Tragus had given her. They'd finance her escape. She also needed to change from this peplos, because she'd stained its hem with blood when she'd knelt to check Tragus.

I should cut my hair short, she thought as she saw the scissors on her bureau. No, it won't do any good. I'll still be very recognizable. Hesper will describe a pregnant woman with half a foot, accompanied by a two year old boy and ten year old girl. And if there's any doubt it's me, they'll just look for the scars across my breasts.

She put on a different peplos, then also got out one of Daphne's robes still stored in a chest. She persuaded Eugenia to change into it, then led her back to the horse cart. She lay down Eury, then reattached the traces that she'd started to take off.

"Sheep-fucker's dead, isn't he?" asked Hesper. She hadn't moved from her log. "And now you have to flee."

Her voice was back to normal now, a quiet rasp. *That's why Hesper was talking so loudly before, Nerissa realized. She was trying to warn Tragus that he should stop before I saw him.*

"Yes," she said to Hesper. "You should come, too. You might be blamed."

"I'll stay. Who'd believe I have the strength to kill him? Besides, it means that I belong to Tyrus now. Everybody knows that's the last thing I'd want."

"Then come with me."

"You'll be lucky if they only take your head. You stupid girl. Your mother was right -- you never should've stirred the swamp."

"He was raping Eugenia. It was bad enough what I endured. And you, when you were

younger. How could I let the same things happen to her?"

"Those who try to change the Fates' designs only make them worse. Old Tyrus will be Eugenia's master now. You can't imagine the things he likes to do. Miklos will suffer, too. Tyrus enjoys abusing boys as much as girls."

"Does he? I'll have to take Miklos with me. You should come, too."

"I'd be admitting guilt by running with you. Life has little flavor for me now, but I don't want to end it strangling on a rope. Is it too much to ask for a more dignified death than shitting myself while everybody watches?"

Nerissa didn't say another word. She climbed into the cart alongside Eugenia, who still was shaking like she'd just stepped from an icy stream. Nerissa hugged Eugenia until the girl's trembling eased, then picked up Eury, who'd now awoken to the anguished sobs.

The lingering darkness in Nerissa's mind told her it would be best to silence Hesper. With Tragus's field slaves rented down the road, the murders might not be discovered for a week. No guests or deliveries were expected, and Tragus didn't have the sort of friends who frequently dropped by. Certainly, no one ever came to visit Hesper. A well placed stone, a quick and painless end to the old woman's aching years would be the safest course... Nerissa couldn't bring herself to do it.

Hesper never did me any harm. Other than tell Tragus those times I escaped. And she had no choice. He might have beaten her to death. In fact, after he put the axe to me, she saved my life. It may have been for selfish reasons, but the truth is, everyone is selfish. We all do what's least painful. Like I'm doing now.

Hesper would report her crime, but Nerissa simply couldn't kill her. Not so much for the sake of her own soul. She couldn't do it in front of Eury. For some reason, he adored the querulous old woman. And poor Eugenia didn't need further trauma. So Nerissa just left Hesper sitting on her log, flicked the reins, and didn't look back as Arion pulled the cart.

Hesper would soon stir herself to report the murder. She'd want to be blameless in this matter. But at the pace she walked, it would take her all evening to reach the nearest neighbor.

It's another reason I can't leave Miklos here, realized Nerissa. Hesper will send him with a message.

But Hesper was right about one thing. A jury would say that anyone who fled the farm had participated in the murder. As she came in earshot of the pasture, she called to Miklos and waved him down. It occurred to her that Miklos was the same age as little Mavros would have been had he survived.

I should give him a choice to stay or come with me. But isn't anything better than

winding up the slave of Tyrus?

"Tragus is dead," Nerissa simply told him. "We're leaving the farm and I'd like you to come. We won't be back."

"What about the ewes?" This was Miklos's only concern.

"They'll be all right. The weather's fine, there's plenty of good grass in the field, and water in the creek, so they won't stray."

"What if wolves come?"

"I haven't seen one down from the hills in years. And the lambs are big enough that there's no danger from eagles."

"I'm glad... Where will we go?"

"I don't know yet. I have to think about it. Before we leave, you haven't stashed some treasured keepsake in the ewe shed, have you?"

"No, Mistress."

"I keep telling you, I'm not your owner. Please just call me Nerissa. Or Aunt Nerissa, if you like."

"Thank you, M-- You're very kind." He climbed into the back of the cart. "All set, Aunt Nerissa."

From Eugenia's teary face and Nerissa's frozen expression, Miklos could see that something very bad had happened. They wouldn't be grief-stricken if Tragus had died a natural death. Miklos didn't ask why they were running. He'd been a slave since birth, so he knew better than to expect explanations. Nerissa also knew it was better not to tell him. Miklos must have no knowledge of the murder, in the event that they were captured. She didn't have to tell Eugenia to stay quiet. She wondered if the girl would ever speak again.

"Good." She flicked the reins. This time, she did glance back. She'd done so much to build the farm. For two years now, it had been a good life. She'd miss this place. "We're off, may all the Gods protect us."



Nerissa headed toward Polis. With her cart, she could reach the port in half an hour. There was still plenty of light and Arion showed no sign of flagging. Maybe she and the children could leave Ithaca before the alarm went out about Tragus. If the tides weren't favorable to sail this evening, there was a good chance that the search tomorrow morning would concentrate toward Alalcomenae. Hesper knew she'd gone in that direction on her last two

flights.

They'd probably try the cattle farm of Architalos first. But Nerissa had known better than to seek help from Berenice. She couldn't put her friend's life at risk. Berenice was still a slave. They'd execute her, too.

Not finding her with Berenice, they'd check the Cave of Loizos. Hesper knew that she'd spent seven years there, living with the hermit. Nerissa hoped that he wouldn't get caught up in this.

She decided to seek out the navigator Psatos. No one would remember their connection. Inside the spice shop, he'd mentioned that he was embarking in the morning on a ship called the Euphremia. If word hadn't reached Polis about the murder yet, she could pay Psatos with her silver fibula for passage on his ship. It would be more than enough for him to take her and the children to Tyre.

She found the Euphremia easily enough, but Psatos wasn't on it. A sailor confirmed that they were sailing on the morning tide. Nerissa didn't dare try to buy berths from anyone but Psatos. The sailor directed her to the street where Psatos lived. He said the house was painted a dark blue/green, like deep water. She'd know it also by a large pear tree in front.

Nerissa returned to the wagon where she'd told Eugenia and Miklos to wait. Eugenia had finally stopped crying. She'd gone in back to sit with Miklos, who had his arm around her.

Nerissa clicked her tongue at Arion. Her good horse promptly started up the hill. As they turned onto a residential street, Nerissa kept the cart to a moderate pace, as if their errand were routine. Recognizing her, a few pedestrians nodded polite greetings. It wasn't the hour when she usually came to Polis, and she'd never brought the two young slaves before, but no one seemed to think her presence unusual.

She quickly found the house of Psatos. His pear tree was heavy with fruit. Their shape was similar to hers now that the growing infant was well along. She had a craving to eat one of the pears, but she resisted. There was plenty of food on the cart. They'd eat most of it tonight, inviting Psatos to join their feast. The raisin pastry and the garden salad would keep a day or two, despite this heat. She'd take them on the voyage.

Holding Eury, she knocked on the door. A tall, curly haired slave answered. Nerissa couldn't help noticing that he was a very pretty youth. His features were almost feminine. His delicately shaped lips and long eye lashes would be the envy of most women.

He went to summon Psatos, but didn't invite Nerissa inside. Psatos beamed with pleasure when he came to the door. Evidently, he was genuinely glad to see Nerissa again so soon. He ruffled Eury's hair. But when Nerissa asked if she might buy passage on his voyage,

Psatos refused. He claimed that the Euphremia's owner didn't allow him to take passengers aboard.

"Especially not women. My patron Aetes believes that females are bad luck at sea."

"I'd pay you well." Nerissa indicated the silver fibula she wore. "Aetes doesn't have to know."

"I'd like to help you, but my men will talk." Psatos looked past her shoulder at the cart. His eyes hardened as he considered what two young slaves might be doing on it. And why Nerissa was willing to pay a premium to suddenly leave Ithaca. "You'd do better to approach a captain who's the owner of his ship."

"I have permission from my husband, if that's what has you worried."

As far as Psatos knew, Tragus really was her husband. Most people in Polis assumed he'd freed and married her. Which meant that while she'd never be a citizen, she could mix into the population of valued foreigners allowed to live on Ithaca. That's why they treated her so respectfully these days.

"Who said I'm worried? As I told you, it's my patron's rule."

"Couldn't you oblige me just this once for old time's sake? Tragus wants me to bring my sister from Smyrna to join our household. I can reach there easily from Tyre. He's sent two of our slaves along to serve me on the voyage."

"I'm sorry, but no. Even if you bribed my crew not to tell Aetes, the Euphremia's very full this trip. We have no extra room."

Nerissa didn't press. She wished Psatos well on his journey and departed. He wasn't going to change his mind. He was already suspicious. He must think she was running from Tragus with her slaves. She didn't want him to guess her crime was murder. The sympathy he'd expressed about her treatment on the Thallia appeared to be quite limited. It certainly didn't extend to helping in a crisis.

She'd have to return to the port and ask if any other ships were sailing on the morning tide. She already knew the tide was in tonight and there was little wind. It all was in the Gods' hands now. If Olympus retained a trace of pity for her, she'd be able to leave Ithaca before Hesper spread word about Tragus. If not, there'd be as little mercy for her as any of her family knew while dying.

Nerissa turned the cart and headed down the hill. The sun was setting now, but there still was plenty of light to recognize faces. The wool merchant Leptos hailed her as she approached. His wife Theodora smiled and gave a friendly wave. What rotten luck, running into two of the few people in Polis who knew that she was still a slave.

“Sorry, can’t stop,” Nerissa called. “I stayed too long doing my errands. Tragus will wonder where I am.”

Theodora’s pleasant expression dropped. It was clear she thought Nerissa had been very rude. Leptos glared, equally offended. “The gall of that pallakeia!” he muttered to Theodora. “After we treated her almost as an equal.”

“Tragus doesn’t like me to drive on the road in darkness,” Nerissa added as she passed. Let them think what they wanted. She didn’t have time to stop and be polite. “The light will fail soon, and this horse is very slow.”

She continued to the port, then wasted half an hour learning that no other ship was due to sail in the morning. She thought of the shipyard’s owner Anapater, who seemed to remember her with fondness. Maybe he could get her onto one of his customers’ ships. But he was a council member. It was very improbable that he’d take such a risk for her. It seemed far more likely that he’d turn her over to his friend Theoton. Her former owner definitely wasn’t a man to trust.

Nerissa decided to ask among the fishing fleet. It anchored across the bay. By the time she reached their pier, they’d be coming in from sea. Surely some man in need of silver would agree to take them off Ithaca with no questions asked. Once she reached the mainland, she’d have more time to find a ship leaving for a distant port before pursuit from Ithaca caught up.

After she’d turned Arion again and gone back up the hill, another man hailed her. With the setting sun in her eyes, she couldn’t see who it was. Now she could make out the silhouettes of two men, one tall, one unusually short. The one who’d called had a very familiar voice. Friendly, finding the world a senseless, but amusing place. It reminded Nerissa of her grandfather. But that was impossible. He’d died when she was seven.

“A fine evening, Nerissa,” he said as if she’d answered. “Sir, it’s our old friend, the young lady who read your poem so well.”

As she drew close, Nerissa recognized Philemon. He’d looked short because he was so bent. His head was at the level of a sundial in front of someone’s house. Beside him was Homer. He appeared a good deal older now, his beard streaked through with silver. He must be forty-five or so, approaching the age when men who’ve survived this long are regarded as wise and venerable. But just as handsome as nine years ago, except for those strange eyes. The sun’s low rays reflected from them like the pearly inner surface of a scallop shell. This time, Nerissa wouldn’t dream of driving past without saying goodbye.

“It’s very good to see you both,” she said from her halted cart. “I’ve often thought of you.”

"We hear that you've done well," said Philemon. "People say your farm is prospering, and that you have a fine family, too. Just the other day, Linus the butcher mentioned you're expecting another child. Isn't that right, sir?"

Homer said nothing. He seemed lost in thought. If he'd noticed Nerissa's voice, he hadn't turned to face her.

"It happens that I'm leaving Ithaca tomorrow," Nerissa said. "I'm glad to have this chance to wish you well. Has there been any good news about, er--"

"About the court case?" finished Philemon. "No, in fact it's worse. Jeremos's father died. He's inherited a goodly sum."

"Why would that make things worse? If he's become rich, you'd think Jeremos wouldn't care about collecting Penelope's bride price."

"Come, now. You've seen enough of life to understand that isn't how it works. Now that he's wealthy, Jeremos is even more determined to protect his honor. Maybe Smyrnan society has avoided the sin of greed, but here on Ithaca, rich men are always after more of everything."

"No, it's the same."

"What did I tell you? Human nature. Even worse, Jeremos now has ample silver to bribe the council. Any day now, we expect they'll declare my master must forfeit himself."

"What, you mean Homer must become Jeremos's bondsman?"

"That's right. He has no remaining assets to satisfy these debts they claim. I offered to take his place, but the council says I have no value."

"But what of Theoton? Couldn't he advance Homer the money? He doesn't want to lose such a gifted tutor for his sons, does he?"

"Theoton won't help. His wife fears that the court's decision will bring scandal to her household. She said my master's easily replaced. In her opinion, one pedant's as worthless as another. She's ordered us to leave."

"That's terrible. Where will you go?"

"Not to Jeremos!" Homer spoke for the first time. "I'd rather dwell in Tartarus forever than turn myself over to that jackal."

"But you can't just walk the streets until they seize you," said Nerissa. "Maybe you should come with me."

"You needn't concern yourself with my troubles." Homer sounded as proud as ever. "I still have many friends."

Philemon sadly shook his head. He couldn't say it aloud, but the message was clear. All

friends had deserted Homer years ago.

“Sir, maybe we should consider leaving Ithaca with her,” said Philemon.

“Never. May I be despised by all Olympus if I run away from trouble. I’ll fight this battle until its cursed end.”

“Maybe the battle takes you to a different field,” said Nerissa. She couldn’t let this brilliant man wind up the slave of an oaf who’d tormented him for decades. “There’s something I must tell you. I’m in a great amount of trouble. If I don’t get off Ithaca by morning, I’ll be executed. I fear for what will happen to my little boy and my two charges. Not to mention the child growing in me.”

“What?” said Homer sharply. “What is this trouble, girl?”

As quickly as possible, she told him what had happened.

“Why are you still waiting?” Homer snapped at Philemon. “Help me up onto the cart. Can’t you see there’s no time to dawdle?”

Nerissa coughed to hide a smile. Then realizing Homer couldn’t see it, she dropped her hand. But her instinct had been right. She’d guessed she could convince Homer to leave Ithaca if she made him be the hero.

“Where are we going, sir?” asked Philemon.

“To my boat, of course.”

“What boat?”

“The racing boat they gave me for winning the Hekatombaion poetry festival at Athens. You forgot about that one, didn’t you? When the Iliad was new and Penelope fell in love with me. I kept the Tachytata because she’s just like one my father owned. She’s the fastest thing on Ithaca -- that’s how she got her name, of course. When you feel the wind and spray lash over you, it’s like you can become a great sea eagle swooping over his domain.”

“I’m sure she’s very fast, sir, but years ago, the court awarded your boat to Jeremos.”

“*Euphemeite!* I may have lost my sight and property, but I haven’t lost my wits. Of course I know that cur has title to the Tachytata now. What I meant is that she’s still kept at the northern pier. Unless that jackal’s ruined her, she can outrun all pursuit.”

“With a following wind. We don’t have oarsmen, sir.”

“I can feel the wind freshening right now. Stop flapping your gums and help me up. We leave tonight by moonlight.”

“Here, let me give you an arm, sir,” Nerissa said as she climbed down. “In case you haven’t noticed lately, Philemon might need some help up, himself.”

With assistance from Miklos, Nerissa boosted both Homer and Philemon onto the cart’s

bench. She waited until Miklos resumed his spot in back with his arm around Eugenia, then clicked at Arion to get him underway. But as they turned to the north, a woman came running up the street.

“Stop, you criminals!” she cried.

Nerissa blanched. Not that discovery should be a great surprise. Now that she'd returned to the familiar waters of ill fortune, she should have known that the worst possible things would always happen. Naturally, word had spread about her villainy before she could leave Ithaca. Someone must have come to see Tragus, after all. The visitor must have been on horseback. He must have hurried into town to spread news about this brutal murder.

Nerissa slapped the reins to speed up Arion as the woman screamed at them again. At least, she could outdistance one angry harridan. Soon enough, there'd be a mob of men, and they'd be armed. Nerissa tossed her sling out of the cart, so she wouldn't be tempted to use it. Then maybe they'd spare Eury, Eugenia, and Miklos.

“Fine then, run like cowards!” screeched the woman. “Run like the miserable thieves you are.”

As Nerissa looked back at her, the woman stopped at a cross street leading to the west. In the last rays of the setting sun, Nerissa recognized her. It was Dzunga. But she was rail thin now. Her face was drawn, her hair was cropped above her ears. It looked thin and dull, anything but the sleek black tresses Nerissa remembered. Theoton's household slaves were well fed, so it couldn't be from hunger. The last time Nerissa saw her, Dzunga had been downcast, but still voluptuous. She must have sickened after Phyllis had her sterilized. Either that, or the mutilation had left her with no appetites of any kind.

At that moment, Nerissa saw a youth catch up to Dzunga. With harsh words and a stern hand pointing down the street, he sent her home. Then, he ran after the horse cart, himself. Nerissa slapped the reins again, but the youth called out for Homer.

“Wait, sir, I'd like to say goodbye. Please stop. I have your things.”

The voice was deep, but it cracked on the last word. Nerissa stopped her cart. She'd realized who this was. The youth was tall, brown haired, and thin. Tall like his father, but too young to have much muscle. Still, he looked the picture of good health. The setting sun lit up his cheeks with a rosy glow. His narrow frame was only the normal thinness of sprouting adolescents.

“I packed this satchel for you, sir,” the youth said to Homer as he caught up. “I put in all your scrolls, your favorite stylus, your extra clothes, your drinking bowl, and plenty of new parchment.”

"But your mother insisted we leave all of that behind," said Philemon.

"Don't worry about my mother. I'm a man, and I'll say what my tutor may keep as his property."

"Thank you, Vasiledes," said Homer. "And thank you for bidding me goodbye. I wish you the best of fortune with your life."

"You, as well, wise sir. You were the best tutor I ever had. I'll miss our talks about the way of heroes. My little brother liked you, too."

"That's kind of you to say. And it might even be believable if young Dichophilos hadn't nodded off every time I lectured on the Trojan War."

Vasiledes laughed, handed the satchel over, then hopped onto the cart and clasped Homers' arms. He also said a warm farewell to Philemon. Nerissa could see that he was still a very considerate young man. Most children of the rich wouldn't have defied their mothers to return a hired man's possessions. And they certainly wouldn't have bothered saying farewell to a slave.

"It makes me very glad to see what a fine young man you've turned out," Nerissa said to him. "Stay with us a while as I drive. You always had a good heart, Vasy."

"No one calls me that any more. It's Vasiledes."

He sat up very straight as he gazed at Nerissa. But there was no arrogance in the young man's tone, only manly pride. Of course she realized that he was no child any more. He must have had his coming of age ceremony in the Temple of Ares earlier this year.

"I'm sorry, Vasiledes. I know that you're a man. It's just, you were very little the last time I saw you. I've thought of you so often over the years, I guess I'll always remember your beautiful, soft face as you slept in the nursery." She could picture it exactly on that morning half an hour before Tragus dragged her away. "You do know who I am, don't you?"

"Of course, Nessa. I think about you all the time. In my entire life, you were the only one who showed me any tenderness."

"That's not true. Your father loves you very much. I'm sure you remember how he sang to you and played and told you stories when you were small. And naturally you couldn't know this, but he'd kiss your brow when you were sleeping."

"I remember the singing and the stories. But that all stopped once you were gone. After that, he rarely came into the nursery. I think he was ashamed."

"It wasn't about you, Vasiledes. He was very proud of you."

"I suppose I always knew that. But it was hard to have my father's love snatched away so suddenly. In time, I came to realize Papa couldn't bear to come into the nursery, or even see

me outside it, because I reminded him of you. I asked Praegon why you were sent away. He said that you did something very bad. I never believed him, of course. I knew that it must be my mother's fault."

"It was both of ours. I wasn't blameless in this, Vasiledes. I'd started to fall in love with your father. Your mother wasn't wrong to feel I threatened her household's peace and stature."

"That's very generous of you to say. But I've long since learned the truth. My mother is a hateful woman. My father knows this, too. Their alliance is political, not personal."

"What do you mean?"

"You were sent away because of my Uncle Telander's vote."

"Telander is your uncle?"

Nerissa remembered the well-born councilman who'd been at Theoton's feast along with Aetes and Anapater. She'd never seen him again. Now that she thought about it, this seemed odd if he was a close relative.

"Yes, on my mother's side," said Vasiledes. "He's why Papa married her. As the most direct descendent of our ancient king, Telander's vote holds much weight on the council. And as you probably remember, my father hoped to change the government of Ithaca. He'd cultivated Telander, which brought Aetes along, as well. With his friend Anapater, Papa now controlled four votes. Often, he could win support from Nylos, too, because we bought much leather to use in our shields and armor. And Ductor, who owns the linen mill. But then, when Stenarch accused Papa of treason, Aetes's vote melted away."

"Yes, but your father said he wasn't worried. Stenarch couldn't buy the other votes, because that would be a capital crime, too."

"It was a lot closer than Papa let on. Nylos and Ductor both were wavering. If Telander deserted my father, they would have, too. Seeing her chance, my mother threatened that if Papa ever saw you again, she'd get Telander to switch his vote."

"Ah, that explains a lot. I always wondered why Theoton didn't buy me back from Tragus."

"He isn't an unfeeling man, you know. I wouldn't want you to keep that as your lasting image of my father."

"I know he's not. He did what he thought he had to."

"Papa loves this island more than anything. He believed he had no choice but let you go, or he'd never be able to lead the council in a new direction."

"And did he, Vasiledes? I've never heard anything about reforms."

"He'd like to, but he's stymied. The votes are still the same. Jeremos may have lived

most of his life in very common circumstances, but now that he's rich and sitting on the council, he's thoroughly determined to preserve the oligarchy's rights."

She felt better for the explanation. So Theoton hadn't been unfeeling, after all. He'd been forced to make a choice. Love of country had prevailed over romantic love. Again, she wouldn't have the choice and subsequent events be any different, if it meant she wouldn't have her children. She felt content to let the matter lie.

"What of you, Vasiledes?" she asked. "I see you've grown into a strong young man. Do you still plan to captain a ship?"

"Yes. It's always been my goal to visit distant nations. So I've trained my body hard. I know that there'll be many challenges, both at sea and ashore. I want to learn if there's a land where happiness is the normal state of men."

"That's a very worthy goal. I hope you find this place, and spread its lessons."

"I plan to... I have you to thank for helping me grow strong. I always remembered what you said about a captain. That he must be a good swimmer, so he can rescue drowning crewmen. I won the swimming competitions every year among my classmates. And this year, I won at the natatorium when men of all ages competed."

"Congratulations. I know you'll make an excellent captain. Your men will love you well."

"I hope so, Nessa. I mean, Nerissa. If I'm such a prat to insist you call me Vasiledes, the least I can do is use your full name."

"I don't mind. I always liked it. Your father used to call me Nessa, too... How is he, anyway? Apart from politics, I mean."

"He's very well. His manufactory makes many weapons now, in addition to the shields and armor. Now that I'm grown, I see him more. He knows I don't wish to take over the business, we've agreed that Dichophilos has much more of an aptitude, but I traveled with him to Sparta last year. We'd gained a very large contract for swords, and Papa wanted me to see how their young men are trained. And do you know, he murmurs your name when he's asleep. We shared a room while traveling. I heard it nearly every night."

"Ah. So he remembers me, too."

"Of course he does. It's the greatest regret of his life that he had to accede to Mother's spite because of Uncle Telander's vote. We never speak of it, but I can tell he loved you."

"You're kind to say so, but I think we both know the greatest regret of his life is that he couldn't bring demokratia to Ithaca... I don't think badly of him, you know. Your father's brilliant, a good man, too. He cares about his people. In time, I think this idea that he's planted

about equality will take firm hold.”

“I also think so, Nessa. If it hasn't by the time I must take up my family's council seat, I'll make it my first priority. Every time I see my cousin Myron, Telander's son, I work on him. The elder sons of Aetes, Ductor, Nylon, and Anapater, too.” He jumped down from the cart. “By the time we're on the council, I think we'll have the votes.”



“I wonder why Dzunga called me a thief,” Nerissa said to Homer after she'd said goodbye to Vasiledes. “My crime is murder. Unless she means I took this cart. Eugenia and Miklos, too. I could be charged with stealing them. But what's the point? If they catch us, I'll be hanged for killing Tragus, anyway.”

“She wasn't yelling at you, Nerissa. She meant me and Philemon.”

“Why, what did you do?”

“Nothing, but refuse to give back what's mine. I wasn't given the chance to collect the things that Vasiledes brought me, but Philemon happened to have my latest pages in his pouch. You still have them, don't you, Philemon?”

“Yes, sir. I have more than the latest verses. I have every book of the Odyssey that you've composed to date.”

“Your new epic?” asked Nerissa. “Why would Dzunga claim it's hers?”

“Not Dzunga. That damned Phyllis must've sent her. I used her husband's parchment for a new section. Phyllis owes me, anyway. For months, she's told her man Praegon to withhold my tutelage fee.”

“Lady Phyllis claims that we owe *her* for room and victuals,” said Philemon. “What did I tell you about the rich?”

“You're right. It seems ridiculously petty. If Phyllis only had the good sense to sponsor Homer's work, she might earn something far better than silver, a glowing name through all the ages.”

Nerissa longed to ask how the epic had progressed. This was anything but the time, however.

“You're kind to say so,” answered Homer. “Unfortunately, few share your good opinion... Perhaps men haven't sunken to such idiocy on Chios. I always found them an intelligent community, much beloved of verse. That's where we'll head.”

“Fine with me. Chios is near Smyrna. I'd like to see my homeland once before I die.”

“Oh, you won't die.” Homer's voice was very strong now, the same one that he used when he declaimed. “Not if I have anything to say about it... But there's one thing I don't understand about your flight.”

“What's that?”

“If your first stone knocked down Tragus like you did that time with Jeremos, wasn't it enough to stop him from raping the girl? Why did you have to kill him?”

“I didn't knock him down. I didn't stun him, either. I aimed to kill and that's what happened. The same way I aimed at Jeremos's foot and then his chest and then his thigh. None of those were lucky shots. I almost always strike my targets. When Tragus bent over poor Eugenia, I saw his greasy skull and wanted to explode it. I slung a single stone, a perfectly round one I'd saved for a long time. I have no excuse -- I chose to end his vile life.”

“You mean to say that you're an expert killer?”

“I've told you this. Through many tales, you heard me say that I've slain dozens who attacked my family.”

“Then all of it was true? I thought that you--”

“Embellished? I wish I had. I'd give anything if my worst crime was exaggeration. By my count, thirty-seven men and three women have died at my hands. They take their turns to haunt my sleep each night. Some singly, some in phalanxes. All with their gory wounds unhealed.”

“Ah, you must forgive me.” Homer looked away, just as he often did nine years before, seeing some dark scene from his past. “I know these dreams, myself. Before it ended in my blinding, I had a youth as violent as yours. Though I can't say I was the hero of my tale, as it seems you were in yours... And all this time, I thought it was your father.”

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They made haste through the quiet streets as dusk descended. Philemon called out turns until they reached the northern pier. Miklos helped down Homer and Philemon, while Nerissa lifted Eury from the cart. She told Eugenia to collect the amphora of lemon drink and covered bowls of food still on the cart. She borrowed Homer's empty sack to put them in, then gave it to Miklos. She patted her good horse Arion as tears welled in her eyes.

"I didn't mean what I said to Leptos about you being slow," she murmured. "You're fast and strong and very faithful. You should be numbered with your namesake among the immortal horses. I'll really miss you, boy."

He'd belong to Tyrus now, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Philemon pointed out the racing boat at the left end of the pier. Nerissa led them to it. By moonlight, the Tachytata looked to be in fine condition. She lifted Eury over its rail, then boosted Eugenia aboard. As Miklos was helping Homer, a man came running up the pier, carrying a torch. His face was scarred and he was missing his left arm. Probably an ex-soldier, now working as a watchman.

"Oi, you lot!" he shouted at them. "What do you think you're doing?"

"We're getting on my boat," said Homer.

"This boat belongs to Jeremos."

"He stole it from me, you mean. We're reclaiming my property."

"Wait, I know you. You're that addled poet. I heard about you at the tavern. They say you'll wind up Jeremos's slave."

"I have no interest in what your tosspot cronies say. This is my boat and we're sailing on it. Now get out of our way."

"By Hades' hairy shithole, I will not!" The watchman brandished his torch at Homer, unaware that he was blind. "Now climb on down. You too, missy. Bring the brat."

Nerissa saw more torches approaching on the street that led down to the pier. She heard a rumble of many voices. She knew that Dzunga must have disobeyed Vasiledes and alerted the town watch. She couldn't let this guard delay her people from escaping. She ran at the guard's back.

Hearing her step, the man began to turn. She slammed into his shoulder, knocking him into the water. His body, then his head went under. *Oh no*, she thought. *The water's deep. I've killed again. Hurling away the sling couldn't stop this blood lust in me.* Then she saw the man's arm break the water's surface, then his face. He seemed all right, bobbing on the wavelets. He wore no breastplate or greaves, so he was light enough to float.

"You can swim?" Nerissa called.

"Yes, may Triton ream you with his spear! I might've guessed a woman would use such a treacherous attack."

At least, he didn't say, "a slave." As the guard began to swim around the pier to reach the shore, Nerissa vowed she'd never again be anybody's chattel. She hurried Miklos and Philemon aboard. As she was urging the still fuming Homer to accept her assistance, a knot of men approached the pier. The moonlight still was low in the eastern sky, but Nerissa could make out about a score of them.

"They're coming, sir!" cried Philemon to Homer. "The town watch has all turned out. There's Stenarch in front. He has his sword."

"That pompous ass. I'm surprised he didn't take the time to strap on armor, too. Never been in battle, but ever since he bought his captaincy in the militia, he has to strut about like some great general."

"Get off that boat immediately!" shouted Stenarch as he stepped onto the pier. "You're all under arrest for aiding in this murdering slave's flight."

"Go back to your mine and count your drachmai," Homer retorted. "Maybe you've hoarded enough to buy a Titan's helmet. Just make sure it's large enough to fit your bloated head."

"Surrender immediately if you don't want your own head joining the slave's as it rolls across the orchestra floor."

"He should lose it anyway for thievery," said a very large man next to Stenarch.

"For parchment? That's only petty theft. At most, he'll lose a hand."

"For my boat. It's worth a fortune."

"Jeremos is here, too," Philemon said to Homer.

"Do you think I'd ever forget his noxious voice? I'm not surprised he's come. He's

moved into his father's town house ever since he came into his inheritance. He wouldn't dream of missing out on my disgrace."

Nerissa cast off the stern end's mooring line, then hurried in her uneven gait for the other at the prow. But Stenarch moved to intercept her. Because of her maimed foot, she couldn't run. Overtaking her in two long strides, Stenarch grabbed her by the shoulders. He was a big-bellied man, easily twice her weight. Nerissa struggled in his grasp until she got one arm free. Wheeling on him, she tried to punch him in the throat. But Stenarch bulled in close, then wrenched Nerissa's arm behind her back.

I'm dead, she thought. I'll never even get to hug Eury goodbye. Or see my daughter born.

She kicked her stump of a foot at Stenarch, got free for an instant. Despite her resolve that she must never kill again, she would have plunged a blade into his chest. But she had no weapon, only her two fists and one and a half feet. Stenarch lunged and bashed her in the temple. Grabbing her by the hair this time, he began to drag her off the dock. Nerissa cried a desperate farewell to Eury.

Someone crashed into them, releasing Stenarch's grip. She heard the clang of his sword falling on the wooden pier, then the grunts of two large men wrestling like bears. One rolled over her, pressing his knee into her back. She crabbed away, with her hands wrapped around her belly to protect the growing baby. She looked up to see that it was Homer grappling with Stenarch. As she gaped with shock, Homer closed his hand over the fallen sword. Stenarch rose to his knees and brought a knife out of his belt.

"Don't!" Nerissa shouted as she saw both men swing.

She heard the crash of metal as Homer's blow connected with Stenarch's helmet. The wealthy man went down and didn't move.

"Oh no!" she cried. "Why did you do that? Now you'll be executed, too."

"He won't die. I turned the blade to its flat side. Hear that, the jackal's breathing. Now hurry, girl. We have to go."

Nerissa retrieved the torch that the watchman had dropped on the pier. She helped Homer climb over the boat's rail. It seemed equally astonishing that he'd chosen to save her life as that a blind man had been able to fight so well.

"But how?" she asked him as she scanned the deck, searching for the sail locker.

"I wasn't always a poet," Homer answered with a touch of pique. "In my youth, I was a respected warrior."

"That's not what I meant." How could she say the obvious? That he needed a guide to

steer him everywhere. It was inconceivable that a blind man could defeat an armored swordsman. "How did you know where to attack?"

"You were screeching like a soaked cat as he dragged you. It wasn't hard to locate Stenarch. And he's a fool -- he should have scrambled away where he'd have every advantage. I can only fight an enemy if I can get close in."

"That was very brave of you. I thank you, Homer."

"Nine years ago, you came to my defense. I wanted to repay the debt."

She had the good sense not to mention that he'd chastised her for defeating Jeremos that other time.

"You're wrong, there never was a debt," she said. "But you were right about the wind. It's blowing out to sea a fair clip now. I need to get the sails up. Where are they kept?"

"They're coming, sir!" warned Philemon. "They're all rushing up the pier. Jeremos is leading them."

"Beg for mercy, Homer!" they heard the huge man cry. "Prostrate yourself like the base slave you are, or I'll gladly twist your scrawny neck."

"Never mind the sails!" yelled Homer. "Put another stone into Jeremos. Aim for his head this time."

"I mustn't kill again," Nerissa said. "I threw away my sling."

"I haven't," said Miklos.

He brought out a sling fashioned from a seed sack. Immediately, he whipped a stone at Jeremos. Striking him on the shoulder, it knocked the large man down. Nerissa saw the butcher Linus and the slave dealer Antechron struggle to drag him away as the whole militia scrambled back in panic. Fortunately, they were only townsmen. No professional soldiers among them. There hadn't been war here in centuries.

"How did you learn to do that?" Nerissa asked Miklos.

"I saw you hunting hares one day. I made a sling and practiced. I kept at it every day, until I became good enough to scare off eagles when the ewes were lambing. I learned to store the sling and a good stone in my tunic."

"That was a fine shot. I'm glad you didn't strike his head."

"I was aiming for his leg."

"It was a good shot anyway in this wind. If they grow bolder and advance, keep aiming for their legs. But you'll need more stones. Go down below and find some in the ballast."

"Yes, Mistress. I mean, Aunt Nerissa."

"Eugenia, you go with Miklos. Take this torch the watchman dropped. After you get the

stones, go around and light the weather lamps aboard.”

“Yes, M-- Should I call you Aunt Nerissa, too?”

“That would be nice. I'd like it very much.”

She realized that this was her household now. The two youths had joined Eury and the baby growing in her belly. Not to mention Homer and old Philemon.

“Where are the sails?” she asked Homer.

“The locker's at the prow,” he answered. “But who will man the Tachytata? I once owned a crew for races, but they're all gone, of course.”

“If you believe my stories, I have more than a little experience.”

“Yes, I believe you, Nerissa... But even if you know what to do, who'll carry out your orders?”

Homer was right. What an unlikely crew they made. Two children, a toddler, a relic, a blind man, and a pregnant woman.

“We'll do the best we can. Eugenia and Miklos both are strong. Young people always make good climbers. The lines are all in place; the mast appears in good condition. We only need the sails. I can't say where we'll go once we leave the bay. Father never taught me navigation.”

“Leave that to me,” said Homer.

“But you're--”

“Blind? I wasn't always. I remember every star and island and coastline I ever saw. With Philemon's assistance, I'll man the helm.”

Nerissa broke out the sails. They were in good shape, too. While Miklos held back the militia with his stones, she attached sails to the rigging. Fortunately, the militia had no archers. As she sent Miklos and Eugenia up the ratlines to extend the sails, Nerissa reluctantly took over the sling. But she couldn't bring herself to aim at the townsmen's bodies, so she sent her stones whizzing over their heads.

As they got underway, six men came rushing up the pier. They were armed with spears and shields. Stenarch must have revived and sent a runner to the armory. Nerissa pelted them as rapidly as possible, but they advanced in phalanx, covering their heads and bodies. As she reloaded for a tenth time, one stood up and flung his spear. It struck so close to Philemon, he screamed. She saw that it had nipped the corner of his chiton, pinning him to the cabin's wall.

Homer reached down, yanked it out, then flung it back. It struck one of the shields. Another amazing feat for a blind man, she thought. She'd really underestimated him. All these years, she'd had an image of Homer as a hopeless intellectual. Brilliant, but useless when it

came to taking a stand. In truth, he was courageous and incredibly resourceful.

Handing Eury to Homer, she asked him to take the boy below. She knew he'd never leave the fight otherwise. It would also remove Philemon from danger, since he had to lead Homer down the hatchway.

The wind filled their sails and they slowly gained momentum. The next time one of the phalanx stood up, she knocked the spear out of his grasp. He yelped shrilly. She saw that it was Antechron. The slave dealer who'd once ripped open Berenice's peplos.

I've broken his arm, Nerissa thought. *Well, he can thank me that it's not a broken head.* Another man stood up and cocked his arm. In the moonlight, she recognized his face. It was Caphates, the foreman at Ductor's linen mill.

Since he didn't live in Polis, she guessed what must have happened. Caphates had come to see Tragus about some detail of his flax delivery. He'd learned of the murder, then ridden into Polis and alerted Stenarch, captain of the militia. Stenarch quickly learned from Phyllis that her slave Dzunga had seen the fugitives in a wagon heading for the northern pier.

Nerissa sent her stone a fraction wide this time. Feeling it brush the hairs on his arm, Caphates ducked back beneath the shields without hurling his spear. She had nothing against Caphates and didn't want to injure him. He'd been very nice to her when he came to the farm a month ago to buy their crop of flax. He'd even spent half an hour that evening catching lightning bugs for Eury.

The Tachytata's speed increased as a wind out of the east picked up. Nerissa steered due west into the bay's deep water. Except for Antechron, the phalanx all stood up and flung their spears. One sliced through a sail, but no one was injured. Nerissa held the helm steady as they made for the shadowy shape of Kefallinia. After she rounded that large island, she'd call Homer above. He'd know where they should go next.



"It's best to round Ithaca and head for the mainland," Homer advised. "There, our enemies will have to guess which of many ports we've reached."

Unfortunately, this proved impossible, since the wind held strong to the west.

"What do we do now?" Nerissa asked.

"We must continue straight to Kefallinia," said Homer. "If we had oarsmen, it would be different, but all we can do is let her run before the wind."

As they left the bay, Nerissa saw many lights from torches in the shape of a bireme

coming after them. Stenarch must have taken the militia onto one of Ithaca's war galleys. In calm air, it could easily overtake them, but as long as the wind blew hard, Homer's boat would stay well ahead.

But now they couldn't dock at Kefallinia. This pursuit destroyed her hope of quickly finding passage on an ocean-going ship. At best, Stenarch was only a quarter hour behind. Past Kefallinia, there was no landfall in the wide Ionian Sea until Sicily and wild Etruria.

Worse, the torches appeared to be gaining steadily on her. Nerissa glanced up and indeed her sails were luffing. The wind had paused, as suddenly as it began. She turned the helm a half point to the south. The slack sails puffed a bit, but still Stenarch gained on her.

I beg thee, merciful Athena, Nerissa prayed. I know I've sinned. I've killed the man who's been a husband to me. I've deprived my child of his father. I should have left Tragus's punishment to you. But I don't ask this favor for myself. The others on this boat are innocent. Scourge me in full suffering when we're far away from Ithaca. But please, Blessed Mother, Thou Who Never Loses the Day, grant me strength and knowledge to save these five blameless people.

Athena turned away. Nerissa's words fell drowning in the moonlit water. The wind died down to nothing and the torches gained. She could hear the slap of rowing now. A staggered sound, unpracticed. Stenarch must have been lax about drilling his militia on the oars. While Ithaca owned numerous municipal slaves to serve the temples and clean the streets and work the docks, none were trained to man the bireme.

Still, it gained on them relentlessly. She sent Miklos and Eugenia aloft with the rounded third sail. She told them to set it forward of the mast as they ran before the wind. With the strong gale before, this extra canvas might have snapped the mast, but now she needed to catch all the wind she could.

It made little difference. The bireme gained ten stadia on them each minute. Nerissa could hear their voices now. Stenarch braying at his oarsmen to increase their stroke. Jeremos crying out the vengeance that he'd take.

Nerissa could see their oars flash in the moonlight. She cut a sling from extra sailcloth so she could join Miklos in bombarding the bireme. It would do little good, she knew, but she must emulate Athena and fight on to the end. She had no illusions that it would restore her in the Goddess's favor. Athena would look elsewhere as the bireme's iron ram smashed into the Tachytata.

Maybe if they see me tie a heavy stone around my neck and leap into the sea, they'll spare the others. Maybe Stenarch will consider my death enough and call off his attack.

A flight of arrows quashed this thought. Soaked in pitch, they flamed brightly as they

arced. Stenarch must have pressed into service all of the men in Polis who possessed war bows.

He intends to burn us to the water line.

The arrows fell short, but not by much. Nerissa hobbled around the boat, extinguishing all its lamps. She turned the helm sharply to port, hoping to escape into the darkness. But the moonlight was too bright.

They can see us nearly as well as we see them with all their torches blazing.

Another flight of arrows proved that she was right. Two of the burning missiles lanced into their strakes. She lowered a bucket on a rope, hauled up water, and extinguished these two arrows. As soon as Miklos came down from the mast, Nerissa had him fill more buckets. She lined them along the rail in readiness.

The next flight of arrows mostly found the deck. No one was hit, because she'd sent them all below. She extinguished the fires with little trouble, but knew that the bireme's archers would soon come into range to hit the Tachytata's sails. Dry, they'd catch fire very quickly. The burning canvas would be impossible to extinguish. Fire would spread to the mast and decks as the blazing pitch dripped down. Now, it was too late to send Miklos and Eugenia back above. She'd made a ruinous mistake leaving the sails up. This light wind was doing them no good. It was no more their ally than the Minotaur had been on the side of Heracles.

"Stop now, or burn to death!" they heard Jeremos call across the waves. "Maybe a jury will spare you, Homer. Anyone can see that you've become demented. We show mercy to those whose minds are not their own to rule."

"No, you'd be fortunate to burn or drown!" cried Jeremos. "You'll not survive this night! If you escape the flames and water, I'll cut you into dog meat for what you did to my Penelope."

Homer didn't answer. He didn't even turn in the direction of his enemies' voices. He simply stared away at the black things only he could see.

Oh, sweet Athena, I know I've wronged you intolerably, prayed Nerissa. I've caused you grave offense. But life is learning, isn't it? My father taught me that. Asclemelion loved knowledge and so do I. For the sake of those aboard who've never caused you pain, teach me what I must do here.

She looked up to beseech the sky. There was no answer from the Goddess. Only bright Selene, who was allied with Stenarch. Another flight of arrows struck the boat. Nerissa managed to extinguish them all, including one that stuck into the mainsail's bottom corner. The moon shone on as she gazed up. The wind died to a whisper. No sacred owl came to rescue her, only a flight of terns, winging home to Kefallinia. Athena had abandoned her entirely. Whatever hope Nerissa harbored vanished like a grievous sigh.

But wait. The terns had also vanished. Nerissa studied the vaulted patch of night intensely. The flock was gone. One moment they were racing Selene's team of silver horses, the next moment, they'd been swallowed by a famished sky.

Nerissa continued staring at the spot. Its hunger seemed to grow. And with it, a swirling darkness. From the north, it blotted out all light...

And then she understood. It was a bank of fog. Athena hadn't scorned them, after all. She'd sent the terns as guides.

With every bit of strength cached in her now-free arms, Nerissa wrestled the wheel all the way to starboard. What little wind there was came from the south-east. But still, her struggle went for nothing. She'd never reach the fog in time before they were ablaze.

She called the others up, except for Philemon, who must remain below with Eury. She had no choice but risk the others' lives. Together with Homer, Miklos, and Eugenia, she attached the racing oars to their pivots and thrust them through their port-holes. They rowed like demons across the glassy sea. Homer was very strong, and in her desperation, Nerissa nearly matched his power. Miklos and Eugenia had worked hard all their lives, and though they weren't full grown yet, their rowing made a contribution.

Another flight of arrows smacked into the deck and sails as the first wisps of mist caressed their faces. Nerissa had Miklos and Eugenia run around extinguishing the fires with water from the buckets, while she and Homer pulled the oars so hard, steam rose up from their handles.

They slipped into the fog like the spirit of an ancient ship. Nerissa felt the shade of staunch Odysseus pulling on the oar beside her. Five years or five hundred after Troy, he never quit. But she signaled him to stop, then spoke a soft word to Homer. Now, their greatest asset would be silence. As Miklos and Eugenia came back from their task, Nerissa put a finger to her lips. The children understood they mustn't speak or move from where they sat. Before he went below, she'd told Philemon he must be careful to stay quiet. Even Eury understood. Down in the hold, he rested silently in old Philemon's arms.

They drifted in the fog for hours. They all felt terrified that it would lift or that they would be found. The wet murk that protected them was also their dank prison. They could see nothing further than their hands. Each creak of their ship seemed like the first sound of Stenarch approaching. Here in the dense fog, they all knew he was always just one turn from crashing into them.

Nerissa made the others eat, though no one had much appetite. Then she sent everyone to sleep, claiming the first watch as her privilege. She didn't plan to wake anyone until morning.

After less than an hour, Homer came up to join her. He said he couldn't sleep. Nerissa thought it very kind of Homer to keep her company. No one would expect him to take a watch.

She longed to ask about his poem. But sound could travel a great distance in the fog, she knew. Still, it shredded her nerves to simply sit here voiceless. She edged next to Homer, until their arms were touching. It would be all right if they only whispered.

Before she could ask about the tale of desolate Odysseus, Homer put his lips against her ear. He asked her to relate the story of her last nine years. Nerissa told him everything, including the maiming of her foot, her near death, and her impregnation while delirious with fever.

Unexpectedly, the long tale helped allay her dread of discovery. Not only the realization that she'd already overcome worse obstacles than this. But feeling Homer's indomitable strength beside her gave her hope. He was a man who always would endure to finish what he'd started, despite blindness, poverty, and the ridicule of lesser men.

"You mentioned composing a long epic in the Cave of Loizos," Homer said when she was finished.

"It would take hours," said Nerissa.

"That's exactly what we have," said Homer. "This fog shows no sign of leaving."

"All right," Nerissa said. Then she began whispering the epic verse committed to her memory.

She didn't finish until dawn's light seeped into the mist. Homer sat motionless until the end.

"And what of your father?" he finally spoke. "You've told me what happened to each member of your family. It seems that only you and Chloe remained alive to reach the distant land of Scheria. Did Asclemelion die like your mother, Aristides, and Mavros on Laestrygon?"

"Oh, did I fail to say how we lost Father? That's odd. I thought I had."

Nerissa searched back in her memory, but found she couldn't recall mentioning his death. In fact, she couldn't picture how he'd died at all.

"He was with us on the raft. I know he was, because he's the one who helped me pull Chloe aboard after I found her floating in the wreckage. And it was Father who spotted the sail, rowed to it, dragged it from the sea, and spread it to collect rain water. Then he saved the water carefully, just as he'd done that time we were becalmed. He meted sips to me and Chloe every hour. And kept our spirits up with songs and verse and stirring tales. But now that I think back, it's strange, I can't remember Father taking a single sip, himself... And then one day, I tended Chloe all alone. Father simply wasn't there.

“Oh, heartless Fates! I see it now. I see the guilt I'd banished from my mind. He gave us all the water, waited until we slept, then allowed himself to slip into the sea. He did it so that we might have a better chance to live. And I wasn't so young or innocent that I didn't guess his plan!

“Now do you understand what sort of fiend I am? And why I deserved everything I suffered at the hands of Captain Hycron and Tragus? I killed both my mother and my father, the most noble, selfless people on this earth. The only wonder is that the Gods haven't devised a harsher punishment for me.”

Homer placed his calloused palms on Nerissa's cheeks. She was surprised that they were rough, not the soft hands of a scholar. He held her face as if he were a peasant asked to hold a marble bust of great antiquity and value. Though he stared at her with sightless eyes, Nerissa knew he saw her as she really was, with all her monstrous flaws and empty places.

“You're anything but a fiend, Nerissa. You're an exceptionally brave woman with so much grief to bear, you've chosen to trade the largest part for penitence. But now I understand from whence your courage comes. Your father was a hero, too. May Asclemeleon's name live on forever in your verse.”

“But how can it? I'm no poet and no scholar. In all my life, I've read only a handful of scrolls. I know only the rudiments of composition.”

“You've been divinely touched,” said Homer.

“What nonsense. You're very kind to say so, but my poem is merely doggerel I carved to ease my boredom those long years in the cave.

“You couldn't be more wrong. All these years, I've tried to make Odysseus's tormented path sing with endurance and despair. What a stupendous fool I've been! All I ever had to do was come and hear your epic. Imagine, what arrogance I've harbored. I blush at how I lectured you on the qualities of epic heroes. You are the master, Nerissa, while I'm but an awkward student.”

“No, it's the opposite,” she answered. Could Homer really have such a high opinion? She'd never allowed herself the hubris of imagining his approval. “If there's any merit to my verse, it's because I wrote it as you would. Your voice has never left my thoughts... You thought my lines flowed well? I made every effort to obey your meter.”

“There was one place I thought you misperceived the rhythm of Calliope.”

“I'm sure that there were many places.”

“A few, perhaps. But this one sticks out in my mind:

*Odysseus! Ah, wert thou allowed to know
What Fate has doomed thee still to undergo,
Thy heart might settle in this vale of ease.
And O, these slighted charms might learn to please.
A willing goddess, and immortal life.
Might banish from thy thoughts an absent wife.*

“But Homer, that’s one of my best verses. I took my experience with the hermit, but made him be a nymph holding Odysseus a captive of her love. When Athena’s messenger Hermes finally persuades Calypso to free Odysseus, I thought I captured exactly what she’d say to him.”

“You did. But I’d make a few changes, thus:

*But ah, Odysseus! wert thou given to know
What Fate yet dooms thee still to undergo,
Thy heart might settle in this scene of ease.
And e'en these slighted charms might learn to please.*

“What of the last two lines?” Nerissa asked as irritation crept into her voice.

“They’re fine.”

“So are the others. I like them just the way I wrote them.”

“‘Vale’ is inaccurate. Your poem describes a rocky island.”

“All right. If you insist, let the word be isle.”

“Fine, then. But ‘given’ is better than ‘allowed.’ That’s how knowledge is received.”

“You’re quibbling. I thought you liked my poem.”

Nerissa realized that her voice had risen. They were no longer whispering. They’d backed away, no longer touching. So soon after their reunion, despite the danger that they shared, she was already growing angry. Homer hadn’t changed a bit. He remained the most infuriating man she’d ever known.

“Your poem is excellent. I’m merely trying to perfect it. After all, it’s my poem, too. You’ve borrowed my ancestor Odysseus.”

“I didn’t borrow him.” She forced her voice back to a whisper. “I composed this epic as a gift.”

“A gift to whom?”

“To you, of course.” She regarded Homer’s noble features in the shimmering dawn light. And his eyes, more unsettling than she’d ever noticed. “All right. To me, as well. I would have lost my mind those seven years if I hadn’t put it to this task... My son Eury likes the story, anyway.”

“I never said I didn’t. The tale is brilliant, of course. I could have done no better. No, let us speak unvarnished truth. I would have done much worse. I tried many times; I stole your tales, but couldn’t begin to fit them to my hero.”

“Then what’s this new verse you wrote on Theoton’s parchment? Have you abandoned poor Odysseus?”

“No, I struggle on. But my verses tell the story of what happens to his wife and son in Ithaca while he’s away.”

“I’d love to hear it, Homer. I’ve wondered countless times over the years what you’ve done with your epic.”

“I’ll have to wake up Philemon. I don’t have your memory and much of this was written years ago.”

“No, let him sleep. I’d rather hear it in your voice. Just recite the parts that you know well.”

“All right. Though I’m not used to whispering.”

“It’s true -- you have such a ringing tone when you declaim. It’s echoed all these years for me. But there also is great power in your written words. So let them claim their birthright with a murmur.”

And Homer did. He told of Odysseus’s faithful wife Penelope and the horde of suitors oppressing her. Of her son Telemachus and his determination to rid the household of this plague. Of a plot hatched by Antinous to assassinate the princeling. Of the Gods’ debate on whether they should aid Odysseus. Of how Athena went to Telemachus, shored up his confidence, and persuaded him to excoriate the suitors. Of how the Goddess sent him on a journey to seek Odysseus’s old comrades Nestor and Menelaus and how he hears word of his father’s travels. Of how Odysseus received aid to travel home. Of how he disguised himself as a beggar at Ithaca, learned of the suitors’ perfidy, allied with Telemachus to slay them all, revealed himself to Penelope, destroyed the household of the traitor Antinous, and restored peace to the kingdom.

“You’ve done an enormous amount of work,” Nerissa said when Homer finished. “If you could see my face, you’d know it’s glowing through the mist with awe.”

“For what? I’ve failed. My tale is only half an epic. My time on earth has been as wasted as my ancestor Odysseus’s life.”

“What do you mean?”

“After everything his hardships should have taught him, he blundered to the end.

Odysseus dreamed his son would slay him, so he exiled Telemachus to Kefallinia. But his other son, Telegonus, whose mother was the abandoned Goddess Circe, came to war on Ithaca. When Odysseus battled with him, Telegonus killed the hated father whom he'd never known. It was an agonizing death, because Telegonus's weapon was a stingray's tail. Then Telegonus wed the widowed Penelope... Don't you see? His pride and inability to see the truth brought ruin on Odysseus, just as I've done to myself.”

“Oh, Homer. You couldn't be more wrong. Can't you understand the Goddess's design?”

“Athena? I know you cherish Her, and so do I, but--”

“Your epic must be why the Goddess has arranged for us to find each other. It seems I have the other half. Deeply flawed as it may be.”

“It wasn't flawed. Your verse was beautiful, Nerissa. Please don't be offended that I made suggestions on a handful of your lines. As I recall, you weren't the least bit reluctant to do the same to mine.”

“You're right. I don't know why I snapped at you. It must be from the tension of this long night's wait.”

“It was entirely my fault. I should have known better than to criticize such an inspired work. But I feel the strain of waiting, too. Hour after hour, I sit believing this will be my last night on the earth... And yet, I feel wondrously fortunate to spend it with you.”

“You do? I'm the one who's fortunate. I feel blessed to breathe the air that's touched your genius. I've memorized your Iliad, you know. For eight years after I heard part of it, I longed to learn the rest. I have it right now, tucked inside my peplos. I found a copy at the scriptorium in Polis. Tragus allowed me to buy it as a birthday present, though I didn't dare tell him the author's name. After I read it aloud, I read it many other times, until I knew every word. With such inspired writing, it's no wonder you won the poetry prize at the Apturian Festival.”

“Oh, that. It seems a lifetime past. If anyone's inspired by the Muse, it's you. I can feel Euterpe's aura all around you. And I don't need eyes to see the rest of wise Athena's plan.”

“You mean the way Her mercy's held? That She's allowed us to stay inside this cloud until dawn light?”

“It's dawn, is it? The world's so quiet, I thought it must be night.”

“No, the light is rising fast.”

“I don't hear any seabirds.”

“They can't work the water until this mist burns off. But you're right, we're all alone out here. I can see a good distance now, and there are no other vessels. We can sail toward the mainland. Is that what you meant by Athena's plan for us?”

“In part. But I think Her principal intention is that we must be partners. If you don't mind me working on your verse, just as you'll work on mine.”

“Not at all. In that way, we'll complete the story of Odysseus, and mine as well. That's what I longed for in the Cave of Loizos. In fact, I think that we'll complete your story, too. Telemachus represents you, doesn't he? Oh, by the loom of miraculous Athena. Now I see it! What an intricate design She's woven. This battle with your mother's suitors is how you became blind.”

Omega

They followed an easterly breeze to the mainland port of Stratos. There, Homer consulted a Chandler in the market across from the famed Temple of Zeus. He quickly learned of a leading citizen who was known to enjoy boat racing. Within an hour, he'd found the man, shown off the Tachytata, and come to an arrangement. The deal they struck was far short of what the boat was worth, but the heavy bag of silver restored a good deal of the sum that the Ithacan council had forced him to pay Jeremos.

With a small part of this money, Nerissa secured passage for all of them on a coastal freighter departing at noon for Korinthos. She bought provisions in the market, then hustled everyone aboard. They traveled all afternoon through the Gulf of Corinth, and reached the handsome city with an hour of light still left in the sky.

Nerissa stopped briefly at the magnificent Temple of Aphrodite, perched high on the acropolis of Korinthos. The Goddess of Love had been sacred to Aunt Melissa. After finishing her prayers, Nerissa approached one of the famed hetaerai, who assumed she wanted to arrange a tryst for Homer.

"I'm very expensive," she warned, noting Homer's humble clothing.

"No, it's not that," Nerissa said. She reminded herself to tell Homer he must buy a new chiton and chlamys as soon as possible.

After mentioning she was the niece of Cythera, a noted hetaera in Smyrna, Nerissa learned the quickest way across the isthmus. They followed the same route by which ships were hauled on sledges over the ridge to the port of Isthmia on the Saronic Gulf. From here, they could resume their journey across the Aegean Sea.

Once they reached Isthmia, Nerissa found a merchant captain willing to take them to Chios. His ship would sail upon the morning tide. That night, they stayed at a reputable inn that the hetaera had recommended. It was a cheerful place, where they enjoyed a good meal in a

pleasant courtyard.

For the first time in her adult life, Nerissa experienced what it felt like to be free. Miklos asked why she'd smiled all through deipnon, but she simply tussled his wavy hair. Any spoken answer would have fallen far short of the joy that came from sharing simple pleasures with those closest to her in the world. She'd miss Berenice, of course. And she wondered if she'd ever have the chance to meet Vasiledes, again. But it felt so good to sit here with her loved ones. She realized how fortunate her life had turned.

Though Nerissa would have been happy to sleep in the common hall, with its clean straw and well-banked fire, Homer paid extra so they could all lodge in a private room upstairs. He said that it was necessary to stay away from strangers, but Nerissa doubted this was his chief concern. It seemed that with his purse restored, Homer had regained his distaste for low-born neighbors.

It didn't lessen her admiration for his character and talent. Once the others were asleep, Nerissa encouraged him to tell the story of his youth. Homer had a very hard time beginning. For a proud man, he seemed especially uncomfortable talking about himself.

Little by little, she coaxed out the details of his background. He was the only surviving son from a lesser branch of Ithaca's ancient nobility. The king, his great, great great-grandfather, had been deposed over a century before Homer's birth. But his father Hippomachus had retained his lands and served as leader of Ithaca's battle fleet.

Hippomachus was a stern, but learned man, a faithful husband, and extremely conscientious in his duties as a father. He'd trained Homer in the art of war, and also oversaw his education in all forms of knowledge. He'd employed tutors in literature, geography, philosophy, and rhetoric. At seven, Hippomachus brought Homer on a journey to Egypt. En route, he'd instructed Homer in seamanship and navigation. It was the one occasion when they'd spent much time together.

Homer's mother Leucania was a celebrated beauty, daughter of a wealthy merchant. A most religious woman, she'd taught Homer to love the Gods. From her, he'd learned extensively about their genealogies, their rivalries, and intrigues. Leucania was a loving mother, as soft-hearted as Hippomachus was severe.

When Homer was fourteen, Hippomachus led his men to war on the island of Euboea as an ally of Chalcis. Though news came back that they'd defeated the Eretrians on the Lelantine Plain, Hippomachus's ship did not return. They never learned its fate, but likely, it sank in a storm.

As a wealthy woman, presumably a widow, Leucania was courted by Aetes, the most

powerful man on Ithaca's council at the time. Though Aetes was far from a rogue, Leucania refused him for many years. And though it was only one man, not a plague of suitors, Homer chafed at this man's constant visits to their hall.

At last, when Homer was seventeen, Aetes forced a vote on the council to declare Hippomachus dead. He then demanded an answer from Leucania on his marriage proposal. When she still refused, he threw her over his shoulder, stormed out of the house, and mounted his horse with Leucania before him on the saddle.

This was too much for Homer, who attacked. Hurling into them before Aetes could leave, he knocked them from the horse. He drew his knife and told Leucania to return inside. Aetes merely shoved her back against the horse and laughed at Homer. So Homer lunged with the knife, but Aetes was a battle veteran. Homer quickly learned that real fighting was nothing like his father's drills. Aetes dodged the strike and swung his sword. Homer fell and then lay motionless.

"You obviously didn't die," Nerissa said.

"No, he struck me with the flat side of his sword, like I did with Stenarch."

"But Aetes beat you with one swing. I thought you said you were a well-respected warrior."

"That was later. At this time, I was only a thin youth, whose height and pride had far surpassed his strength."

"What happened to your mother?"

"Aetes forced her back onto his horse."

"He married her?"

"I didn't give him time."

"But how did you stop him?"

"When my tutor Mentor came that afternoon, he saw me lying in the dirt. He revived me, then I ordered him to get our slaves ready for a long journey. I went to the estate of Aetes, then crept around to the women's quarters. I knew he wouldn't have touched my mother yet, because he'd want the marriage to be seen as legal. Aetes had few guards posted, since he didn't expect retaliation. My father's kinsmen all had vanished with him. My uncles from my mother's side, as well. And certainly Aetes expected no trouble from me. He assumed that I was still unconscious, or at best, terrified of him."

"Wait a minute. Aetes died this spring, I heard. And Philemon said that Jeremos recently inherited his father's fortune. Is he the son of Aetes?"

"That's right. Our feud's continued to this day."

"Is he your half-brother, then? Through your mother?"

"No. You interrupt too much. Just let me tell the story."

"Sorry."

"I suppose you can't help yourself. It's a storyteller's natural curiosity. Like mine..."

At any rate, it was dusk by now, and I went through a window. A young slave girl saw me, but she hated Aetes as much as I did. I think he must have deflowered her. She didn't say a word as I led my mother out. We rode back to our house, where Mentor had everything ready for departure. We left in a war galley that was being repaired at the time my father left for Chalcis."

"But wait. There's one thing I don't understand. If Jeremos is the son of such a prominent man, why was he poor until his inheritance? For goodness sake, he used to be the executioner. And when I stopped him from attacking you that day when we first met, he was wearing homespun cloth."

"His mother was a slave. When Aetes lost Leucania, no other woman was ever good enough for him to marry. He made Jeremos his heir, but kept him no better than a tenant farmer all his life."

"No wonder he hates you. It wasn't only about your betrothed Penelope, was it?"

"He blames me for embittering his father. It's perverse logic, clearly, since he wouldn't have been born at all had Aetes married my mother. But there you are. Jeremos is a moron."

"You haven't explained what happened to your eyes. Did you have another fight when you returned to Ithaca? Was it with Jeremos this time?"

"Nobody bothered with me when I returned. My mother had long since died, and Aetes had no desire to prosecute me in a trial."

"For what? *He* assaulted *you* and kidnapped your mother."

"Yes, but I attacked him first. Broke into his house, too, and took the woman with whom he had a valid marriage contract."

"But your mother never agreed."

"She didn't have to. The council had sanctioned their marriage... Still, by the time I returned, Aetes had little interest in punishing me. He'd already confiscated all my father's property. I suspect he thought reopening the issue would stain his name, as well. He didn't even object when I moved into a vacant cottage my father once owned."

"If there was no further violence with Aetes, and you didn't fight with Jeremos, what happened to your eyes?"

"It was the original fight with Aetes, but my sight didn't fail for years. Sometimes it would be blurred as a result of Aetes's blow, and I experienced severe headaches many days

each month. But mostly, I was able to manage well.

“My training in seamanship and navigation produced an uneventful trip to Cyme, the homeland of my mother's family. I grew, became a warrior, and saw action in a host of battles. But every year, my eyesight deteriorated. I'm convinced that the blow from Aetes weakened some connection between my eyes and mind.

“Finally, when I lost my sight entirely, it was a staggering thing to bear. I could fight no longer and I couldn't sail. I wished that it had been my life I'd lost and not my eyes... Sometimes, I still do.”

“But you can't mean that, Homer. You've accomplished wonderful things with your life. If you'd lost it, the world would never have your poetry.”

“Maybe so, but darkness is an evil thing. Those born blind might bear it well, but when you've known the light and beauty and all the things that young men savor... compared to a black world, death often seems a kindness.”

“Do you still feel that way, even now?” Nerissa asked.

Homer didn't answer. But after nearly a minute passed, Nerissa felt his hand close over hers.



In the morning, they walked down toward the port. Passing the Temple of Poseidon, Philemon pointed out its splendid peristyle in the Doric fashion and the ornate decoration on its columns' capitals, carved with many leaves and fronds.

“No one wants to hear you babble on about the architecture,” Homer cut him off. “The important thing is that athletic and artistic contests have been held here since antiquity. They take place in both the year before and the year after the Olympic Games. No matter if it was a time of war, there'd always be a truce, so contestants could cross enemy territory.”

“Exactly, sir. And always in the summer, to make travel easier. Though not necessarily on the second full moon after the solstice, as would be the case in Olympia. The winners of wrestling, pankration, and chariot racing receive a wreath, a statue, and an ode. Personally, I'd be happy with the wreath alone, because it's made of celery. I'm quite partial to this herb, you know. It does wonders for digestion.”

“Yes, quite... The poetry contest attracts a very strong field, I'm told, though I've never participated myself.”

“That's because the Isthmians allow female contestants in poetry and music,” Philemon

said to Nerissa with a wink.

"It most certainly is not!" said Homer. "I have nothing against female poets. You must believe that, Nerissa. I was entirely sincere in my praise of your work."

"Oh, I believe you. Philemon is merely teasing. You should see the grin stretching that old rogue's face."

"I knew that," said Homer, though anyone could plainly see he hadn't. "But I wished to make it very clear that poetry is poetry, no matter what the artist's gender. If verse is good, it should be honored. If I've never honored another woman's work, it's because you're the only one I've ever heard who understands the qualities of heroes."

"I'm sure there have been others," said Nerissa. "But I'd guess they found it necessary to pen a male's name on their verse. Or maybe sent a brother to read their work at the Panathenaea. After all, few are as broad-minded when it comes to females as you are."

"Yes, very true," said Homer, unaware of the smiles that passed between Nerissa and Philemon. "You could be right."

They came into the port, an extremely busy place. Past the crowd of dock slaves, sailors, townsmen, and travelers, they saw the tall masts of the merchant ship they'd found the evening before. Nerissa put a hand on Miklos's shoulder. The boy stood gawking at the many ships and people from all nations. She understood he'd never witnessed such a scurry of activity before, but urged him to move on.

"We don't want to be late," she said. "Captain Gymnos could give our berths to other passengers."

"Sorry, Aunt Nerissa. It's just, I've never seen such a crowd before. This place is fantastic. I wish that we could stay."

"Chios has a bustling port, too. And wait until you see Smyrna, if we're ever lucky enough to reach it."

"But I thought that you have enemies in Smyrna," said Homer. "Whereas, I have many friends in Chios. Why would you want to go to a place where you might be thrown in prison?"

"My family was made outlaw, it's true. But so were many others, and we were only obscure people. I'm sure we've been forgotten."

"Not if your mother was a baron's niece."

"Maybe so, but my whole family is dead and I wasn't accused of anything. I doubt very much that powerful people care if I come home."

"But why would you want to? As you say, your whole family's dead. There's no one left in Smyrna to welcome you."

"No one on my father's side."

"Don't tell me you intend to claim your birthright from Baron Iadros as his grand-niece."

"No, and I'll have nothing to do with my Uncle Laedron, either. But my Aunt Cythera should still be well in Smyrna. She was only twenty-seven when we left."

"Your aunt, the temple pros--"

But he was interrupted by a commotion coming toward them. People were protesting sharply as a large man dressed in armor knocked them from his path. Stopping to look back, Nerissa saw him brandishing a spear. With its butt end, he prodded those who didn't retreat fast enough.

It's Stenarch, thought Nerissa. She couldn't see his haughty features beneath the helmet, but it seemed that he'd pursued them all the way to Isthmia. She felt surprised. She wouldn't have guessed he'd care to this degree about her escape. It wasn't like she'd killed a leading citizen. Though Tragus had risen a few notches to the point where citizens tolerated him, he was still considered a man of little worth.

Maybe it was Homer that Stenarch pursued. His defeat by a cripple in front of Ithaca's militia must have been an unbearable blow to his honor. But Stenarch would never come alone. He'd bring a score of guards.

"Out of my way, you scum!" bellowed the large man.

She recognized that voice. Of course -- it was Jeremos. Newly rich, he could have easily paid members of the militia to come with him. But furious at Homer's escape, he'd charged ahead alone. He'd been lucky enough to pick up their route in Stratos, then followed quickly through Korinthos. Intemperate, he hadn't engaged mercenaries in the city. Not that he was unaware his enemy would be protected. He'd dressed in armor to deflect slung stones. Instead of the headsman's axe she'd half expected, he carried a long spear.

Nerissa saw they'd never reach the ship in time. She handed Eury to Eugenia. Bringing out the new sling cut from sailcloth, she stepped in front of Philemon for a clear line of fire at Jeremos.

"Now you die!" the huge man roared at Homer. "This is for my beautiful Penelope."

"She was mine, not yours, you cur! We loved each other very much. May you rot forever in the black waters of the Cocytus for what you've done."

Jeremos raised his spear above his head. Nerissa and Miklos both flung stones before Jeremos could cock his arm. But Miklos's shot clanged against his breastplate, while Nerissa's stone lodged in his visor. They didn't knock him down. Before they could reload, Jeremos hurled his spear at Homer.

Nerissa dove and took it in her thigh. Jeremos came charging forward. He leaped on Homer, seized him around the neck, and twisted hard. Miklos tried to grab his arms, but the man was huge. Homer fought back, but Jeremos was no Stenarch. He was a seasoned brawler. He slammed Homer's head into the street. He lifted it to slam again, then slumped.

When Miklos and Eugenia managed to roll him off Homer, they found Philemon's eating knife stuck in Jeremos's throat. Meanwhile, Nerissa yanked the spear out of her thigh. Blood spurted, but she quickly bound the gaping hole with a strip torn from the hem of her peplos. She remembered doing something similar on Tenedos during her first bleeding.

After she'd staunched the flow of blood, Nerissa tested weight on her leg. Something gave, and she felt blood trickle down the inside of her thigh. Still, the important thing was that her femur wasn't broken and she could stand. It was the same leg that ended in her maimed foot, so her customary limp was more of a lurch as she went to Homer. The side of his head was bloody, but he was moving. Though his blind eyes were open, it was impossible to tell if he was alert.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, a little woozy, but I'll be fine."

She helped him to sit up.

"We need to get that cleaned," she said.

"We need to get aboard the ship, before more trouble comes."

"It might fester if I don't wash it and apply a poultice of healing herbs. Then where will we be?"

"I could say the same for you. But it will have to wait. The ship will sail without us."

"Is that man dead?" a loud voice asked.

He wore the insignia of a harbormaster. He was accompanied by two guardsmen armed with swords.

"Yes, he's dead," answered Nerissa. "Which is only right. Since he attacked us. You can ask any of these witnesses."

"I couldn't just let him pound my Master's head to pulp, could I?" said Philemon.

"The man you killed doesn't look like a criminal," said the official. "He's wearing very good armor. While you people don't look prosperous enough to bother robbing. I think you'd better come with me and let our magistrates sort this out."

"This man that Philemon defended is Homer, the famed poet," said Nerissa. "We're poorly dressed because we had to flee suddenly from Jeremos's attack in Ithaca. He's feuded with my blind husband for years." She didn't have time to explain her real relationship to

Homer. She didn't know what it was, herself. "I'd be glad to explain everything to your magistrates, but unfortunately, our schedule won't allow. Homer's expected in five days on Rhodos. He's the principal poet invited to perform at their summer festival. My husband is a very famous man, you know."

"Never heard of him," said the harbormaster.

"Surely every learned man knows of Homer's celebrated work *The Iliad*. It won the golden tripod at the Apturian Festival twelve years ago, and many prizes since. I'd be happy to recite:

*"Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son, of Peleus,
That brought countless ills upon the Achaeans.
Many a brave soul it sent hurrying down to Hades,
and many a hero it yielded prey to dogs and vultures.*

"How long do you have?" Nerissa asked. "It will take all day to give you the whole story."

"That won't be necessary," said a ship captain, who'd come over from the pier. "She's right. I know this work. It tells the story of the Trojan War. I heard Homer read it ten years ago on Lesbos. He won first prize there, too."

"Did he, now?" said the harbormaster. "That doesn't change the fact a man's been slain."

"He attacked them," said one of the bystanders, a well-dressed youth. "We all saw it. They only were defending themselves."

"Yes, but maybe the armored man had cause. Maybe he was sent from Ithaca. We must hold them until we learn the truth."

"No, Captain Constanides is right," said the youth. "This man's a poet, not a felon. I've heard *The Iliad* recited, too. My brother owns a copy."

The harbormaster relented. It was a good thing, because sailors from the merchant vessel began hauling its mooring lines aboard. Nerissa got everyone aboard just before it sailed. As they headed into the Saronic Gulf, she saw Stenarch arrive on the dock, trailed by a score of guards.

He knelt by the slain Jeremos, then grabbed a dock slave who'd brought a cart to remove the body. She saw Stenarch questioning the slave, who pointed at their vessel. Stenarch sprinted to the dock, his face a mask of fury. He ran to the harbormaster's building, but soon emerged. Clearly, he'd been unable to commandeer a bireme. And it would be a full day before his own ship was sledged across the ridge from Korinthos.

He may have learned that they'd embarked for Asia Minor, but he wouldn't know where. Nerissa had yet to offer Captain Gymnos a generous incentive to make an extra stop at Chios.

Epilogos

Some days later, Nerissa woke to a refreshing sea breeze. A bed had been slung for her beside the cabin's open hatch. She felt hungry, but in a pleasing way, as if her stomach was finally ready to accept food after a long illness. She pulled herself up a bit by one of the bed's ropes. Her arms were weak and looked thin to her eye. She felt flushed by the exertion, but again, it was a good feeling. She remembered her flight from Ithaca. She'd escaped the executioner, while bringing Eury, Eugenia, and Miklos off the island. Homer and Philemon, too.

Ah, what joy to know she was no longer a slave. Not only this, but her successful flight proved that she'd harbored safely in the Gods' favor. Maybe now they'd listen to her prayers when she asked them to protect her kinsfolk in the Fields of Asphodel.

Gazing down the blanket that covered her, Nerissa saw a man's head resting on the bed's edge beside her lap. She couldn't see his face, but knew that it was Homer from his chestnut curls and an old scar on the back of his right hand. Though he slept, Homer held tightly to a cloth. A basin of water sat beside the cask where he was sitting. He didn't stir during the time she watched him. He must be very tired, because she'd learned that Homer was ordinarily a very restless sleeper. In the Grotto of the Nymphs and also in the upstairs room at the inn, he'd shifted every minute or two. He often spoke out in his sleep.

Clearly, she'd been sick, and Homer had been tending her. Searching her memory, Nerissa recalled the fight with Jeremos at the Isthmia dock. She'd been wounded in the thigh, but her femur wasn't broken. And, oh yes, Jeremos had battered Homer's head against the paving stones. She couldn't see the wound, because Homer was lying on that side. But they'd been forced to flee before she could clean it for him. Or her leg, for that matter.

Now she remembered that she'd done a thorough job with both once on the ship. Seawater was very good for cleaning wounds, she'd learned from Father. And Captain Gymnos had been kind enough to provide lengths of boiled linen to make proper dressings. But still, she

must have sickened. Without the herbs for making a healing poultice, fevers were usually the result of wounds that tore the flesh. She wondered if Homer had suffered from sickness, too.

Ah well, his fever couldn't be too severe if he'd been tending her. And hers hadn't been nearly as bad as when Tragus chopped off half her foot. If they were still aboard the ship, the most she'd slept was a week or two. And now, apart from hunger and weakness, she felt quite well.

Nerissa didn't wish to wake Homer, but she wanted to rise and move about. She wanted to see Eury, to check on Eugenia, Miklos, and Philemon, to get some food, and to ask Captain Gymnos about stopping at Chios. Actually, that last one wasn't necessary. Homer would have done so, already. With his purse from selling the Tachytata, Homer had more than ample funds to offer a sizeable incentive.

Nerissa was trying to figure out how to get down from the hanging bed without disturbing Homer when Philemon approached.

"You're awake!" he greeted her with a pleased grin.

"Yes, and anxious to see everyone. How are they?"

"Everyone is well. Miklos follows the captain everywhere. I think he'd like to be a mariner. Eugenia's with Eury. The last I saw them, she was teaching him his colors. That girl will make a fine mother some day. She's seen to Eury's every need, I can assure you. The boy adores her."

"Good. Thank you for telling me. As soon as I can get out of this bed, I'll go and praise Eugenia."

"Er, it might be better if I have her come to you. You've been seriously ill, you know. We worried for your life."

"Don't be silly. It was just a little fever."

"No, Miss. The Master was afraid you'd die. For seven days, he's never left your side. He's hardly slept, convinced that only the sips of water he trickled down your throat were keeping you alive."

"But Philemon, what of his head? His wound was considerably worse than mine."

"He did get a strong fever, with sweats and shakes and the inability to keep food down, but the herbs you prescribed cured him."

"What herbs? I didn't bring my healing pouch from Ithaca."

"You don't remember? We stopped on Kithnos. You were too weak to go ashore, yourself, but you told Eugenia what to buy."

"But if the medicine worked for Homer, why not for me?"

"You were far worse. Your skin was so hot, we could feel its incandescence without even touching you. I think that only Homer's constant prayers convinced the Gods he needs you more than they do."

"He cares that much for me?"

"Can there be any doubt? I've never seen such tenderness in my Master's face. Every time he'd dab you with cool water, it was like a Goddess smiled on him... And you? Forgive an old man's curiosity, but do you share any portion of these feelings?"

Nerissa gazed at the back of Homer's head. She reached down and gently touched his hair. She felt warmth flooding through her, a different kind of warmth than fever. It felt like the source of all life and all hope.

"I think you know the answer, Philemon." She smiled shyly at him. "I think I've always known, myself. From the first time that I heard his verse. It spoke to me, as if it were a child that we'd formed together."

"That's good to hear. You make an old man very happy, Miss. I'm only sad about your loss."

"My *loss*? What do you mean?"

"Oh, no! You don't remember? Forgive me for speaking out of turn. I should have waited until my Master could tell you in some way that might bring you less pain."

"Pain?" Nerissa felt a jolt of dread so sharp, Philemon's choice of words was starkly accurate. "What is it, Philemon? You must tell me at once. What have I lost?"

Suffused with panic, Nerissa groped at the blanket. The fever must have come from putrefaction in her thigh. She hadn't cleaned the wound in time, or thoroughly enough. They must have had to sever her femur to stop the rot from spreading. Many times before, she'd seen flesh wounds lead to death if left untreated. Though delirious, she must have told them what to do.

Homer must have held her down, maybe with help from a sailor. Captain Gymnos may have possessed a sword or long knife capable of cutting bone. She would have told Eugenia to keep Eury far away, and Philemon to hold a heated iron ready to cauterize the stump. Miklos, fearless and reliable, would have stood ready with clean linen to bind the wound.

But she felt two legs beneath the blanket! They both were there. She groped down the length of her left leg, consumed with the irrational fear that they'd taken her good foot for some reason. No, it still was whole.

Nerissa snatched off the blanket. She felt immense relief to see that both her legs were whole, her left foot was entire, and her right one no worse than before. There was a large

bandage on her thigh, but it was only slightly tinged with blood and had no smell of rotting flesh. She moved the leg a bit. Feeling only moderate discomfort, she flexed it at the knee. She bent it more and more, rotated her ankle, pivoted her hip. Everything seemed to be working as it should.

“But what’s the problem, Philemon?” she asked. “Why do you say that you feel bad about my loss? This wound will heal. I may have a prominent scar, but we both know that in a life filled with fearsome challenges, that’s nothing.”

“It’s not your leg,” he answered in a voice weighted with regret. “As you say, the wound is healing nicely.”

“Then what?” Suddenly, Nerissa grabbed his arms and pulled herself toward his face. “Oh, no. Is it Eury? Did you lie when you said everyone was fine?”

“Calm yourself. Eury’s the picture of health... But I’m afraid his sister didn’t take so well to this world.”

“His sister?” Nerissa felt confused. She was only six months pregnant. Her child couldn’t have been born yet. Unless she’d slept far longer than she thought. “My baby is a girl?”

“She was. But she couldn’t stay. Your injury caused her early birth. She was formed enough to see that she was female, but she was very tiny. I think her lungs weren’t big enough to draw in air.”

“Oh, sweet Athena,” sighed Nerissa.

This was the worst blow yet. One final member of her family demanded by the Gods. And she remembered now. The sensation of tearing in her belly soon after the spear lanced through her thigh. The blood that trickled down her leg, but not the one whose flow she staunches. Then later on that day, the sense of unbearable loss as she’d slipped into deep sleep. The knowledge that she’d never know this daughter. Never know any daughters, in fact, because the damage was too great.

Nerissa felt like a thin clay pot dropped by a careless God. She was a dactylos away from smashing on the floor. She gripped her arms around her shaking torso, but it did no good. Though she managed to stop her plummet in mid-air, there wasn’t enough room inside for such intense emotion. Like steam inside that thin clay pot. With no outlet, it was inevitable her fragile walls would burst.

In the space of a single minute, she’d woken to find that she was truly free, witnessed the measure of Homer’s devotion, and learned that the Gods were as merciless as ever. Far from turning benevolent at last, they’d chosen to punish her hubris by snatching away the daughter whom she would have loved so well.

It all was far too much. She couldn't begin to accept or deny or do anything with these hurtling emotions. She couldn't combat them, but she couldn't allow them to dominate her, either. The Gods might be monumentally capricious, they might overwhelm mortals' best efforts time after time, but they couldn't make us stop trying to survive. The only essential human failure was when we added to their misery by losing hope.

As she'd learned to do throughout her life, Nerissa found the necessary route. She could only take care of her family if she put aside her grief. She must wall it in some fortress, and only let it out years later, when it had lost its power to prostrate her. She knew just how. Mother was right. A woman must be strong as iron.

With Philemon's help, she rose and went to Eury. As promised, he was thriving under Eugenia's care. He allowed her to hug him for a minute, then wriggled free. After Nerissa told Eugenia how much she valued all her help, she went to get a bowl of soup from the ship's cook.

Feeling exhausted by these small exertions, Nerissa slumped against the rail to eat it. Then Eugenia helped her return to her hanging bed. After Philemon brought Miklos, too, Nerissa told both youths that they were free.

"I'd be greatly honored if you'd consider remaining with me," said Nerissa. "You are my family now. I promise that I'll always love you as much as I loved the people in my first one."

"Does that include me?" asked Homer, who'd come awake.

"Of course," Nerissa answered after an uncomfortably long pause. She felt thoroughly taken aback by Homer's question. "If that's what you want."

"With all my heart. I love you, Nerissa. And little Euredon, as well."

"Sir, I've been meaning to tell you, the child looks a bit like you," said Philemon, to fill another worrisome gap. "That curly hair, the noble sweep of his forehead."

"Not surprising. We are related, after all." Homer tousled Eury's hair. He lifted the boy from Nerissa's arms. "I suppose we both get our physiognomy from our common ancestor Telemachus. In the marble bust my father once owned of that great hero, he's shown with a broad brow and very curly hair."

"You realize I won't be able to give you children of your own?" Nerissa said, a tense edge to her voice.

"You already have. We make a perfect family. Blessed with three fine children and our poetry. I know that we'll be very happy. Once we arrive on Chios, we'll marry at the Temple of Cybele, where I once taught. The priests there all regard me highly."

Nerissa's thoughts swirled with chaos. Mixed joy and sorrow overwhelmed her. Homer must be utterly incapable of perceiving another person's feelings. How could the Gods conspire

to make her love this most maddening of men? Was he really so oblivious, he'd make a marriage offer in the same hour that she'd learned of her daughter's death?

Then again, he'd been asleep when Philemon told her. At this moment, Homer was unaware she knew.

Which only made it worse that he'd propose. In fact, he hadn't even proposed. He'd jumped straight to the wedding arrangements, without even asking if she'd want to be his wife. Homer's absence of doubt that she'd agree was, in a word, infuriating.

But she had to admit that Homer's perfect certainty was the very thing that drew her to him. It glowed in every word he wrote. She realized that the quality so often striking her as arrogance was something else entirely. It was actually the vast self-assurance he'd gained through overcoming every obstacle. Homer didn't ask, because it wasn't necessary. He trusted in her love.

"I'll marry you on one condition," Nerissa said at last.

"Anything. What is it?"

"You must free Philemon. If he wishes, he'll become an elder of our household."

"That old rogue? We'll never hear the end of his dubious wisdom."

"Even so. We both know he's earned an honored place within our family."

"Very well. If nothing else, we never would have met, had Philemon's clumsiness not sent you sprawling all those years ago."

"My clumsiness?" protested Philemon. "Is this the thanks I get for saving your ungrateful hide from Jeremos?"

"It was entirely my fault when I crashed into Philemon," Nerissa hurried to forestall an argument.

She suspected there'd be nightly wars of words between these two beloved men for many years to come. She felt too drained to hear one now.