

# The Witch of Syracuse

## Ἡ Μαγισσα Συρακουσικα



Dorothy J. Heydt

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Most of these stories appeared in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Sword and Sorceress* series. "Ill Met by Moonlight" appears here for the first time.

The passage from Homer's *Odyssey* quoted by Palamedes in Chapter 2 is taken from the translation by Richmond Lattimore, published by Harper & Row, 1965.

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## CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE:

Back in 2000, when I was writing this and USENET was still in flower, Anna Feruglio Dal Dan and Maurizio M. Manafó provided geographical data on the site of the Battle of Mylae, and Jo Walton gave insight on Roman law that made a plot element work. Later on, Sean Eric Fagan gave me web space and Bill Gill performed miracles of formatting. Thanks.

# THE WITCH OF SYRACUSE

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## 1. THINGS COME IN THREES

Since daybreak the small city called Margaron, the Pearl, had been hearing dull thumps from outside its walls, the sound of a giant patiently threshing grain with a flail made from a whole fir-tree. And the giant was Rome, and it was knocking at the door. Catapult stones had been arcing over the walls, smashing through the roof of the little Pantheon where the Olympian gods were honored, and coming to rest against the tall megaliths that walled the fane of the chthonic goddess of the city, around which — or around whom — it had been built. Cynthia, an outsider come last year from Taras to the east, had never entered the place, nor heard the goddess's name.

Now there was an ominous silence outside the gates. Cynthia crossed the street warily, and hurried into the shelter of the city wall. The men atop the wall were scurrying back and forth like a line of terrified ants. She slipped inside the door at the base of the gate-tower, unguarded in all the confusion, and set her feet upon the ladder.

She had climbed some ten or fifteen rungs when a great crash resounded through the darkness and nearly shook her loose. She clutched at the iron-bound casket wrapped in her stole, and struggled up the ladder to the top of the tower.

An old man sat on the wooden floor under the arrow-slits, holding his head in his hands — an old man in a blue robe embroidered with silver, the mage Palamedes. A younger man bent over him, holding a cup; a fair-haired youth with a mere suggestion of beard creeping through the pimples. That would be his son Demetrios. They were the only unarmed men Cynthia had seen in the last five days. Margaron's Captain and two sergeants stood around them, their faces as grey as their beards. "Let me through, please."

The young man raised his head and scowled at her. "We don't need whores here this morning. Where's Euelpides the physician?"

"Dead these four days. I'm Cynthia his daughter, and a respectable widow, so restrain your tongue. What happened to Palamedes?"

"One of those stones clipped him on the head," the youth said. "He's awake now, but he's not in his wits. And we're running out of time —" another great crash interrupted him. They peered through the arrow-slits to the road below.

For three weeks the Romans had pushed steadily across the countryside from conquered Taras to the walls of Margaron. There had been little of the usual devastation — farmhouses burnt down, cattle slaughtered or driven off — for the Romans were concerned simply with taking the city as quickly as they might. Now, at the base of the walls a hundred or more Roman soldiers defended themselves from the missiles hurled down onto their heads by the men of Margaron. Some raised overhead wicker shields covered with leather; others lifted the battering ram in its slings and carried it backward for another rush at the gates. The bronze-bound wood was already showing signs of caving in at the center. And the Romans, under the calm eyes of their commander, seemed ready to go on battering at the gates all day, or until they went down.

Cynthia turned back to the old mage. "Palamedes, can you stop them?"  
(Crash!)

The old man looked up at her and smiled. "Salted olives," he said.

"Hellebore," Cynthia muttered, and opened her casket. "Give me that wine."

Demetrios handed her the cup, and she poured dark liquid into it from a thumb-sized flask that had started life as an alabaster perfume-bottle. With nods and smiles and soft words she got the mixture down the old man's throat. It was like feeding a child. "The Pleiades are down," he quoted sadly, "and the night is half-gone." (Crash!)

"His talk is all like that," Demetrios said. "And I don't know how to work the spell."

"What spell?"

Demetrios shrugged. "The one that uses these." He pointed to what lay at Palamedes's side: a bronze sword, a crumpled-edged roll of parchment, a quartz crystal the size of a child's fist, girdled with a band of gold. And all three — she bent closer — marked with some kind of writing. "What do they say?"

"Well, this one says —" he pointed to the scroll — "'I am Pargas, powerful among the *daimonia*: like Time itself I cover the land and wear down the sturdy rocks.' This one —" the sword — "says, 'I Khalkas am powerful beyond all mere words: books of lore I cleave in two, and tear all windy

words to tatters." (Crash!) "And the crystal says, 'I Krymos defy Ares and Zeus alike; swords and thunderbolts I shatter beneath my weight.'" He spread his hands again, as if to say "That's all I know about it."

"They go together, don't they," Cynthia said. "The crystal says he can break swords, the sword says —" (Crash!)

"My father has had these things for years," Demetrios said. "He kept them in those three little chests, as far away from each other as he could. Until today."

"The raven is thirsty," Palamedes muttered, and reached for the wine-cup. Demetrios refilled it for him.

"I don't even know if I should let them sit there, side by side," the youth went on. (Crash!) "They're growing warm to the touch."

"And you have no idea what they're supposed to do?"

"They're supposed to drive the Romans away," Demetrios said. "And you need all three if they're not to turn on you. Other than that —" he shrugged a third time. (Crash!)

"You need all three," Cynthia mused. "The sword, the scroll, the stone. Well, of course!" And she reached out to grasp the crystal, but Demetrios seized her wrist and hauled her to her feet.

"Old fool, are you going to meddle with what even *I* don't understand?" The dark stole slipped back from her head, and a shaft of light from the arrow-slit fell across her face. "Pardon me. Young fool, I should say." (Crash!)

"I'm twenty," she said, pulling her wrist away and rubbing it. "Old enough to know my craft; old enough to be a wife and a widow and to lose my father, who was all my kin, to these bloody Romans. But of course you're right," she went on meekly. "These things must be dangerous." She looked down. "Zeus! What's that?"

The boy bent down to look, and Cynthia hit him, hard, with the flat of her hand on the side of his neck. He went down softly, as she snatched the fragile scroll out of his way, and lay with his head in his father's lap.

She tucked the scroll into her bodice, took the crystal in one hand and the sword in the other. The boy was right, they were uncomfortably warm.

(Crash!, and a splintering sound that went right through her heart.) She ran out onto the walls, past the line of nervous soldiers trying to find a target for their slings, and looked down at the Romans. They were just drawing back the ram for another stroke, and several feet of road lay bare before the gates. She hesitated for a moment. This was a terrible gamble, a desperate trick. "Hermes," she whispered, and threw the sword and the crystal down to the pavement below. The scroll from her bodice fluttered down to join them.

A blue light was rising from the sword and the crystal as they lay together before the gates, a deadly glow that seared the eyes. But as the scroll fell between them, the light drew back and grew into a whirlpool of all the colors of the rainbow, twice the height of a man. The Romans fell back, leaving the ram to lie in the road.

Three figures rose out of the whirlpool, white and red and gold, neither gods nor men, with bodies like waterspouts and teeth like crocodiles'. The whirlpool died away in a scatter of dust devils along the road, but still the figures spun, each pursuing the next. Their terrible eyes spared hardly a glance for the fleeing Romans or the clay-faced men of Margaron huddled atop the wall: all their attention was for each other. White Pargas smothering golden Krymos bludgeoning red Khalkas cleaving white Pargas. The wall trembled.

Demetrios was beside her, rubbing his neck. "And now?"

"Now we take your father home. No man will touch the gates today. If Palamedes recovers his wits, he can send the *daimonia* back where they belong. If not —" she cast an uneasy eye on a crack slowly widening in the road below — "we'll think of something else."

Slowly, one burden at a time, they moved Palamedes and his three chests down the ladder from the ramparts. "Where do you live?" Cynthia asked.

Palamedes said, "Cloud-Cuckoo-Land," but Demetrios said, "We're staying at the Red Bull, the inn kept by Theophilos Nestor's son. What about you?"

"Above Philias the fishmonger," she said, pointing. "You can see the sign from here."

The boy nodded. "The gods willing, we'll speak again." He set off toward the inn, the small chests in a fold of his cloak, leading his father by the hand.

Cynthia tucked her own casket under her arm and began to cross the

square.

*What have you done?*

She looked around quickly. No one stood near. The voice was no louder than a whisper, but it had carried a long distance, as far it seemed as the edges of the world.

*Here. Come here to me.*

She turned, and saw the dark door of the fane of the goddess yawning like a toothless mouth. Would it be one of the priests calling her, through the speaking trumpet built into an actor's mask?

But when she stepped inside the fane, there was no one there. Many of the great standing stones (she counted them swiftly; there were nine) formed the walls, with ragged stonework set between them. Long timbers overhead supported a thatched roof. Two lamps burned at opposite ends of a low altar that lay before a tenth huge stone, shorter and broader than the rest, with a strange shape —

In the dim light, with the lamps placed as they were, the stone resembled the body of a woman, hugely fat and gross with child, with heavy breasts and lumpy thighs and one arm raised to conceal her face. It was crusted with layers of something: blood of sacrifices, probably. The place smelt of stale blood.

*What have you done? What have you done to my city?*

"It's possible," Cynthia said, "that I've saved it. The Romans have drawn back —"

*Not the Romans, fool. They might have taken the city, as many have before; they would still have come to worship me. But now the earth is cracking beneath us; the city will fall. I shall fall into the sea.*

"Well, Lady, you are the earth, are you not? The Minoans called the sea the husband of the earth, who enriches her with fair winds that bring the rains of Zeus to her —"

*Husband? For ten thousand years he has battered against this cliff where I stand. He is my destroyer.*

Cynthia, who had known some marriages like that, said nothing.

*Get out of my sight, mortal; out of my city. Know that you go under my*

*curse.*

"I call upon Asklepios, son of Apollo, son of Zeus. May he protect me the physician." As she spoke she stepped cautiously backward. The doorway was still behind her, and she backed out into the sunlight.

The ramparts above the city wall had fallen. The wall itself was breaking up. The *daimonia* were still dancing in their whirlwind, and beneath them the ground was cracking. The Romans had fled.

She made her way to the house of Philius; the fishmonger was nowhere in sight. Upstairs, she gathered her few belongings and left the house. The Red Bull stood on the edge of the square, which was now also laced with cracks. Two of the megaliths of the goddess's house had fallen and were sliding towards the sea. Inside the inn, she found Demetrios and Palamedes inside the main room, with two soldiers taking a last cup of wine before they fled, and the innkeeper packing a bag with food and cups. "The city is falling," she said. "Demetrios, go and pack everything you can carry. We're leaving."

The boy sucked in a deep breath and obeyed. When he came down, with a bundle over his shoulder and a larger chest held in his hands, he said, "Where do we go?"

"The harbor," she said. "There are boats there, and I've always wanted to see Syracuse." She urged Palamedes to his feet, and picked up the little chests to add to her own bundle.

Outside, Demetrios stared at the ruin of the square. "Where are the Romans?"

"The city is falling to the sea, not the Romans," she said. "Falling, after ten thousand years." She risked one more glance at the turmoil in the road.

"Paper covers stone, stone breaks scissors, scissors cut paper," Cynthia said. "Who says the gods haven't a sense of humor?"

## 2. THE SONG AND THE FLUTE

The bowl of the sky was the deep blue of Punic glass, and blue as glass was the flat sea beneath. All morning there had been not a breath of wind, not a dolphin arcing out of the still water, not a seagull overhead. The whole of the Mediterranean, as it seemed, had been holding its breath.

Now the sun was nearly overhead, toasting the air to a pale rich gold. And low down, almost flat against the water and close enough for the dolphins to hear, there was a sound, a whisper of music, and the creak of ancient wood, and the rustle of canvas under a single breath of air.

"Next time," Cynthia said, "we must make sure to steal the boat with the new sails, not the one with the new paint. I think the owner of this tub had just finished painting her in order to sell her, quick, before she sank under his very eyes."

Demetrios shook his head "yes" without speaking. He was playing on a little flute of olive wood, playing a strange melody in the Lydian mode, a long strain with many variations. His brow knotted, his head bobbed with childlike earnestness not to make a mistake.

"The wind's picking up," Cynthia went on. "I think your spell has worked. You can stop now."

They sat in a tired old grandmother of a fishing boat, broad-bottomed and creaky, one that had better have been left home to nap in the sun. Her sails were patched and worn, her sheets had grown long frayed hempen whiskers, and the worm had been intimate with her timbers. Her red and white paint, fresh and cheerful, had concealed her age till it was too late. Now it was flaking away as her timbers creaked. The caulking was lavish in her seams, though the way it was working loose promised easy come, easy go.

Still, they had covered two-thirds of the distance from Margaron to Syracuse already, and luck or the gods' favor might see them to landfall yet.

There was no land visible now but a vague smudge to the northwest that might have been Kroton. With the wind blowing, even that would soon be out of sight.

"I said, it's worked. You can stop," Cynthia said sharply. She was four

years older than Demetrios and had made it clear in their two days' acquaintance that she would take no nonsense from him. But the youth shook his head "no" and went on playing.

"This is the third time through. I think once would have been enough."

The cloudy smudge on the horizon was growing, not shrinking. Plainly it was a real cloud, blowing toward them on the wind as it rose upwards from the sea; it was making for a thunderhead.

"Demetrios, too much is as bad as too little; you are blowing up a *storm!* Give me that thing."

But the boy turned round, holding the flute out of her reach while he played the last phrases, playing faster and faster like a tavern dance, tapping his foot to maintain the rhythm. The tune finished, he turned back. "It's dangerous to interrupt a spell, any spell, in the middle," he said with dignity. "I know you don't think much of me, Cynthia, and I admit Father hasn't taught me much about the business. But the first thing I ever learned was never to interrupt him." And he tucked the flute into a fold of his bedroll where it lay cushioning the sternpost behind his back.

"All right, all right, I sit corrected," Cynthia muttered.

In the uncomfortable silence they heard a voice murmuring,

*"But when we were as far from the land as a voice  
shouting  
carries, lightly plying, the swift ship as it drew nearer  
was seen by the Sirens, and they directed their sweet song  
toward us:*

*"Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the  
Achaians,  
and stay your ship, so that you can listen to our singing,' "*

Palamedes chanted softly as he sat in the prow and trailed his fingers in the sea.

*"for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black  
ship  
until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues  
from our lips; then goes on, well pleased, knowing more  
than ever*

*he did; for we know everything that the Argives and  
Trojans  
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite.  
Over all the generous earth we know everything that  
happens.' "*

"Go on," Demetrios urged, but the old man was silent, and both his listeners sighed. It was the longest speech Palamedes had made since the Roman catapult stone had taken away his wits at the siege of Margaron, and nothing passed his lips now but quotations: his will had been stunned, leaving only his memory.

"We had a vase once, when I was little, with Odysseus and the Sirens on it," Demetrios said. "A red-figured stamnos, it was as old as Teiresias. The ship had only one bank of rowers. There was Odysseus tied to the mast, and his men rowing away with their ears stopped with wax. There were two Sirens, like birds with women's heads, perched on the rocks above, and a third one falling to her death in the sea. She was fated to die if any man escaped her, so it's said."

"That's not in the *Odyssey*. Anyway, Homer had only two Sirens."

"Did he really? I'm not much good at Homer; he talks funny."

"The isle of the two Sirens,' he says, '*nesōn Seirēnoiin*,' not '*Seirēnōn*.' Don't you know a dual when you hear one?"

"Whether I do or not doesn't matter; it's plain the vase-painter didn't. He knew how to paint, though. The vase was my mother's. It was after she died that we started travelling, and I don't know what became of it."

"My mother died when I was born," Cynthia said, "and if she left anything to me I never saw it. Motherhood! What a business."

"O Zeus, Cynthia," the boy said, turning pale, "do you have children? You never left them in the city!" He turned and looked anxiously backward over the miles of water that lay between the boat and fallen Margaron. The thundercloud was very high now, boiling outwards as they watched into the flat shape of an anvil. The wind was growing cold.

"Don't be a fool, I was only married for six months, before poor old Demodoros got himself killed. In a skirmish, in a bean-field, with a Roman. Then I miscarried, and so I had nothing to show for my six months at all.

Your storm-wind is coming up nicely, we'll have enough rain to fill the waterskins, if not swamp the boat."

"Cynthia, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. I didn't know."

"Of course not. Anything we already know, we don't ask about. Don't worry about it." She stared over Palamedes's head into the southwest, and drew in a deep breath. "Worry about that, instead."

It was a ship, just on the edge of the horizon, a dark line against the sky, its hull half-hidden by the sea. A large ship, to be seen at all at this distance, and moving swiftly northwards on a course that must surely cross paths with the little boat within a few miles.

"Well, I don't know who they are, but we don't want to meet them," Cynthia said. "Lean on the steering-oars; I'll shift the sail. We'll tack to the south and sneak behind their back."

But at this moment the storm-wind reached them, filling the little boat's sail with a jerk and nearly knocking Cynthia overboard. She angled the sail as far to the south as she could, its sheets wrapped round her wrist and her other arm clutching at the sternpost, but the wind was steady and powerful and pushed them almost due west, ready to fall into the great ship's lap. The mast creaked, and the waves slapped against the boat's sides, and the wind whistled through the rigging.

"Who are they?" Demetrios shouted.

Cynthia shrugged as well as one could while holding for dear life onto the sheets. "Punic warship. Punic merchant. Roman merchant, just possibly. Nobody we want to be known to; even odds if they'd drown us or sell us at their next port of call."

"We should've —" an energetic wave dashed itself in Demetrios's face, and he spluttered and wiped it away. "We should've stuck to the coast."

"*They* stick to the coast, generally; that's why we crossed open sea, to avoid them. This is just pure bad luck."

Steadily the wind carried them westward. The sea was breaking into white-flecked waves, dull green now under the grey clouds overhead. At the horizon the sky was still blue, behind the black shell of the ship that drew steadily nearer. They could see a faint mistiness of spray around her hull far-off, and a fringe of oars, tiny and delicate as the legs of a millipede. There

was an eye painted on her prow, round and pitiless and unblinking, and a thin beak before it like the sting of a mosquito. And still she came nearer.

"Jason!" Demetrios said suddenly.

"Jason what?"

"I've just remembered. Jason met the Sirens when he went to Kolkhis: we used to have a book that told about it. Three Sirens, and they had names which I forget. Jason had Orpheus on board, and he defeated them at singing, and so they escaped."

"And did one of the Sirens fall into the sea?"

"I don't remember; it's been a long time. The book got left behind somewhere, like the red-figured stamnos."

Now the first drops of rain fell, fat and juicy as grapes, and very cold. The wind grew stronger, and the rain thicker, and the drops stung like hail against the skin, skimming along almost parallel to the waves. In moments they were all soaked through, and only Palamedes seemed not to care. Cynthia cursed in Attic, the Koinē, and Egyptian. Demetrios listened with respect.

They were watching when it happened. The great ship, now plainly a Punic warship with two banks of oars and a wicked-looking ram on her prow, seemed to stop dead in the water, as if all her rowers had backed water at once. Then slowly, slowly, like someone getting into an overhot bath, her stern settled into the water. It would take her some time to sink altogether, but her voyaging was over. Demetrios and Cynthia exchanged glances.

"Rocks," he said, half-shouting over the howling winds. "Or shoals at least."

"All right," she said, and pulled the sheet about. "Maybe the wind will let us go *north*." The sail flapped once as she turned it, and filled with wind again, drawing the boat a few points north of west. They could see the Punic ship clearly now, her prow in the air, a few tiny man-figures clinging to her decks; or dropping into the sea to swim for shore. There was an island, a small one, with no more to be seen above water than a stretch of beach and a spire of rock, indistinct in the mist.

The wind was slacking off now; the thundercloud had passed overhead. Cynthia glanced upwards. There was another mass of clouds behind them, but for the moment no rain was falling, and the howling of the wind had died

away. And in the stillness they heard, faint and sweet as the last fragment of a dream clutched at on waking, a fine thread of song.

A single voice, pure and clear like the voice of a silver flute, singing words that tugged at the edges of the mind, teasing, almost-familiar as the memory of a fragrance. The shifting air blew the voice away from them, toward them again, away again. And Cynthia and Demetrios looked at each other and said together, "Sirens," and again, "No, it couldn't be."

"They're supposed to be north of here, anyway," Demetrios added. "Up around Neapolis. I read it someplace."

"Have you been in Neapolis? I have," Cynthia said. "Good cheap wine, great shellfish, sulphur fumes, thousands of people running around making money. Interminable noise, and no Sirens. And I don't believe in Sirens anyway — Just the same, it's a strange thing, such a great ship to break on such a little island."

The wind shifted again, and blew the voice to them, and she heard faint but clear "Come, Cynthia," and "rest," and then a harsh sound like the mew of a seagull, the crying of a tiny child.

Cynthia stood still, her hands clenched on the mast, but Demetrios leaped up and made a dash for the oars lying at his father's feet. But at that moment the east wind picked up again, and the boat jumped forward, and Demetrios fell on his face on the deck. The rotten halyard broke, and the wet sail fell and lay heavily over the deck, and over the boy and his father. From underneath the canvas she could hear him cursing and struggling to get free.

Even with the sail down, the force of the wind was enough to drive them steadily toward the island. It was wreathed in stormcloud now, and the air round about was growing dark. Thunder rumbled overhead, but the voice floated above the noise of air and water. Cynthia clung in misery to the foot of the mast and listened. The song was a lullaby. "Come here, dear child," it sang,

"...so long abandoned and sadly wandering;  
no longer vainly ruin your lovely skin with weeping,  
beautiful Cynthia; here lives everyone who loves you.  
For as in the country the lowing calves come running  
around the cows their mothers when they return from  
pasture,

and bleating kids crowd near the goats with milky udders,  
so here on shining meadows every mother embraces  
her own child in her arms, and every child her mother."

The singer paused as if to take breath, and in the pause the infant cried again, an intolerable sound, the child was hungry, or cold. Scarcely knowing what she did, Cynthia fumbled under the sail's edge for the oars. The tears were cold on her cheeks. *Who is that who sings, who cries? My mother, or my child? I never knew either, and they are both dead!*

She couldn't shift the oar; the sail and its wooden yard lay too heavily on it. She crawled to the stern and with the steering-oars guided the boat as best she could toward the island. Her arms ached, her heart ached, and her nose was dripping like a sponge.

Thunder rolled overhead again, and a bolt of lightning split the darkness ahead, burning an instant's vision onto Cynthia's sight. Atop the highest spire the figure stood, her talons gripping the rock, her feathery tail spread out behind, her breast smooth as a dove's, and her great wings outstretched, all covered in plumage like pure gold. She shone in the darkness like the aureole of the sun. Her hair was bound upon her brow with silver ribbons, her eyes were dark and bright; and her face was no mortal woman's face, but pitiless and serene, indifferent as the stormwind, the face of an immortal.

And beneath her feet, along the beach at the base of the rock, lay the bones of men. Some lay clean and white, picked by the wind and bleached by the sun; some still with the leathery skin stretched taut across them. And one dazed Carthaginian had dragged his broken body this far, to lie beneath her rock, his face lit up with longing, and to reach upward with one good arm into the promise and agony of her song. For the Siren sang to each one his own heart's desire.

But the vision was gone in the lightning flash, and Cynthia crouched weeping on the deck, saying, "Liar, liar." The Siren sang her lullaby. The baby cried.

"*Liar!*" Cynthia screamed, rising to her knees. "*Lying mimicking mocking drab, I'll give you music!*" She put her hands to the deck and began to crawl. It was now raining hard again, and the old wood was saturated and slippery. She spread her arms like a lizard and crept close to the deck, not to be tossed to one side or the other as the boat rolled. The steering-oars beat loudly

against the sternpost, a vicious clacking sound like a broken shutter. Her nose bumped against Demetrios's sodden bedroll, and her fingers searched it till they found the flute. She found the fipple end, got it to her mouth somehow, and began to play.

She felt no certainty of getting all the notes right, let alone the variations in proper order. The storm did not seem to care. Hearing its music sounded in its very heart, it exploded into joyous rage, screaming like an eagle, lashing the boat back and forth till Cynthia thought surely the mast must break, the waves wash in, the boat be swamped and the three of them drowned before ever they reached the island. No matter, if the noise drowned out that music.

Something scraped under their bottom; they had run aground on the shoals. Cynthia dropped the flute and reached for the oar again: the yard had shifted and freed it. She planted the blade in the sand and bore against the shaft with all her weight; on three successive swells the boat crept forward and clear of the shoal. The wind flung them forward again, and the oar was wrenched from her hands. She seized the mast again and listened, holding her breath.

For a moment there was only the howling of the wind. Then there sounded a sharp crack, like a tree snapping in a gale, and a rumbling sound sharper than the thunder, building up, rattling and crashing, not dying away. And there came one more sound, a long descending note, not a cry of pain or grief or any human passion, but the departing cry of an ageless spirit. Cynthia thought she heard some great soft thing fall into the sea, but she could easily have been mistaken.

Then there was no sound but the wind and the thunder and the rattle of falling rock.

It was an hour later, maybe, that the storm cleared away for good and the sun shone again. Gripping the mast and standing as tall as she could, Cynthia could just see what remained of the island: flat beaches nine parts awash, that the sea would soon rub into nothing. Of the Punic ship there was no trace but broken wood, and a few shapes floating face-down in the water. Of the Siren there was left nothing at all. Cynthia turned her back on it and began to search the baggage for the waterskins.

The canvas heaved, and an arm emerged between the fallen yard and the prow. "Cynthia?" came a muffled voice from beneath the sail. "Please let me up, we're shipping water down here." Cynthia found the broken end of the

halyard and tugged till the sail slid backwards and Demetrios could work his way free. "O gods, my head," he muttered. "Father, are you all right?"

Palamedes, emerging from the bottom of the boat, smiled and settled in the prow again, looking out over the sea. "*Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians,*" he murmured, "*Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians,*" as if he had forgotten all the rest.

Demetrios made his way over yard and sail into the stern. He stood there for a long moment, elbows on the sternpost, looking back over the ruin of the island. "I was never so cold in my life," he said. "The sun feels good. Is it still the same day? It felt like forever. I shouted for you, but you never answered."

"I was busy."

"Hard to hear anyway, with the wind and the singing. And now I know how Odysseus felt — Cynthia, what did you hear?"

"They offered every man what he most wanted," Cynthia said, avoiding his question. "You heard what your father said: to Odysseus, they offered knowledge."

"Well, I don't mind telling," he said. "She told me I could go home."

"Ha, there you are, waterskin."

"Not that I suppose I'd know Corinth if I saw it now; not the port, or the agora. I remember our house, though, and the street it was on . . . do you know, the Siren knew the name of every tree in our garden. And now she's gone at last. Good riddance. What did she look like?"

"Like a bird — like your vase. Like a spirit of the dead. Whose children were the Furies?"

"Night's and Aither's, I think," he said, sitting down beside her. "It doesn't matter. Was she very beautiful?"

"Beautiful, O yes. So is the Sun, but if you look at him you go blind and lose your way. One for Orpheus, one for Odysseus, one for us. Beautiful lying wretches, they'll never drown another man. O Demetrios, the last Siren is dead, and now my heart will never break again." She found she was crying, her head on his shoulder, while his hand awkwardly patted her back.

Demetrios by now had his arms around her, trying to pillow her head on his shoulder, but this brought him up with a start. "Don't say that, Cynthia!

Some god will hear you and take steps to make a liar of you. Cry if you like, but don't tempt fate."

"Hmph! Don't let's both behave like fools. Can you splice a rope? Then start mending the halyard, while I empty these rain puddles into the waterskins. After that —" she picked up her sodden hem and tried to wring it out — "I'd better . . . start bailing."

### 3. THE NOONDAY WITCH

The fishing fleet had gone out from the Lesser Harbor of Syracuse, and no one remained on the sheltering Mole of Dionysos but the usual handful of loafers, boys, and trash fishermen. A few gulls still wheeled overhead, but one by one they spiraled down to land on pilings or winchheads and tuck their heads into their back feathers. The weather was not unduly warm, the sun had not yet risen into noon; but already it was a day on which to get nothing much done.

"Here we are," Demetrios said. "We had the gods' favor after all."

"Measured out precisely to the last obol's worth," Cynthia said. "Frugal householders, the gods." She set the bailing bucket down and straightened up, clutching her back. "Aiiiiii."

"Get up there and I'll hand you things." He tossed up a few sodden bundles of clothing and started tugging at the iron-bound chest that had served as rowers' bench before the oars went overboard. "Crows take it."

"Better get your father up first," Cynthia said. Demetrios reached out a hand, but Palamedes was as soggy as the other bundles, and less inclined to stir himself. He sat up, clasped his arms around his knees, and shook his head "no".

Demetrios made a face, and glanced up as if to seek sympathy from on high. Beside themselves there were two disdainful pelicans and a dark-haired Syracusan, about his own age, wearing a faded blue khiton and mended sandals. "You, there, could you give a hand? Father was struck on the head and he's gone simple."

The youth in the blue khiton reached down a hand, but the old man paid no attention. He sat in the bilges like a sack of grain, hard to get hold of and very hard indeed to lift.

"Come, Palamedes," Cynthia said softly. "Come to Cynthia." The old man looked at her and smiled, but made no attempt to move. He sat like a lump in the rapidly filling boat. But instead of lending a hand, the Syracusan shouted, "I've got it!" and ran away.

In a moment he was back, dragging a rope and a pulley used for off-

loading heavy cargo, and threw it over a beam. "Put this under his arms," he commanded. "Right. Now look out above!" Digging his heels into the dock, he hauled away on the rope. The old man rose smoothly into the air, and Cynthia snatched his feet and brought him ashore. The pelicans took off. The boat rocked and shipped more water, and Demetrios leaped to the dock as she went under.

"O Zeus!" Cynthia cried. "The books!"

"Did you say *books*?" The Syracusan flung off his clothing and dived into the water. A great bubble burst at the surface; the boat was now quite out of sight. The youth's head reappeared, shouted "The rope!" and disappeared again. Demetrios dropped it into the water, and hauling at the free end pulled out the Syracusan with the loop of rope under one arm and the iron-bound chest under the other.

He set it carefully on the dock. "O Apollo, don't let the ink have run," he muttered. "What books are they?"

"They should be all right," Cynthia said. "I stopped the seams with wax to keep out the spray. We have books on philosophy, poetry, medicine, mathematics, and — Ouch!" Demetrios had stumbled over a coil of rope and kicked her in the shin. "Mmm, yes. And we have an exposition of the elements of geometry by my father's cousin, Euklides of Alexandria."

"Oh, marvelous," the boy said. "May I read them? Do you have a place to stay in Syracuse? Where do you come from? What's your name?"

"Demetrios son of Palamedes, of Corinth," the fair-haired youth said. "This is my brother's widow, Cynthia, and —"

"From Corinth? But you're among kinsmen here. Will you stay with us? I'll ask my uncle Loukas, but I'm sure it will be all right. He's selling wool in the market. If you'll come with me — oh, sorry." Bending down to pick up the bookchest, he saw the blue khiton lying forgotten on the dock, and belted it around his body again. "Arkhimedes son of Pheidias the astronomer, at your service." He shouldered the bookchest and led them down the jetty into the confusion of the market crowds.

For its size, the marketplace was quiet, surprisingly so; Cynthia could make out the words of individual voices. From a henwife's ramshackle coop built against one wall of a carpetweaver's booth, a rusty black cock put up his

head and crowed once, uncertainly, and settled down again to sleep.

Palamedes was beginning to notice his surroundings now, just enough to shy at noises and balk when someone crossed his path. This made it necessary for both Cynthia and Demetrios to lead him, one on either side; Cynthia took the opportunity to whisper, "Kick me again and I'll break your leg."

"I didn't want you to mention the books of magic," Demetrios said. "Arkhimedes seems very friendly, but he's terribly curious and I don't want him getting into Father's books. You should know by now that it isn't safe to meddle with things you don't understand."

"And how many times have I saved all our necks by meddling, while you stood around and wrung your hands?" she retorted. "I grant your point, but you've no cause to leave marks on me. You're not my husband."

"I still think —" Demetrios began.

"No," Cynthia said firmly, and took a better grip on Palamedes's elbow to guide him round a cart full of hay.

Their situation was a strange one, sure to win the world's contempt if ever they were such fools as to let the world know about it. Having few resources, and with old Palamedes still stunned out of his wits and needing care, they had thought it best to stick together. But what Hellene was going to believe in any woman traveling with two men without being the wife or the whore of at least one of them? "Widowed sister-in-law" seemed the likeliest fiction.

They made their way through the flower market at the foot of the old Temple of Apollo and Artemis, with its double row of columns and brightly painted cornices. Over to their right stretched the narrow causeway that connected the island Ortygia to the rest of Sicily. The sun was fierce overhead now, the air all the closer for the dampness left by yesterday's rain. Somewhere a voice was singing, a shrill monotonous sound like a cicada, some mother singing a lullaby perhaps to a child fractious with the heat. The city sparkled in the sun, all its colors fresh-washed, but its people were beginning to droop, declining gently into the prospect of the afternoon's nap.

Demetrios had offered to let Cynthia stand as his wife, purely for the public's consumption of course; Cynthia had preferred to put round the story that her late husband Demodoros had been Palamedes's elder son. Cynthia

had her way, as she usually did, but her position was still precarious; what if Palamedes suddenly came back to himself and said, "Who's *that*?" Well, she would just have to keep an eye on him.

"Come, father," Demetrios said, guiding Palamedes round a muddy rut in the street. "Come, father," Cynthia echoed, to get the old man used to the sound of it.

Loukas was a little, wiry man of about thirty, with no hair at all left on the top of his head, and he was asleep with his head against the wheel of his cart. Against the other wheel slept a man taller than Loukas, with a broken nose and a face that still scowled as he snored. Arkhimedes raised an eyebrow. "That's Gellias," he said. "When they wake they'll start fighting again, and then they'll have a few jars. We'll talk to him later." He led them away. "I'll bring him round, and he'll bring Grandmother round. Did you say you had books about medicine? Do they tell how to draw a tooth?"

"I can draw a tooth if there's need," Cynthia said. "My father was a physician and taught me a bit."

"Can you deliver babies and cure the cough?"

"Usually," Cynthia said cautiously.

"Then you'll be well settled with Grandmother. Have you been in Syracuse before? I'll show you round the island today; you can see the rest of the city later. How long were you at sea? Are you hungry? Uncle brought some bread and olives, but —"

"We have a little money," Cynthia said. She reached into her bodice and brought out a small purse of faded embroidery. She took out a couple of coppers; that should be enough, unless the fortunes of war had sent prices farther up than was decent. (She had a fair number of silver coins as well, tetradrachms from most of the kingdoms of Greater Hellas sewn into the hem of her gown, but she wasn't about to let Arkhimedes or his fellow-citizens know that.)

They bought bread, and small green onions with the morning's dew still on them, and a flask of wine that Arkhimedes recognized as not so bad at the price, and a cup to mix it in. "We'll get water from Arethousa's spring," Arkhimedes said. "It's a great marvel, and besides she is a patroness of the city and one should pay respect to her. It's at the other end of the island —"

you can walk that far, can't you? It's less than ten stadia and you'll see many fine things on the way." They set off down a wide street that ran down the island's spine. The first colonists from Corinth had settled on Ortygia, just off the eastern shore of Sicily, and only later spread onto the smooth slopes of the Akhradina on the larger island. A causeway connected the two islands now, with a fortress on it to guard the passage between them and overlook the Little Harbor.

All the buildings that lined the street had once been very fine, and some still were. Here was a great house, its stones freshly plastered to cover cracks and graffiti, but the house next to it had been cut up into a warren of little rooms and let out to the poor. Both buildings had a drift of humanity round their bases, like the line of foam and trash left by the sea along the shore: merchants, peddlers, beggars, thieves, street boys with their eyes out for a chance at a quick copper or two. All were growing quiet and drowsy with the heat. Old Palamedes was lulled into docility, making him easier to lead.

They stepped inside the great Temple of Athenē for a moment, to admire the beauty of its painted walls and to enjoy the cool shadows under the forest of pillars that held up its gilded roof. The temple was the richest in Syracuse, and probably the most splendid throughout all Greater Hellas. The interior walls were painted with scenes of the wars of the tyrant Agathokles against the Carthaginians, and with portraits of the kings of Sicily.

When a junior priest strolled toward them, plainly in search of a donation, they stepped out into the heat again. High over their heads, a great figure of Athenē stood on the roof, with her gilded shield that could be seen far out to sea.

Most of the aristocracy now had their houses on the Akhradina, Arkhimedes said, or up on the Epipolai plateau overlooking the sea, but some still kept second houses on the harbor so that they could sail small pleasure boats. "That one there, for instance," he said, pointing to a large house on a rise of ground by the shore, its white walls brilliant in the sun. "That is the house of the noble Leptines. I've been inside it, and it's so beautiful. All the floors are mosaic, with patterns of sea creatures. My Uncle Hieron married into the family."

"Cleverly done!" Demetrios said. "That's a big step upward."

"Not so very far," said Arkhimedes. "Uncle Hieron's the General in

command of the city's troops. Oh, smell the fish!" An old fishwife was grilling the odds and ends of the day's catch over a little charcoal fire. They bought half a dozen tiny fish, still sizzling from the grill, and as they walked away the old wife yawned, and covered the fire and settled down for a nap. There were no more customers anyway. The whole island was quiet, and above it Cynthia could hear that humming cicada lullaby song. Maybe it was a cicada? Ortygia was thoroughly built up, but there were still some trees and gardens, in the grounds of Leptines's house for instance; leaves fluttered over its roof. Except that Cynthia could almost make out words in it, not Hellenic words but some kind of barbarian jargon she'd never heard in all her travels. She set the thought aside and concentrated on the task of getting Palamedes down the green bank that surrounded the Fount of Arethousa where it poured out of its rocky grotto. There were a dozen people lying on the grass round the spring already, all of them asleep. Cynthia could have sworn she saw a cutpurse creep up beside a citizen, hand stretched out to pluck, and then decide it was too much trouble and lie down to sleep like a child beside his intended victim.

They settled themselves at the edge of the spring and spread out the food on the clean grass. They dipped up water to mix with their wine, and poured a libation to the nymph of the island. Men said this spring was the same that went underground with the holy river Alpheios in Elis, far away in the Peloponnesos, and that when they made sacrifice in Elis the blood welled up in the water here. But there was no blood today: the water was cold and clear, far down into the depth of the rocky grotto beneath.

It was very warm now, and Cynthia felt she might sleep herself if not for Arkhimedes and Demetrios, and their constant chattering.

"My Uncle Hieron was a captain under General Pyrrhos; he was just thirty when Pyrrhos left Syracuse without a leader and went to defend Taras against the Romans, but he didn't succeed —"

"You needn't tell me! After the Romans took Taras they came and took Margaron, and we had to run for our lives —"

"— And Pyrrhos had executed Thoinon and the other aristocrats who'd sold us out to the Carthaginians, so the people elected Uncle Hieron general —"

"— And we had to cross open ocean in that leaky little boat, and we were

nearly captured by a Punic warship —"

"— And Uncle Hieron married Philistis, the daughter of Leptines, practically the only one of the noble families that's survived this long. We're all so proud of Uncle Hieron, he may make all our fortunes, and that's why Uncle Loukas keeps arguing with Gellias, because these days it's the aristocracy against the army and Gellias was a sergeant —"

Palamedes was asleep. Cynthia settled her back comfortably against a stone and looked down into the depths of Arethousa's spring. Cool, dark and green.

Cold water closed over her head, and instantly she was awake; awake for the first time since morning. That song! That shrill cicada lullaby, there was some magic in it, a spell to put the whole island to sleep and her with it. And now she had fallen in. She tried to throw off her stole, kick off her sandals and swim back to the surface; but she could not move. Far above her head the little silver disk of the sky turned blue, went dark, dwindled out of sight.

Belatedly she realized that she was still breathing — breathing air? water? a thing against nature either way, and surely the work of some god. The spring was a holy place. Sucked down into the earth like Persephonë. She folded her hands before her face and waited as the waters bore her downward.

They laid her down on a bank of sand and pebbles, dropped there like herself in an eddy of the current. The waters swirled round her on every side, shining with a cold blue light. There was no light overhead, the sunlight could not penetrate this deep, but the water was full of a cold brilliance, shading back and forth between blue and green like the feathers of a peacock, dazzling as his Argos-eyed tail. There was no living thing to be seen at all, but Cynthia knew she was watched. As one who walks singing through the forest hears his own voice fall silent, and feels eyes upon his back, and turning, knows by his trembling that his mortal flesh beholds immortal things, so Cynthia trembled, and clutched at her drifting stole to draw it over her eyes. So Odysseus, washed up on an unknown shore, heard the laughter of young women and knew the fear of the nymphs who haunt the mountain peaks, the springs of rivers and the grassy meadows. Cynthia bent her body down to the bank and hid her face in her hands.

*Get up, woman. You have nothing to fear.*

Cynthia obeyed. Still she saw nothing, only the swirl of color in the water.

*I am Arethousa who inhabit this spring, the voice said. (She could have left it unsaid. Through clever fakery or the skills of temple craftsmen one may mistake a mortal's voice for a god's, but no one hearing an immortal's voice will mistake it for a mortal's.) Ortygia gave me refuge when I fled my native Elis. When the men of Corinth came here and built a city round my spring, and a temple to far-shooting Artemis, I was pleased, and claimed the city for hers and mine. Now impious mortals threaten the peace of my city, and would fill it with strife and hatred and violent death. Not yet is it time that Syracuse must be overthrown by the children of Aphroditë. I will protect the city from division, and you shall be my instrument.*

A hand parted the light like a curtain, revealing the shape beyond.

She might have been the size of a mortal woman, seen close to, or very large and far away; the eye could not fix her in place. Her limbs were smooth, almost transparent, like a jellyfish or a piece of glass barely visible in the water likely to appear or disappear at a whim. *Hold out your hand.*

Cynthia did so, and the nymph touched one finger with her own, a touch like cold fire or the chill of a deadly fever. A dark shape appeared on the finger, not instantly but like a shadow developing on the street when the sun comes out of a cloud. It was a ring, a plain ring of black iron with no ornament. *This will protect you. Go toward my Lady's temple, and you shall see what you are to see. Return to me at sunset.*

All at once the waters reversed themselves and bore Cynthia upward like a cork bobbing to the surface. She clutched at the bank and hauled herself out, lay panting for breath on the soft grass.

*But if I was breathing water down there — was I? — it would have been hard to breathe. Could I have spoken, if I had dared? This gets me nowhere. O Zeus, O Artemis, what am I now to do?*

*Someone is preparing an act of violence against my city, she heard from a great way off. Go and prevent it.*

"How?" Cynthia said aloud, but there was no answer. Already that voice was so far distant that to expect it to answer was like asking Homer to speak again, or a bird to sing that sang in Agamemnon's garden.

She got to her feet. Everyone around her was still asleep, and the cicada

song still shrilled in her ears. Her clothing was dry, and her hair had come unbound. She pinned it back in place, picked up her skirt, and climbed up the bank to the street.

Every living thing lay still in sleep: even the seagulls; even the flies. As for the men and women, it seemed the spell had come on them slowly, for they had taken the time to lie down or at least to find a comfortable spot. Here was a horse asleep on its feet, one leg slack and the other three planted (she remembered the geometers in Alexandria, drawing diagrams in mid-air: three points fix a plane), and its groom propped against a cartwheel, asleep with the reins still in his hand. Here were three little street boys curled up together like a basketful of puppies, and here an iron-jawed matron, her stole embroidered in gold, her head pillowed on the shoulders of the slaves who carried her baskets.

*I am like Gyges who found the ring of invisibility, she thought, and stole everything he wanted, even to Kandaules's wife and kingdom. Sokrates had said any man would do the same, given the same opportunity, but somehow Cynthia was not tempted. Gyges, after all, could not be caught in the act by anybody — that was the whole point of the story — but Cynthia had Arethousa to answer to.*

*Go to my Lady's temple. But which Lady? Ah, well, both temples lay north of here. You shall see what you shall see.* She set off to the north at a good pace, as fast as she could go without making much noise. *An act of violence.* The word *hybris* carried the sense, not just of blood and destruction, but of an outrage against the natural order of things, such as the gods never let go unpunished, but would always avenge — eventually. Sometimes too late to be any help to men. The cicada song grew stronger. She could see the bright roof of the Temple of Athenē now, and the road across the causeway, pointed like a dusty arrow at the distant palaces on the Akhradina.

Something was moving on the causeway, a human figure or so it seemed, little and black against the heat-shimmering air. Cynthia ducked quickly behind a cart. Had he seen her? If he had, he made no sign, but kept walking in her direction, the little black speck growing slowly, not fly-sized now but beetle-sized, the size of a thumb, the size of a hand. Cynthia crouched down behind the cart's solid wheel — *If I can't see him he can't see me* — and peered at the approaching figure through a tiny crack. The flutter of a scarlet cloak, the confident stride of a warrior, a glint of metal in the sun. But this

was no soldier, no man at all but a woman, walking alone through the silent street like one who knows exactly where she is going and what she intends to do, and still coming this way. Cynthia settled herself against the wheel as though she had fallen asleep there, and pulled her stole forward just enough to shadow her face. The sound of footsteps was now quite near.

As the woman passed by, Cynthia got a good look at her back but none at her face. Her scarlet stole was rich with embroidery, her gown dyed with saffron, and her jewelry jingled with every step — and a jeweled dagger in her hand. A rich woman, who would surely never be out on the street by herself if anyone were awake. And she spared not a glance for the sleeping marketplace; she had expected it, planned for it, and now under its shelter she was setting out to carry out whatever plan she had. And none awake to watch her but Cynthia, armored by Arethousa's ring. She needed no bolt of lightning, no flight of doves to tell her who her target was — but what was her task? What violence did this woman have in hand? Cynthia slipped off her sandals, got to her feet, and followed the scarlet figure at twenty silent paces' distance.

The woman came to the house of Leptines, and pulled the door open with a gold-ringed hand. The slave who kept the door lay asleep across the threshold, and she stepped over him, carefully, as though her touch might wake him. Cynthia did the same. The man shifted in his sleep, and settled his shoulders against the stone. He was smiling.

The hall was floored with smooth blue tiles, cool against Cynthia's bare feet, and the light reflected from them shimmered against the walls like water, like the cool light in the hall of Arethousa.

Cynthia followed the woman by the sound of her jewelry, through the great house full of sleeping servants and out onto a terrace in the sun. Here the floor tiles were the color of burnt cream, the walls were brilliant with whitewash, and a low outer wall looked out over the turquoise of the Greater Harbor and the emerald of early summer on the hills. The air was blisteringly hot now, but there was a little breeze out of the west, enough so that the man lying under the blue canopy could sleep comfortably. All around him the sunlight lay thick as amber.

A peasant of Kerkyra, to ward against the stings of scorpions, will carry a little flask of oil in which a scorpion has been drowned. In its slow death the

beast lets out its poison into the golden oil, misty and dark as the smoke from a damp fire, and this extraction (it's said) will cure the sting as easily as the prick of a thorn. Now the woman in the red stole paused, suspended in the thick sunlight, and stretched out her arm slowly like the drowning scorpion. The dagger in her hand, long and thin-bladed, had a ruby in its hilt like the scorpion's heart, and around her hung a mist of hatred that Cynthia (Arethousa's ring cold on her hot hand) could see almost with her eyes.

She drew in her breath, sharply, and the woman turned at the sound and looked at her coldly. "Who are you?" she demanded. "How are you still awake? Who sent you?"

"Arethousa," Cynthia said. "She says you must not kill —"

"That be damned for a tale," the woman said. She took the loose end of her stole and threw it over her shoulder, and took a better grip on her dagger's hilt; and all at once Cynthia realized why it's said the gods help those who help themselves. She might have virtue on her side, and Arethousa's mission, and even Arethousa's ring that warded off the sleeping-spell and maybe other baleful magics. But it wasn't likely the ring would ward off the sharp edge of iron, and plainly the easiest way for the woman to get her business done was to cut Cynthia's own throat before she cut Leptines's.

She seized the end of her own stole and wound it around her forearm for a guard; it was heavy wool at least, better than that silk. Wasn't there anything here she could use as a weapon? Leptines had nothing by him, only a bronze bowl on a little table with nuts and early cherries in it; not even a fruit knife. Pity it wasn't apple season. She held her padded forearm before her throat and retreated slowly as the woman advanced. (How far behind her was the parapet?) She slipped away to the side, and the woman turned to follow her, smiling. "You can't escape," she said.

"I wouldn't think of it," Cynthia said. "Why do you want to kill Leptines? Is it just to stir up the city, like a little boy with a stick in an anthill?" She circled again, back toward the sleeping man. (How solid were those canopy poles? Could she pull the canvas down over the woman's head?) "Or is it personal? Did he betray you? Men were always deceivers. Or did he only cheat you out of your price?"

"Be quiet, slave's garbage," the woman hissed, and thrust the dagger toward Cynthia's face. Cynthia deflected it with her stole. (The woman did

not seem really sure of what she was doing with that blade. Had she ever used one before?) "Or I'll kill you slowly. I'll take hours at it." But she glanced uneasily toward the sun. Perhaps she didn't have hours; perhaps the cicada would run out of breath before then. (Could Cynthia distract her long enough for the household to awaken? Unlikely at best; and the canopy poles were firmly planted and too strong to break.)

There was a pendant round the woman's throat, baked clay it looked like: marked with a little red ochre, hanging from a leather thong, unsuited to lie on that smooth breast surrounded by gold. It had the shape of an eye, wide and staring, and the woman's own eyes were round and wide and seemed hardly to blink.

Cynthia reached behind her with her free hand. The table's edge; the rim of the dish; a handful of nuts. She caught up a fistful and threw them into the woman's face.

She dodged, and lunged forward; Cynthia took the dish by the rim and skimmed it like a skipping stone to the floor; the bronze rang like a bell and the woman went down in a rattle of nuts and a shower of cherry juice. Cynthia leaped and came down heavily on her back, pinning her down like a wrestler, and what she lacked in skill she made up, thank the gods, in weight.

The woman cursed quietly, lacking breath, and raised the dagger, but Cynthia grabbed her wrist and struck her elbow twice, thrice, against the tiled floor. The woman screamed, and her hand released the hilt; Cynthia caught it up before it could fall and held the point to the woman's throat. "Now then." She took a deep breath, her first it seemed in several minutes. "Indulge my curiosity. I ask again: who are you, and why Leptines?"

"You barbarian bitch —" the woman squirmed, trying to throw Cynthia off her back. Cynthia let the dagger's point press her throat a little closer, and she lay still.

"I am a pure Hellene and the daughter and granddaughter of scholars in Alexandria," Cynthia said, exaggerating only a trifle. "Answer my question."

"The crows take you!" Cynthia eased the dagger along a little further. "I'm Phano daughter of Thoinon. Leptines — aagh! — Leptines delivered my father up to Pyrrhos, to his death; Pyrrhos and that slave's bastard of a general. I'll have their lives for it —" but Cynthia settled her weight a little more squarely onto Phano's shoulders, and she fell silent.

*Violence against the peace of my city.* Yes, the murder of a leading figure like Leptines could hardly avoid causing turmoil among the citizens, a power struggle within Syracuse, and they had war abroad already, did they not? And here Cynthia sat with Phano's own dagger against her throat, and the day was wearing on. Sometime the spell must fail, and the city and Leptines's household awake — and who were they likely to put their trust in then: the daughter of the rich Syracusan (never mind what had become of him since), or the tattered stranger with the dagger in her hand? No, she must stop Phano now and make her escape before anyone awoke, and now the sweat began to run down her spine, one cold drop after another, as she realized that the only way to stop her was to kill her.

*Take the dagger and push it into her throat. The edge is sharp, it will be no effort at all.* But she could not do it.

Her hesitancy must have spoken down the blade of the dagger, for suddenly Phano got her hands under her and reared like a wild horse, throwing Cynthia to one side. Her arm thrust convulsively, and then the blade was jerked from her hand. She fell to the ground, all her weight painful on the point of one shoulder, and tried to roll over to meet Phano's attack.

But there was none. She sat up, favoring her shoulder, and looking around her. Phano lay full-length on the pavement, and the dagger was in her hand with its point toward Cynthia; but she lay still. Had she killed her after all? There was no blood, and in the deep silence her breathing came small and regular. With her good arm Cynthia turned her over, and saw the clay medallion lying beneath her neck, its thong cut by that hasty dagger-stroke. Cynthia picked up the cut ends, reluctant to touch the thing with her fingers, and let it dangle at arm's length. The silence was profound; yes, the cicada-song had stopped, and now in the distance she heard footsteps. She got to her feet and took a step backward. There were her sandals, where she had dropped them; she turned them over with her toe and slipped them on.

The figure that appeared in the doorway was old and bent, as one might have expected, and swathed in rusty black like Cynthia herself, and nearly toothless and marked by a ferocious squint. Her narrow glance took in the whole scene in an instant. "Good afternoon, grandmother," Cynthia said to her, as courteously as she could. "I'm sorry to have interfered in your business, but you see I was under orders. I do hope she paid you in advance —"

The old woman raised her hand. "Give me that," she said, and Cynthia's hand that held the medallion began to tingle. The sunlight seemed to darken, and the hot air closed in around her. Her shoulder ached, her fingers were growing numb, and the muscles of her arm twitched as if with cramp; against her will they contracted and raised her arm to hold out the medallion. The old woman reached out to take it; and Cynthia raised her arm a little higher and jerked it downward, and smashed the thing into the floor. It broke in two, and the old woman clutched at her breast and staggered back.

The sunlight rushed back into her eyes, and Cynthia took a step toward the broken medallion. She stumbled and nearly fell, but caught herself, and laid the sole of her sandal against the broken pieces. "I'll break it to powder," she whispered.

The old woman raised her hands. "No, no. One for you." She bent down and shook Phano's shoulder. "Get up, you." Phano yawned, and got slowly to her feet. Her eyes were half-closed, and she glided over the pavement like a sleepwalker. The old woman led her away. "Yes, I was paid in advance," she said over her shoulder, and sharply, "Mind you, I'm not done with you." She disappeared through the doorway.

Leptines muttered something in his sleep, and turned over. Inside the house someone coughed, and a baby cried, and there was a faint clatter out in the street. Cynthia picked up the clay pieces in a fold of her stole, and the dagger in her other hand, and fled. Both arms ached and tingled. *I have just faced down a professional witch and come out, if not ahead, at least even.* But she didn't feel triumphant, or even relieved, but only frightened and tired and sore. She got out of Leptines's house before anyone noticed her, and made her way through the slowly rousing crowd back to Arethousa's spring.

As soon as her arms would work again, she threw the pieces of the witch's charm far out into the harbor and watched them disappear in two tiny splashes. Then she sat at the edge of the spring again, and took the dagger between her hands to examine it. It was a fine piece of work, with garnets in its pommel, and a hilt of fine braided wire, and along the base of the blade was engraved, "Arkhias made me for Philip."

"Where did you get that?" Arkhimedes demanded, peering over her shoulder and rubbing her eyes. "I thought it was lost for good."

"You know this?"

"Everybody knows it. It belonged to Alexander once, but Pyrrhos gave it to my Uncle Hieron when he left Sicily. It was stolen a month ago, more like two months. We'd given up hope on it."

Everything came together at once in Cynthia's mind; yes, even in little Margaron one had heard about Arkhimes's Uncle Hieron. There had been something about his birth — a nobleman's bastard by a serving-girl, that was it, and exposed at birth, but bees had come and fed him with their honey, and his father had accepted the omens and acknowledged him. A typical hero's story. Plainly the gods had something in mind for little Arkhimes's Uncle Hieron, but if Leptines had been found killed with his dagger it would have set the city on its ears.

"Give it to me," Arkhimes was saying. "Grandmother can keep it till Uncle gets home."

"No," Cynthia said. (If it could be stolen once it could be stolen again.) "We'll offer it to the nymph, in gratitude for her protection of the city. I'll explain later. Is there any of that wine left?"

Most of the citizens had risen from their naps by now, and gone off about their business, but a few lingered to watch the little ceremony, a courtesy to their city's patroness. Palamedes, as elder, poured the libation of wine (Demetrios guided his arm); Arkhimes, who was native there, sang the hymn in a voice that had not quite finished cracking.

"Muse, sing of holy Arethousa, the nymph of Elis,  
who sheltered Sicily from the wrath of queenly Deo,  
when she was seeking her trim-ankled daughter, whom  
Aidoneus  
rapt away, given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-  
thunderer.  
Trinacria more than all the rest she blamed, where she  
found  
the marks of her loss. So there with angry hand she broke  
the plows that turn the soil; in her rage she gave to  
destruction  
farmers and cattle alike, and commanded the fields  
to betray their trust, and the seed to lie sterile...."

Cynthia held the dagger high to flash in the westering sun, and then let it

slide into the cool darkness of the water. It turned as it fell, like a leaf falling; then it was gone. Deep beneath the water something shone blue-green.

"Then, Elean desired of Alpheios, you lifted your head  
from the pool  
and brushing your dripping hair back from your temples,  
you said, 'O mother of the maiden sought over all the earth  
and mother of fruits, cease your great labor and do not task  
the land that is true to you with such violent anger.  
I dwell in Sikania as a pilgrim, but now this land  
is dearer to me than any other; this is Arethousa's home,  
here is my sanctuary; spare it, merciful goddess. . . .'"

There was a marble railing over the head of the grotto, carved with acanthus leaves and a row of lilies; a handful of citizens leaned over its rim to hear the song. Looking up suddenly, Cynthia recognized Loukas, awake now, and smiling. He looked a reasonable man with his eyes open, and Arkhimedes glanced up, too, as he paused for breath, and they exchanged smiles. *Good, Cynthia thought. We'll have shelter for the night.*

"Wearied with hunting, nymph, returning from the  
Stymphalian wood,  
you found a stream flowing without eddies or ripples,  
crystal clear to the bottom, in which you could count every  
pebble,  
and silvery willows and poplars nourished by the waves  
of their own will gave natural shade to the sloping  
banks...."

She knelt at the water's edge and twisted at the ring on her finger. It wouldn't come loose. She rubbed the finger against her nose, to oil it, and tried again, but the ring slipped round and round and wouldn't come off.

"Then Alpheios called from his waters, 'Why do you flee,  
Arethousa?  
Why do you flee?' he called you in his roaring voice,  
and you, worn with the effort of flight, 'O help your armor-  
bearer,  
far-shooting Artemis, pure maiden whose shafts are of  
gold,

to whom so often you gave your bow to bear and your  
quiver  
with all its arrows! . . ."

She looked up again. Behind the smiling Loukas stood Phano, her stole wrapped close round her head, her eyes cold, her vengeance thwarted. Next to her stood the old witch; she caught Cynthia's eye and smiled slightly. It was the smile she had seen once on the face of a skilled fox-and-hounds player in Alexandria, just after his opponent had put him in check and just before he broke out to sweep the board: the smile of an old campaigner who has met a temporary setback.

"Cold sweat poured down your frightened limbs,  
and the blue drops fell from all your body.  
Wherever you put your foot a pool sprung up, and from  
your hair  
fell dew, and sooner than I now can tell the deed  
you were changed into a stream. Then Alpheios  
recognizing  
in the waters the shape he had loved, cast off the man's  
shape  
he had taken on, to mingle his waters with yours.  
But the bold-hearted goddess split the earth, and you  
descending  
through the dark caverns came hither to Ortygia,  
which you love because it bears your name,  
and first received you into the airs above the world."

*I would have slain that wretch while I had the chance, Arethousa said from deep within the water. Human lives are short; it hardly matters one way or the other, does it? But I am not ungrateful. Keep the ring, you may need it. Now go away.*

"Hail, nymph! Keep this city safe, and govern my song;  
and now I will remember you and another song also."

*If I were a god, the poet says, I would have pity on the hearts of men.* A cool wind had sprung up; she wrapped her stole closer around her and watched the light fade away.

#### 4. ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

“Well, Captain,” said Cynthia, “I can't find anything wrong with you.”

The captain looked at her sourly. “Some witch,” he said.

“I am not a witch,” Cynthia reminded him. “I am a physician. There's a difference. I know how to recognize the footprints of a number of bodily diseases, and I know what to do to cure some of them.

“But when your body is strong, your eyes clear, your breath sweet, and your bowels regular, and you tell me about terrifying dreams of Harpies tearing out your entrails and dropping your children off cliffs, and you haven't any children —”

“None that I know of,” the captain muttered.

“— and half your men complain of the same affliction,” Cynthia went on, “then it starts sounding like the punishment of one who has offended the gods. Have you blasphemed against any of the gods, or done violence in any holy place with right of asylum? Or killed any of your kinsfolk? Have you wronged your friend or your brother? Have you lain with a woman on returning from a funeral, or cut your nails at a festival of the gods? Have you relieved yourself in public, or facing the sun, or into a river or spring? Have you poured a libation to the gods with unwashed hands?”

“No.”

“One of your men, perhaps? Remember, the whole body of men may be punished for the offense of one.”

“I'll ask,” the captain said. “In the first dream I had, the one when my sergeant was impaled on my spear, I looked over the parapet and saw two women standing before the door.”

“When was this?”

“Three — no, four days ago. It was the night of the new moon. There was hatred on their faces, and their hands were raised in evil signs. That's why I sent for a witch.”

“There is one powerful witch in Syracuse,” Cynthia said. “We're not unfriends: let's say, respectful opponents. I shall ask some questions myself.

Till then, go down to the island and sacrifice to Apollo the Healer. He may give you a sign.”

*But those who practice violence, planning cruel deeds,  
for them far-seeing Zeus son of Kronos gives judgment:  
often even a whole city suffers for one wicked man  
who aims and plans presumptuous violence;  
on his people the son of Kronos lays great trouble,  
famine and plague together, and the men perish,  
nor do the women bear children, and few are their houses.*

The hexameters marched through Cynthia's mind like troops through a frightened city. That was the trouble with Hesiod and the other old poets, they shaped their verses to stick in the mind, and stick they did.

But the sun shone brightly, and the day promised to be warm by noon and oven-hot by suppertime. Already her skin was sticky with sweat, and she longed for the black shade of the olive grove. She loosened the dark stole wrapped around her head, to let the breeze blow past her throat. Far ahead, where the cliffs of the Epipolai fell short of the horizon, her eyes could pick out a thick line of glittering sea.

The shallow soil here was unsuitable for plowing; to plant each tree in the orchard men had had to dig a hole with picks. There was no sound but the breeze whistling among the grassblades, and the hoarse cawing of a few crows somewhere up ahead, and her own footsteps and those of her escort.

On that, her hostess Xenokleia had insisted. Cynthia could go alone about the neighborhood if she liked, to poultice boils and deliver babies and prescribe elixirs against the cough, but to a fortress full of soldiers she must go attended; and Xenokleia had assigned her two of the household slaves, old Regina and the younger Amata. They followed at a respectful pace behind her, murmuring together in their own Sikel tongue.

Syracuse was in those days the greatest city of the Hellene world, with nearly one hundred myriads of inhabitants. From its first settlement on the island of Ortygia it had spread along Sicily from the swamps of the Anapo River northward nearly to the Megaran border. Behind the city rose the slopes called the Akhradina and the high limestone plateau called the Epipolai. It was shaped like the hull of a ship, prow pointing westward, and edged with a great cliff the height of twenty men everywhere but where it

sloped down to the sea.

Who would defend the city must defend the Epipolai, and the Syracusans had long ago built walls along the cliff and a fortress, the Euryalos, at the tip of its westward spine. Thus they warded off the occasional attacks of the Carthaginian cities that held the western half of Sicily, and maintained order among the native Sikels who plowed the grain fields and dug in the sulphur mines, and wove linen and wool, and ground grain, and escorted the physician from Alexandria to attend the captain of the Euryalos and followed her home again, murmuring in their own speech.

When one has nothing else one cares to think about, a conversation in an unknown tongue grows as compelling as the riddle of the Sphinx, and a well-brought-up person who would not dream of eavesdropping in the plain Koinē can fairly feel her ears stretching as she strains to understand. The language sounded like Latin, but was not Latin, for Cynthia had learned that tongue in Taras when her father had attended the Tyrant there, and she could not understand one word of this —

Her thoughts were cut off by the heavy beating of wings: a murder of crows rising off the ground almost at her feet, leaving their meal behind. Cynthia stopped short and put her hands to her mouth.

“(*Something something*) *lunam (something)*,” old Regina said, stopping just behind Cynthia; and then she drew in a sharp breath and said in Koinē, “Ah, lady! What's this?”

What the crows had left behind was small; Cynthia could have hidden it in a fold of her stole. The crows had got its eyes and some of the softer parts, but one could still make out what it had been.

“Some poor woman's daughter,” Regina said.

“Even a rich man will always expose a daughter,” Cynthia quoted. “Aii! I delivered this baby yesterday, it's Althaia's, the wife of Theodoros. This was their first child; I thought they might have let her live. I suppose he didn't want to take the risk.”

“It's a hard world,” Regina said. Her eyes were bright, and she blotted them on her sleeve. The women stood silent for a moment, while the crows cawed peevishly overhead.

“Cynthia, hey, Cynthia!” a voice shouted. “Is that the lamb we lost? – Oh.”

The youth Arkhimeses, running toward them along the road, skidded to a stop as he saw what lay before them. "Oh," he said again, looking up into Cynthia's eyes. "I'm sorry. Shall we bury her?"

"In what? It's all stone here."

"Put her in that hollow. I'll pry up this stone and roll it over the top. That'll keep out dogs as well as birds."

Cynthia and Regina lined the hollow with leaves, and a few orange blossoms from the orchard down the road, and laid the little body in it. Cynthia said the words, and Regina knelt down and sang the lullaby she sang to Arkhimeses's baby cousin, in a voice like a mourning dove. Arkhimeses turned over the stone with a long pole filched from the same orchard. Amata stood by, wearing the carefully neutral expression that is a slave's closest safe approach to open disapproval. Then Arkhimeses replaced the pole under a branch heavy with oranges, and they all walked back to the farmhouse.

*Nightmares, Cynthia thought. It's not only in the castle; they've been sleeping badly in Xenokleia's house. The maids have circles under their eyes, and the two-year-old woke up screaming last night.* And she set her shoulders a little straighter, determined in that moment to find the answer to this thing whether the captain ever paid her for it or not.

Syracuse was prospering, and the city was creeping westward from the sea over the Epipolai, covering the ridge with suburban houses. But here in the west it was still mostly orchards. The farm of Loukas son of Aias still clung to the westernmost part of the plateau, just before the city gates under the shadow of the Euryalos. There were almond and apple trees, espaliered for warmth against the south-facing wall, and many beehives, and a few sheep and a vegetable garden, and a gaggle of small children who played in the sunlit dust before the front door. And from the top of any tree one could see the length and breadth of the Epipolai, and a glimpse of the city at its feet, and far off the deep blue and sparkle of the sea. Into this well-ordered household three newcomers had blended as easily as three more eggs in the custard. Cynthia had had just time enough to slip the books of magic out of the iron-bound chest and into the little box Xenokleia had given her to hold herbs and bandages.

Demetrios stood before the front door, trying once more to coax his father to speak. Tall and gangling in a green tunic, his fair hair tousled by the wind,

he looked like a dandelion on its stalk. Arkhimedes waved, shouting, "Demetrios, there you are!" and broke into a run. The two boys disappeared around the side of the house. There was fruit for the picking, maybe, or the sheep to be kept out of the garden, or maybe a chance to wander down to the harbor to watch the ships come and go.

"Good morning, father," Cynthia said as she reached the house. Palamedes turned at the sound of her voice, and smiled, but did not speak. Time, and rest, and Xenokleia's cooking had been powerless as Cynthia's nostrils to restore his wits. He sat all day on a bench before the door, soaking up the sun and watching the children at play. Cynthia had been unable to restore him, but he was quiet and seemed happy, and the children watched out for him.

"There you are, Cynthia," called out a voice like a deep flute. "Come in here and tell me your news."

Xenokleia, the grandmother of Arkhimedes, had grown heavy over the years, and her feet disliked to carry her far. She sat most of the day inside her house by the hearth, glowing in its light like a great pearl, for although she must be at least fifty her skin was smooth and clear. Her long hair, still black, was wound around a pair of cow's horns in the country fashion. What in a richer house would have been men's quarters, while the women hid decorously out of sight, here plainly was Xenokleia's throne room. Here she sat unmoving in her great chair by the hearth, and from it she governed her daughters, her sons-in-law, the servants, the children, the fowls in the yard and the very bees in the hives. Her son the general came by from time to time, bringing fish or a length of Alexandrian cotton or the latest news.

Cynthia cast off her stole, for the room was warm, and sat down by the hearth. "No great news in the castle," she said. "We saw a sad thing on the way back."

"Ah," Xenokleia said, when Cynthia had finished the tale. "It's a sad world, it is indeed, when a slave girl can rear her daughters and an honest wife must expose them. I was lucky, that I could rear my girls when I was a freedwoman in Hierokles's house. Your eyes are puffy, Cynthia. You've lost children of your own, I dare say? High time you were married again. But there, I suppose old Palamedes was waiting till Demetrios was old enough; if he can't have a grandson from one son, he can get one from the other."

"I'm four years older than Demetrios," Cynthia said. "It wouldn't be

suitable. Will you be needing me today? I thought I'd go and see Althaia, give her something to dry up her milk.”

“Give her some of my honey wine to take it with,” Xenokleia said. “Poor girl; I had dreadful dreams last night. I might have known they'd be for her.”

Dreams. Cynthia herself hardly dreamed at all; or else she forgot them all on waking. There was something in her mind, cloudy and not to be grasped at; she must leave it to come of itself, like cream rising from the surface of the milk. She took the medicine in its little bottle, and the flask of wine, and left the house. She did not take the two Sikels with her.

*Lunam*, she thought as she walked. *Moon*, in the accusative case. She rummaged about in the Latin she hadn't spoken since the fall of Taras, looking for uses of the accusative, and how much like Latin could she expect this strange Sikel tongue to be, in any event? *Lunam specto*, I look at the moon; *lunam exspecto*, I wait for it, *lunam advoco*, I call upon it; *lunam deduco*, I draw it down, as for sorcery. She shivered a little, though the day by now was nothing less than hot. And then there were the various accusatives of time and space. What were they going to do to the moon?

Cynthia found Althaia heavy-eyed and quiet, and she took the medicines and Cynthia's sympathy with a whisper of thanks. “I had had hopes,” she said. “But he said we mustn't take a risk, business isn't that good, and we'd better try again for a son. I suppose he's right. But I had a dream last night; I saw her wandering in the dark —“ and she put her apron to her face.

Cynthia put her arms around the girl's trembling shoulders. “All dreams don't tell the truth,” she said. “I wasn't going to tell you this, but we found your daughter's body, Arkhimedes and I, and we buried her. I said the prayers and the maid Regina sang for her and Arkhimedes rolled a great stone over her; nothing will ever come near her. Don't cry, Althaia.” But she was crying herself.

*True are the dreams that come out from the gates of horn  
that are well-wrought;  
Liars, the dreams that emerge by the way of the ivory  
threshold,*

Cynthia mused. *But one never knows beforehand which is which.*

Nightmares. Like the arrows of Apollo, falling to right and left of her,

leaving her untouched. If it was the work of the old witch of Ortygia, she was showing Cynthia the kindest consideration –

She stopped in the road, the dust swirling around her, and looked hard at her left hand. The ring of Arethousa had been black, like forged iron, when she first took it in her hand. It had faded over the days, till it was like pale silver, and reflected the color of her skin till one had to look hard to see it was there at all. Even the inquisitive Xenokleia had never mentioned it. The ring that had guarded her against the sendings of the witch. It fit tightly on her finger, and to remove it would be like taking off a breastplate in the midst of battle.

Nevertheless, when she got back to the house she put olive oil on her finger and twisted the ring free, and hung it on a strand of wool around her neck. Perhaps she had some inkling of what she was putting into her path; perhaps not; if mortal men could foresee the future, most likely they would never get out of bed at all.

Over and over that night she saw the crows tearing at the body of her father, of her harmless bumbling old husband, or seizing on the tiny body of the child she had lost and carrying it away. She woke huddled cold on her pallet, her bedding tossed aside, her hair slick with sweat. And she clutched at the ring so fast she broke the yarn, and put it back on.

“No, it isn't I,” the old woman said as she laid out bunches of pungent roots and leaves. “Pennyroyal, trillium, hyssop. I'd heard you'd been up to the castle, but I'd supposed it was the usual thing, a fever or the quartermaster's hangover again. Or one of the castle women with a spot of trouble. That pennyroyal, now — “

“No,” Cynthia said, counting out coins into the wrinkled hand. “Five, six, seven, there you are. “No, I need the pennyroyal for a woman who's miscarried, to clean her out and atop the bleeding, finish the process off, you might say. But to start it, that I won't do.”

“You could make a good bit out of it,” the old woman said.

“I took the Oath of Hippocrates over my father's body who trained me,” Cynthia said. “The gods give him rest. No, the trouble at the castle is nightmares, ever since the new moon.” (The moon . . . *lunam* . . . the word showed itself in the back part of her mind, like the moon between clouds, and withdrew again.) “And now I learn they've had the same thing in the

farmsteads on the western Epipolai. It sounded to me like an impiety being punished by the gods, but the captain thought it was witch's work, and called me in. For a man like him, now, the difference between a physician and a witch is so small as to be lost in a thimble.”

“Well, it wasn't my doing,” the old woman said. “Ortygia is my district and I don't leave it. I don't know who's working up on the Epipolai, but I could ask around.”

“Do that, please,” Cynthia said. “You and I have had our differences, Xanthē, but neither of us wants to weaken the guard at the Euryalos, maybe let the Phoenicians in some dark night.”

“Nor the Sikels neither,” the old woman said. “They put down a rebellion in Gela last month; you didn't hear that? They kept it quiet, I dare say.”

Cynthia went back to the Epipolai, and she cured an outbreak of the flux among the neighborhood children, and drew teeth and set a broken arm and applied poultices to the feet of Xenokleia. And nightly the moon waxed toward the full, and daily she heard tales of nightmare from the farmers and their wives and children.

And night after night she would find herself sitting bolt upright in a tangle of bedding at the sound of someone else's screams — one of the maids, dreaming of serpents, or Arkhimeses or Demetrios dreaming of *daimonia* with bodies made of knives. But she never removed the ring again. For this battle she would be like Perseus against the Gorgon, safe only if fighting blind.

On the night after the quarter moon, after she had risen to dose Arkhimeses's mother with poppy syrup, Cynthia could not get back to sleep at all. She lay still, trying to make her knotted muscles relax, listening to the little night-noises of birds and insects. And something else, so faint she would have missed it by daylight: an indrawn breath, a whisper of sound as of one hand brushing over another. Silently she got to her feet.

The door of the house was unbarred and stood open, just a hairsbreadth. Its hinges were good ones and did not creak as Cynthia opened it, slipped through, and pulled it to again. It was just past midnight, and the waxing moon stood low above the dark bulk of the Euryalos, but the stars were bright. Two shapes were visible on the road to the west, two women's figures, ones she might have given names to. Cynthia drew her dark stole across her

face and followed at a cautious distance.

Their road led straight up to the Euryalos, which of course was always manned and guarded. The guards, surely, would stop two wandering Sikels in the middle of the night, no matter how nicely they asked to be let through –

But apparently they didn't, for there was no sign of the women when Cynthia reached the castle. Two spearmen stood before the unbarred gate, staring ahead into the night. They seemed not to see her, and when she spoke they made no answer. One of the men looked familiar: she identified him after a little thought as the infected finger she had lanced earlier that month.

She reached out and touched his cheek with the hand that wore the ring. He blinked, and his eyes opened wider, and his mouth, and Cynthia said, “Shhh. I'm Cynthia widow of Demodoros, the witch from Alexandria. Remember? Make no sound. Take me to the north gate.”

The soldier shook his head like a dog with a flea in its ear, as if to shake the nightmares out of his skull. Then he pushed the gate open and led her through the silent passages of the castle, down flights of stairs to tunnels out into the living rock, till they came to the gate that opened on the northwest road.

“Stay here till I come back,” Cynthia told the soldier. “If anyone questions you — but I don't think they will — tell him it's your captain's business, and mine. Pray to Arethousa, patroness of this city. And stay awake!”

She walked down the northwest road perhaps a hundred paces, searching for signs of movement. The land was under cultivation, but only sparsely inhabited. The nearer farmfolk spent their nights inside the walls of the Epipolai if they could; there were outlaws and runaways in the mountains, and there was always the possibility of attack by the Punic men of Panormos or Lilybaion.

The moon had set hours before, and in the starlight her feet felt their way over the rough road with some difficulty. Now was that a light in the distance, a torch perhaps? It was a good way down the road, and she never seemed to get any closer to it; the torchbearer was going the same direction that she was.

She dared not run, but she lengthened her stride, and slowly she drew nearer and saw a little more. It was two torches, lighting the way for some

five or six people.

Now up ahead a black shape massed against the stars; they were coming to the far side of the valley. A little river whose name Cynthia did not know ran at the foot of the cliff, and the road led to a rough plank bridge that crossed it. There were more torches to be seen now, three or four of them grouped together at the base of the cliff. One by one they winked out. When Cynthia reached the place she found an inky rectangle cut in the pale starlit limestone. It would be one of the old old tombs the district was full of, cut into the hillsides perhaps by the Sikans long ago, or by folk even older whose names were forgotten; empty now unless the dens of wild beasts. She took a deep breath, and clenched her left hand to feel the pressure of the ring of Arethousa.

But when she stepped inside she felt a cold wind on her face, and knew that the rectangular opening was only the mouth of a larger cave, one of the natural grottoes that water will cut in limestone. Far ahead there was a flicker of light. She put her right hand to the wall and went forward. There were carvings under her fingers, eroded by time and smoothed by the dripping water, squares and spirals that had meant something long ago.

Fifty paces onward she found a turn in the passage, and as she came round it she heard a great shout, and her heart skipped a beat. But the passage was still dark and empty; the shout had nothing to do with her. It echoed and reechoed in the stone till it seemed the voices of beasts, not men. Now the torchlight flickered on the walls; she must be getting near. She crept close to the wall and edged forward.

Around the next turn the tunnel widened into a great hall, pillared here and there with long slick columns that seemed to have dripped down from the ceiling like candle-wax till they reached the floor. The hall was as big as the theatre of a Hellene city, and the thousand, maybe two thousands of people that clustered in the center left most of it empty and echoing. The torchlight lit up the stony pillars and walls, white and rose and gold, as fair as a king's house. In such a place, it might be, Arethousa in her flight through the body of the earth had seen King Dis enthroned beside his Queen, Persephonë the captive Spring.

The people's backs were to Cynthia, their attention focused on the three figures that stood on a ledge above their heads, a natural stage for this theatre

shaped out of the living stone. One was Amata, and the second was an old man Cynthia had never seen before. The third was wrapped in a scarlet robe and had a mask over its face, the head of a snarling wolf.

Amata's harsh voice was speaking in the Sikel tongue, tantalizingly near the edge of understanding, chanting like an angry poet. The crowd answered her at intervals: four or five syllables from Amata, and a low cry from her followers, repeated and repeated, slowly increasing in speed. The old man had a staff or a wand with something carved into its head, and he held it high and shook it in rhythm with Amata's chanting.

The figure with the wolf's head raised its arm, and the crowd went silent, not raggedly but all at once like a chorus well-trained. The wolf's head began to sing.

It was Regina, of course; Cynthia recognized the voice at once, by turns as brilliant as a nightingale and as soft as a dove. The rhythm of her song was not like Amata's chanting, but loose and flexible as speech, its meter subtle and complex. She raised her cupped hands in front of her muzzle, and light shone rose-colored through her fingers as if she held a lighted candle.

She spread her hands wide, as if releasing a pigeon. A sphere of light rose out of her fingers, the size of an orange, the size of a man's head, turning and changing color as it rose into the air. Cynthia could think of three or four ways an Alexandrian conjuror could have worked the same trick, but not on someone else's ground so far from his workshop –

And the light went dark, and at once appeared again, a scant fingernail's paring of light like the new moon. Like the moon it grew, from thin to fat, each day's waxing in the space of a heartbeat: a moving picture, a song brought to life. And presently it reached the full.

Harpies. Hawk-clawed, woman-breasted harpies, and empty-backed Lamiai, and creatures for which she had no name. Clawed and toothed, scaled, or clothed in black slime like squid's ink, they poured down out of the moon. No, they were rising up around the feet of the chanting Sikels. The things the ring had spared her, when they had tried to make their way in by the gate of horn, now poured in unchallenged through her eyes, growing with the power of the moon.

Cynthia never knew if she had cried out, was never certain where she had stumbled and fallen. She found herself outside the cavern, her knees bruised

and her hands stinging, walking as rapidly as she could (for she still dared not run in the darkness) down the road and over the rough plank bridge. Behind her back the dim noise of the Sikels had changed, or so it seemed, like the ominous new sound of a beehive whose sentinels have just noticed something wrong.

The soldier she had left at the gate had fallen asleep again, but that was no matter; she shook him awake. She saw him close and lock the gate and put the key away, and then they went in search of the captain.

They found him awake, a lamp burning upon his table, muttering prayers that revealed him to be an initiate of Mithras. (Cynthia's quick ears had taught her more than one thing she was not supposed to know.) It would have been even odds whether the tale of witchery distressed him more, or the threat of a Sikel rebellion, but he roused the garrison and sent some to watch at the gates, some to go down the road and, if they could, trap the Sikels in their meeting place.

But no one found anything. The captain, when he came back to tell her so, found Cynthia asleep, curled up on the foot of his bed. "Get up, lady," he said, shaking her gently. "If someone found you here it'd be the end of your good name, to say nothing of mine.

"None of them came by the gate," he said. "They must have gone home in secret, those who live outside, and taken the others with them. And my men searched the valley wall, and couldn't find the cavern you saw. No, no, I don't doubt you saw it. But they've concealed their entrance by their magic; the cliff's as smooth as a pan of milk. And they've taken away the footbridge that might have pointed to it, and there are twenty or thirty women out there this morning, doing their washing in the river and treading out any footprints that might have been left from last night. Perhaps if the men felt along the wall with their hands – but there are miles of it, and I can't spare the men. No, it's you who'll have to deal with this thing, work your magic against theirs."

"And I haven't any," Cynthia said. "Never mind, I shall see what I can do. There are some whose advice I can take."

She went home first, to see if the Sikels had returned by some roundabout route. They had not. And when she got down to the market, there was no sign of the old witch Xanthë, and the woman who was selling onions in the space next hers had not seen her that day. So that was no use.

Next she went down to the spring of Arethousa, at once hoping and dreading that she would be able to attract the nymph's attention. But there was no answer. Cynthia poured a libation, and prayed, and lay by the spring's edge to trail in the water the hand that wore Arethousa's ring. Far, far off she seemed to hear a murmur, like the regular breathing of a distant sleeper. But there was nothing more, and when she held her own breath she heard the sound no longer.

*The gods are drifting away from us*, she thought. Or so it was said. New gods were rising out of the earth, but she felt no call to shelter under their dominion. She thought of the captain of the Euryalos, strong in his devotion to Mithras, god of soldiers; of the initiates of Isis she had known in Alexandria, calling on the Great Mother for aid in illness and in childbirth and when the crops did poorly; and the philosophers uttering stately praise of divinities who were personified qualities, Peace and Truth and Hope and Virtue, all goddesses because all abstract nouns happened to be of the feminine gender.

She dried her hand on the hem of her gown and went back to the Epipolai. Regina and Amata never returned to Xenokleia's house. And there were only five more days till the full moon.

Three days before the full, she told Xenokleia everything that had happened. The old woman listened carefully, the spindle under her fingers spinning more and more slowly, and finally coming to rest in the air as she pondered. Then the untwisted yarn parted and dropped the spindle to the floor with a clatter. Xenokleia started, and stooped with an effort to pick the spindle up.

"I've known them both for years, of course," she said, fraying out the ends of the yarn and twisting them together. "Though sometimes I wonder if we ever know anyone in truth. Still, nothing you say surprises me greatly. Regina was always warm-hearted, and Amata always despised her for it. Amata has the heart of Medea, who could cut up her own children and serve them grilled on a spit if it served her purpose. And yet it's Regina who can call up these things out of the depths, who can speak their tongue. Oh, no, it doesn't surprise me."

She gave the spindle a twirl and let it descend slowly on a thread of its own making, while her fingers fed out the wool into the twist. When her arm was

high above her head and the spindle had reached the floor, she stopped the spin and wound the thread around the spindle. "I have an idea," she said, and dropped the spindle into the basket with the carded wool. "Give me your arm, Cynthia; we're going to go call on the neighbors."

Leaning on her black stick on one side and Cynthia's arm on the other, Xenokleia made the round of the neighbors' houses. The people she visited were her contemporaries; old women with rounded shoulders and shriveled breasts, old men with palsied hands who sat in the sun all day telling their grandchildren stories of ancient battles. At each house the family would come out to greet them, to bring chairs for them, and food and wine. Cynthia must take a bite of this and a sip of that for politeness's sake, but her stomach was uneasy and her head ached after her night's adventure. She sat to one side, and spoke at whiles with the younger women about teething and thrush and diarrhea, while Xenokleia and her friends ate olives and bread and grapes and figs and drank wine watered to a pale rose, and talked and talked.

"And now?" Cynthia asked as she led Xenokleia home.

"I've seen a lot of sad things in my life," Xenokleia said. "When you reach my age, you've seen a great deal. Births and deaths, meetings and Sunderings. Many sad things, like that poor child of Althaia's. But they say in Alexandria it's different?"

"Only by a little. Exposed children are gathered up by the Ptolemy's agents and sold. It's a royal monopoly, like salt and olive oil."

"Ah," said Xenokleia. "And now? Now we go home."

The sun set behind the spiky line of the mountains; the full moon rose over the eastern seas. Cynthia could see the one, then the other, by turning her head. The tall keep of the Euryalos afforded an excellent view.

Below her, ranged behind the battlements of the great wall, stood the best of the Euryalos's guard — what remained of them. In the last two days, the sendings had filled in the cracks between panic and dread with a kind of bowel flux that Cynthia had never seen before and could not staunch with any herb in market, field, or garden. Most of the men lay below, the air in their barracks heavy with the stench of fear.

But others had taken their places: Xenokleia's neighbors, old men whose fingers still remembered how to hold a spear or a bludgeon, old women with

kitchen knives or baskets full of soapstone loom-weights.

“There,” the captain said. He pointed where the shadow of the fortress lay black before the gate. Dim in the darkness, lit only by the feeble reflections of the moon from the western mountains, something moved.

The moon rose higher. The light crept along the ground, revealing the Sikels crouched in their hundreds at the foot of the gate. As the light fell on them, they rose to their feet, lifted their hands against the fortress. Shapes rose from among them like marsh mist out of reeds, pale images now of what they would be when the moon rose to its zenith. Fear rippled over the standing ranks of men like wind through the grass. One man in the front line fell to his knees, covered his face with his hands. His sergeant pulled him away and took his place himself.

Now the Sikels began moving forward, drifting like sea-foam around the three figures that stood planted in their midst: Amata, Regina, and the old wizard. The younger Sikels had reached the base of the walls; they threw grappling-hooks, and began to climb.

The old folk held firm, with the wraiths swirling around their shoulders. *When you reach my age, you've seen a great deal*, Xenokleia had said. These elders had seen so much of life and death, misery and joy, that a few horrors out of Erebus touched them hardly at all. An old greybeard leaned over Cynthia's shoulder and dropped a stone the size of a melon on the head of a Sikel youth who had just reached the top of the wall. The young man howled and fell back out of sight.

The defense of the Euryalos held for the moment. But it was a standoff, and the oldsters must surely weary before the attackers did. There was a sudden lull in the battle-noise, as many paused to take breath, and in the stillness Cynthia could hear Regina singing like a golden dove. Somewhere in her head two and two came together and made four. She turned and ran for the stairs.

Xenokleia scarcely noticed that Cynthia went or when she came again, so busy was she. Her greylocked army was strong on defense, weak on offense; its supply of missiles was dwindling. Some of her menfolk had made their way down to the wall, to take up spears dropped by the soldiers and stick them into the attacking Sikels with such force as their rheumatic shoulders would let them. Xenokleia took from the fold of her stole the heavy pestle

that had ground grain for her household these fifty years, and laid it alongside the head of the first Sikel to come up the stairs.

The Sikel tumbled backward and fell in a heap at the foot of the stairs, just missing Cynthia's feet. She stepped backward a pace, drawing her companion with her and firming her grip on the other's shoulder, within the shadow of her stole. The Sikel lay still on the stone pavement. One of his fellows came up and dragged him away.

Regina was there, a dozen paces away along the wall. How had she gotten up here? never mind that now. She was silent, listening to the howling of the wraiths overhead like a good singer waiting for her cue. When she saw Cynthia her expression changed: not to rage, or even to hatred, but to the patient disgust of the good housewife who thought she had gotten all the rats out of the cellar, and now encounters just one more rat. She drew in a breath, full and deep into her rib cage: Cynthia smiled thinly, and flung back her stole, revealing her companion in the bright moonlight.

Althaia took a few steps forward. "Is this she?" she said over her shoulder, and without waiting for an answer, "Cynthia told me about you. I came to thank you for singing my baby to sleep. It was a kindly deed, and the gods will remember it." Regina's hands went to her mouth. "I was going to call her Eunoë," Althaia went on. "She would have been pretty, don't you think so? I only had her for one day." Her face contracted. "Oh, I miss her. Thank you for —" and she began to cry. Nobody knew quite how it happened, but she and Regina were kneeling together in the middle of the cleared space, their arms around each other, weeping the tears that scald and heal.

The wraiths faltered, grew transparent, blew away like mist. The soldiers began to recollect themselves, straighten their spines; they gripped their spears and looked about for targets. The Sikels, seeing how the wind had turned, made haste to slip back over the wall and into the anonymous darkness.

The captain of the guard stood at Cynthia's side. Silently he took a spear from the hand of the soldier beside him, raised it to strike Regina down. But Althaia saw him. "Don't you dare!" she cried. "She did me a kindness!"

Cynthia touched the captain's arm, and pointed over the wall to the road beneath. Like one deep rock buried in the beach sand, the old wizard stood firm in the tide of his retreating warriors. The captain's spear found his heart,

and he fell without a sound.

It was Amata who screamed, perched like an owl atop the wall, and raised one powerless fist and disappeared from sight. There was a faint “pop,” like the tiniest of thunderclaps.

Regina raised her head from Althaia's shoulder, and looked at her for a moment. Then she too disappeared. (Pop.)

The other Sikels had also disappeared, by means more suited to mortal men; only a handful lay dead on the pavement. By morning they would all have returned to their masters' houses and farmsteads; no one would be able to tell who had gone out with the rebellion and who had stayed at home. Just as well, perhaps. Cynthia went to Althaia and helped her to rise. “Come, Althaia. She's quite safe now. I'll take you home.”

The last moon of spring waned and died, and the first moon of summer waxed, and the night it rose to the full Cynthia was called again to the Euryalos, to deliver a soldiers' woman's baby. It was a healthy boy who pissed a flood in Cynthia's apron and waved his tiny fists in her face as soon as he had drawn breath. The sergeant who was probably his father seemed delighted with him. No one would have to sing him lullabies into the earth.

When she came out into the cool air the sky was pale rose with dawn, and the sun only a fingersbreadth below the horizon. The captain came and stood beside her. “Good morning, mistress witch.”

“I've told you —” Cynthia began, and gave it up. “Good morning, captain. Have you had a quiet guard?”

“Not a mouse stirring. Come and have a jar of wine with me. I never thanked you properly for saving my men and my command.” And when she hesitated, “Up atop the keep in the sight of everyone? Who would object to that?” *Xenokleia would*. But Regina and Amata had never come back to the farmhouse, and Xenokleia was short-handed enough that she'd reluctantly given Cynthia leave to go about on her own, even to the castle. No common soldier would lay a finger on a witch anyhow, for fear lest she turn his cullions into serpents' eggs. She tucked her reeking apron into a corner and followed the captain to the stairs.

“Mistress Cynthia — ” the captain's voice floated back through the darkness. “Is your father still living?”

“No,” Cynthia said. “He died in the siege of Margaron, may the earth lie light upon him. Why do you ask?”

“Then it's your father-in-law who has the disposition of you?”

“Not he,” Cynthia said. “He's not in his wits. And my brother-in-law is only a boy. For what it's worth, Captain, I think I have the disposition of myself.”

They came out of the stairwell into the dawnlight on the keep. The captain had set the wine-jars ready.

“I sent a squad out to look for the cavern that opens out of the tomb, now the glamour's off it. They found the place, but the roof's caved in. Not even a rat could get through.”

He kept glancing at her as he poured the wine, with the look in his eyes of one who is about to attempt the unheard-of.

“Cynthia, you saved — no, let me speak. It's proper to give thanks for good deeds done, you've proven that. You saved my command, and probably my neck, and I thank you. I'll be thirty next month, and ripe for advancement — again, thanks to you —”

Once again in her mind two and two made four, and not a moment too soon. The captain was working up his nerve to ask her (unheard-of thing!) to bestow her own hand in marriage.

For a moment she considered it. His prospects were good, as he'd said, his face acceptable (he had fine eyes), his body tall and well-muscled. She thought of him in her bed, in her embrace, and for a moment she felt dizzy, and nearly of a mind to accept him.

But the air was clean and fresh as it blew in over the sea (the sun was about to peep over the horizon), and no dutiful escort waited at the foot of the keep to guard her way back to the farm, and no man living had the power to tell her *Go* or *Come*. “Your thanks are welcome, Captain, but you're sending them into the wrong quarter. It was Xenokleia who gathered in the old people, who no longer feared anything in this life. It's her you should thank.”

“I will,” the captain said. “Has she a son or a grandson with his living to make? I could find him a place in the castle.”

No way to soften this, not by much. “She has a son, Captain, but he's

General Hieron. All he'll ask of you is your loyalty, should you come under his command, and I know you'll give that. As for Xenokleia, perhaps you could find her some serving-women? We're two short.”

The sun thrust its first rays above the horizon, a fingernail's-paring of fiery gold, blinding after the pale dawnlight. They turned their eyes away. The full moon was setting behind the western mountains. “Look there,” the captain said.

Almost too small to see, for the ridge was many miles away, two dark spots moved: featureless shapes with the light behind them, two wild figures dancing under the moon.

## 5. RATSANE

"Open the window," Cynthia said.

"No, don't," the alewife said. "You'll let her spirit escape."

"It's escaping anyway," Cynthia said. "We'll let it go freely, and not linger in this stench."

The boy unlatched the shutters set into the outer wall, and pushed them outward. There was a grating sound of wood against the rough brick, and light poured in: the tarnished golden light of late afternoon. It was not long till sunset. The smell of seaweed and rotting fish began to overlay the smell of death.

"Ah, that's better," the old witch said. "Farewell, Cynthia. I wish we could have known each other longer; I'd have taught you more. Still, I've taught you what I could. I've given you the fire-starting, and the ink-bowl, and the shape. . . ." Her voice stopped. Her expression did not change, except that there was nothing left behind it. Cynthia closed her eyes. The alewife, who was her daughter, began to cry.

"Goodbye, Xanthë," Cynthia said, and sighed. They had begun as enemies, ended as friends, but to lose enemies and friends alike was the way of the world. *What are we? What are we not? Man is only a dream of a shadow.* "Come," she said aloud. "If you'll bring water and linens, I can help you lay her out before I go. I have other patients to see this evening."

They washed the fragile old body, and wrapped it in a linen sheet that Xanthë's daughter fetched from her chest: part of somebody's dowry once, maybe, or (equally likely) the remnants of a successful theft.

"What's the time?"

"Sunset," Cynthia said. Red light was pouring in the window. "Isn't it? Surely we haven't been here all night."

"And the moon's in the last quarter," the alewife said. "She'll go out with the turning of the tide."

"Go where?"

The alewife shrugged, and smiled crookedly. "She never told me things

like that."

The boy Perikles, Xanthë's grandson, followed Cynthia down the rickety steps that led to the inn's common room. "You're not going out now, are you? It's getting dark."

"Don't worry," she said. "I've been coming down here every day; the people know me. Half of them think I'm a witch, the other half, a physician; nobody's going to meddle with either one. I haven't any money, and nobody's going to strike me down for my beauty."

"Don't be so sure," Perikles said with a grin. He must be thirteen or fourteen now, small for his age but clever. "When you smile – and I've seen you smile – you're not nearly so bad as you think. If you insist on going out, I think I'd better teach you how to use a knife."

"I've used one," Cynthia said. "Don't worry about me." She found she was leaning against the door frame, her eyes closed. "Sorry," she said, brushing a wisp of hair out of her face. "It's all right, Perikles. I'm just tired. I'll see you tomorrow, maybe."

She made her way into the common room. Xanthë's son-in-law broke off a long shapeless discussion with a couple of Neapolitan sailors to offer her a beaker of wine, and refuse the coin she offered as payment.

The room was close and dark, and could have benefited by having its own shutters opened — but most of the clientele would have objected. They were here having, as it were, their breakfast, preparing for the night's day that was dawning: footpads, night-climbers, street-walkers of every shape and kind. They paid no attention to Cynthia, nor she to them: as she'd said, they knew her.

It was because the man was looking at her that Cynthia noticed him, caught the bright gleam of eyes in the corner of her own eye. She shifted her position slightly, and contemplated the man without really looking at him.

A dark-haired, black-bearded fellow with a squint, maybe forty years old. Staring at her, with a little smile. Somebody she knew? As a child she'd spent a lot of time on Alexandria's waterfront, playing with the boys as a boy, her hair bundled up under a clout, until time and sudden growth had made that impossible. And her unrecognizable, she would have thought; so where did this man know her from? If he did?

(A dark squinting fellow with an irritating little smile, wrapped in a cloak that was dirty now, and nibbled around the edge by rats, but once had been expensive. Something glinted at his throat —)

She finished her wine and set the beaker down. "No, no more, thank you. I have other patients to see." She turned to go. (The smile widened. The fellow had long yellow front teeth, and he thought something was funny. The shape at his neck was a piece of hammered copper, cut out into a circle and a triangle, a shape she'd seen: it was just at the edge of her memory.) She gathered her cloak round her and left the inn.

Outside, the shadow of the western mountains had fallen over the island, and Hesperus was bright overhead. She would go to see Daphnē next, whose longshoreman husband had fallen to the plague and would die tonight, or tomorrow. The house was not far away: she had the choice of going directly there, through an alley favored by rats, or round three sides of a square, along the docks. Here were two houses, each leaning to the right, so that Cynthia must do the same to go between them; and here was a pair of steps that looked rotten but weren't, and here was the waterfront.

There was a ship in, that hadn't been in this morning. Long nose, graceful lines, an Alexandrian ship maybe? (Maybe that ratty-looking fellow in the inn *had* been someone she knew!) She walked up alongside it, where the slatted gangplank stretched from ship's side to dock. Men were filing up and down in two steady streams, offloading jars of wine and ingots of copper and raw glass.

Oh, yes, it was an Egyptian ship for sure. Crouched on the gunwale, licking its paw and rubbing its ears, was a cat.

"Hello, cat," Cynthia said, and the cat looked at her and stretched itself into half again its length. "Pusht, pusht," she coaxed, and the cat leapt onto the gangplank. It slipped between the men's busy feet, and came down to have its ears rubbed, purring with a rumble deep as the wheels of a cart going by in the next street.

Cynthia hadn't seen a cat in years. In the old days, before Alexander's conquest, the cats had been sacred to the old gods, and to take one out of Egypt was punishable by death. Even now, under the enlightened rule of the Ptolemies who cared not what business you did so long as the royal treasury got its cut, not many cats had made their way to other countries, not yet.

Its tawny fur was tinted red by the last rays of the sunset, and there was a thin black line all the way around its mouth. When it yawned, its mouth opened wide, showing an impressive collection of fangs; it looked like a tiny lioness.

"Good evening," said the shipmaster from the rail above. "What brings you here?"

"I'm a physician," Cynthia said. "There's sickness hereabouts."

The shipmaster made a sign against evil. "What kind?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've never seen it before this month, down here on the docks. A waterfront is a bad place for illness, you know that; there are the ships bringing in new diseases from elsewhere — no offense to your vessel, sir, you've just arrived — and then the people live cheek-by-jowl and catch everything from one another. And this is something new. The black spots in groin and armpit, the stiff swollen joints — I've never seen it before, nor read about it either."

"And do they recover? or do they die?"

"Mostly they die. I've had only two survive so far, both healthy young women without children. They're helping me nurse the rest."

"Ah," said the shipmaster. "Here's something you should know. There's talk in the ports that the men of Carthage are bringing force against the Hellenes of Sicily, trying to make them give up some of the disputed cities between here and Lilybaion. And men say — mind you, this is only tavern talk — men say they've got a he-witch to cast spells for them, to bring about by magic what they can't achieve by war."

Cynthia stood very still. "Is there anything said as to what the man looks like?"

"Nothing."

"But he's one of their own? a Phoenician?"

"I believe so."

*That* was what she had seen in the tavern, around the neck of the rat-faced man: circle for head, triangle for gown, and hidden among his chest-hairs the little stick-fingered arms. The sigil of Tanit, charmless queen of the Phoenicians' sourfaced gods. "I think I've seen him. Thanks for your news,

shipmaster. Goodbye, puss." She gave the cat's ears another rub, for luck, and turned back in the direction of the tavern.

"Good fortune," the man called after her.

She stopped short in the shadow of the skewed house. The tavern's door was open, and three men were coming out. Two went one way, one the other: and he was the rat-faced Phoenician. He was smiling still, and he vanished into the alley without taking any notice of Cynthia. Silently she followed.

There was a place between the roofs of houses where the sky showed, and the last of the sunset cast a square patch of red light on the ground. The man stood there, stripping himself naked; he folded his clothes into a little bundle and tucked the medallion with the sign of Tanit into the midst of it. He put the bundle next to a wall, out of the light and out of the way of traffic. He looked up into the darkening sky, and kissed his hand to it, and murmured a few words. And vanished. There was nothing alive in the patch of dim light but a long-tailed rat.

It was bigger than any rat Cynthia had seen, and lighter in color (though it was hard to tell in the ruddy light). It ran its forepaws briefly over its whiskers, and switched its tail back and forth. Then it scuttled out of the light, through a hole in a wall and out of sight.

*Shape-changing*, Cynthia thought. Xanthë had taught her the words, if she could but remember them. The words were the same for any act of changing; you had to fix your mind on the shape you wanted to take. A terrier, she thought, would do nicely: about two years old, with nice sharp teeth, small enough to follow through the hole in the wall, big enough to put paid to the rat. She thought of a terrier, and said the words.

And nothing happened. Cynthia bit her lip. Had she misremembered something? She thought not. Xanthë had drilled her carefully, seeming to hold no grudge that Cynthia had defeated her —

Defeated her with the aid of Arethousa's ring. That was the answer! The gift of the nymph, patroness of Syracuse — it had faded from its original black to a silvery color that reflected her skin and made the ring very hard to see — it shielded her from the effects of others' spells, so why not her own? She twisted it off her finger, laid it between her feet, and said the words again.

A day or so after she came to Syracuse, she had come down with a flux that had melted all her inward parts into a glutinous mush, bubbling slightly (over a low fire, so to speak) and threatening to slosh over the sides of its container. It had taken her six days to recover.

Now her whole body seemed to be in flux, arms and legs and trunk flowing like water, and she could feel her back stretching out like dough in the baker's hands, stretching out into a long supple tail.

Her face was in shadow, she could not see. In momentary panic she clawed at whatever it was, and scrabbled for a way out. Something clinked against a stone, and she was free. (*I forgot to take my clothes off*, she realized.) There was the hole in the wall, as large as she was now; she leapt through it and down the narrow side-yard behind the wall, following the rat.

As she might have suspected, the world was full of smells, rich and provocative: fish, mud, rot, salt, stale straw somewhere; lentils cooked with onions, some human's dinner; and twisting through them all, a clue thick as a rope, the musty stink of the rat.

At first she thought her sight had also improved. What had been deep night to her human eyes was cool twilight now, enough to find her way between the houses and over the rough ground. But she had lost something in clarity: all the edges were fuzzy, and the red light of the setting sun had gone grey.

She could hear every mouse's squeak, every cricket's chirp, and the distant rumbling of the people's voices within the houses, the scuttling of the rat's claws as she came up close behind it —

It had taken her that long to realize what she was not hearing. Her own paws were silent, that should have clicked against stone and scraped against wood. She looked down. Her forepaws were blunt and rounded, the claws nowhere to be seen. She raised a paw and flexed it; needle-sharp claws sprang out of the toes. Her long tail lashed against her flanks; her back was long and supple. *Xanthë was right; I needed practice*. She'd *thought* she'd been thinking of a terrier, but somewhere along the line her mind had wandered and she was no dog now, but a cat.

*I could easily have done worse*. (The rat was standing on its hind legs, its body stretched up against a wall, its forepaws feeling along the edge of a shutter, seeking a weak spot. Finding none, it fell to all fours again and ran along the wall's edge. There was a door ahead that stood just a nose's-width

ajar.) Cats, after all, had earned not only their keep but a place in Egypt's pantheon by keeping down the mice in the granaries. A rat was just a larger mouse. . . . Except that this was a disturbingly large rat, and the cat she had become was smaller than the dog she'd hoped to be. It would be no easy few minutes' work, to leap in, shake the beast till its neck broke and trot away again. She could still kill it, she thought, but it was going to be much more like even odds.

Belatedly she recognized the place, not from its appearance so much as from its smell: mussel broth, and bread and onions, and the heavy smell of sickness, and the sulphur candle burning on the hearth: it was Daphnë's house. Inside she could hear the sick husband's voice, bewildered and irritable with fever, and Daphnë's voice as she called on all the gods by turns and tried to soothe him. The rat had got its nose inside the door; where its head could go its body could follow. She leaped toward it, and got her claws into its backside long enough to drag it out.

The rat rolled over twice, fetched up against the opposite wall, and landed on its feet. Its eyes were big and black, and they sized up the cat at a glance: bigger than the rat, but softer. It snarled. Cynthia silently called on Bast, who had been a war-goddess as well as a cat in the days when men still believed in her, and crouched to spring.

It was a good leap, for a beginner, but the rat slipped aside and she hit the ground nose first. Before she could get her feet under her, its teeth closed on the scruff of her neck.

As a girl she had dreaded rat bites; they festered and took long to heal — and to go to her father for a poultice was to invite a dressing-down for having been on the docks in the first place. Now her thick fur made the bite no more than a painful pinch. She hunched her shoulders and tossed like a Cretan bull, and the rat flew over her back and lost its grip. She scrambled round to face it as it attacked again, hit it broadside with claws extended, and knocked it sprawling.

Again it charged, and again she knocked it base-over-apex. The rat regained its feet a stone's cast from her and sat glaring while it caught its breath.

She had seen a cat playing with a mouse often enough — bat, bat, bat till the mouse was exhausted or until someone intervened and brained the

wretched thing with a rock. Otherwise, not infrequently, the cat would tire of the game and let the mouse crawl away to die or recover at its own convenience. It served well enough in the long run: what one cat spared, another killed, and among them they kept the mice down. But it wouldn't do here. The rat must die here and now, or go free to spread the plague, and there was not another cat in Syracuse.

(Except the one on the ship — but she daren't take time to go off and recruit it, even assuming she could get the message across.)

So she sprang again, teeth and claws bared. The rat dodged, but not quickly enough. She pinned it to the ground and her teeth sought its neck. The rat squirmed and kicked and broke free again, but she tasted pungent blood: she had marked it at least. The rat darted away between the houses, and Cynthia bounded after it. She opened her mouth to shout "Hellas and Alexandria!" but nothing came out but a caterwaul. With that scent in her nostrils, she could follow it from here to Lilybaion —

She turned a corner and stopped hastily. A householder's midden lay against the wall, reeking with unnameable smells — and a dozen rats roamed over it, foraging. The blood smell led here; her prey was one of the dozen, but how was she to tell it from the others? If she could get in among them she could pick it out by scent, but the rats weren't about to let her. They had drawn closer together, shoulder to narrow shoulder across the midden, teeth bared, eyes glistening.

One of the rats turned to its neighbor and sniffed; sniffed again, and licked. Another rat nudged its way in from behind, and licked, and snapped: teeth flashed, and a rat squealed. Its fellows all turned toward it like a school of fish toward a bit of dropped bait, and squealing the wounded rat burst out of their midst, torn ear bleeding afresh, before they could eat it alive. *Fine lot of friends you've got, Cynthia thought as she ran after it. Just when you need their help, they turn on you. I've known people like that.*

They had left the wharfside alleys, and were running southwest through a better class of streets. Cynthia had the edge on speed, but the rat was running for its life, and she gained on it only gradually. Neither animal was built for long-distance running, and both were tiring. *When I was in Persepolis, the old joke ran, it was so hot that I saw a jackal chasing a hare, and they were both walking.* It might come to that soon.

It was fitting, perhaps, that the rat turned at bay at the rim of Arethousa's fountain. Cynthia approached cautiously; it wouldn't do to pollute the spring by throwing the rat into it. She raised her paw to knock it sideways, but the rat leaped up and sank its teeth into the pad. Pain shot through her foreleg, and she jerked backward, but the rat did not let go. She could not shake it loose. The pain made it hard to think, but —

It was like working out a problem in logic, at dream-slowness, underwater in the bottom of a sack. If she couldn't put the rat away, she could bring it closer. She pulled it in — slowly, taking time to aim — and sank her teeth into its neck.

After a dozen cat-heartbeats the rat squeaked and let go. Cynthia hung on. The rat thrashed about, and scrabbled with its little claws against the ground, but to no effect. Cynthia hung on. She hadn't a dog's muscle, to shake the rat till its neck broke, but between pain, rage, and desperation she felt she could hold on forever. If she held on till morning, some man might come along and kill the rat with a stick.

It didn't take that long. The rat made one last desperate leap, and when Cynthia brought it down to the ground again, its body twisting, there was an audible snap. The rat shuddered and lay still.

Then its flesh began to move, slowly, like bubbles rising in yeast. Cynthia dropped the rat and sprang back in uncatly alarm. The hairs were falling out of its skin, the tail shriveling; the hind legs stretched out. She had heard tales, from time to time, of shapechangers who regained their proper form after death, and Xanthë had said something about it, but none had warned her it would be so slow.

The body was the size of a newborn babe now, and swelling visibly. If she started now, she might be able to drag the corpse to the shore and drop it into the sea before it became too heavy to shift. On the other hand, if the Punic sorcerer had had confederates in Syracuse, it would give them pause to find his body lying bloated and naked with the teethmarks of a huge cat in his neck —

And besides, she didn't want to touch the thing again. Her paw stung. She sat down and licked it for a few minutes, then rose and began to limp away. She would return to the privacy of the dark alleys and change back —

She stopped in her tracks, paw in midair. How was she to change back if

she couldn't speak? The word of unbinding was a simple one, only four syllables, but a cat's mouth could not shape them. She tried, nonetheless, yowling in the dark air till "A-ma-wa-wa" echoed back from the nearby houses and a human somewhere flung open a window and hurled a broken pot in her general direction.

"Over here," someone said in a drink-thickened voice. A small group of men was approaching, five or six of them with three torches among them. Looking for her? No, no, they were returning from a party; she could smell the expensive perfumed wine from where she sat. "Here it is," the man in the lead said, and squatted to hold his torch near her. "I told you it was a cat." He rubbed under her chin with his free hand, and Cynthia found herself purring.

"My mother had a cat once," the drunken man went on. "She called him 'Thoth-Autolykos, Prince of Thieves,' and I called him 'Stinky.' This one looks just like him. Ho, Stinky, you want to go to a party? I don't suppose you drink wine, but you could have a fish. Squid in lobster sauce? Sparrows broiled in anchovy paste? Nothing too good for my friend Stinky —"

The man lost his balance and fell over on his rump. He flailed his arms, holding his torch higher, and that was when he saw what lay beyond Cynthia. The words he shouted were garbled, and his companions laughed, till they saw what he was pointing at. Then they screamed, and hauled him upright, and ran away in a clatter of feet. Cynthia could hardly blame them. She licked her paw again, and took a wide path round the twitching corpse, down the pathway to the base of the spring.

She dipped her paw into the water, and watched as one glistening drop fell back into the pool. *O Arethousa, help me*, she said in her heart. But there was no answer.

No more than she had expected, really; the gods had been going out of the world for a long time. A threat to her adopted city had been enough, once, to rouse Arethousa and bring her close enough to speak across the boundary between the worlds. No longer.

But she had left Cynthia the ring, which had seemed to keep at least some of its power. Maybe the ring would break the spell and let her change back — if she could find it. She climbed slowly up to the street level and hobbled back to the waterfront.

She heard Daphnē's voice as she passed her door, giving thanks to Apollo

All-Healer and to his sister Artemis and to Arethousa. Her husband was mending, then; as Cynthia had hoped, the plague-spell had not survived its maker. And let the silent gods have the credit that should have gone to Cynthia — or to Xanthë. Neither had any need of glory now.

She would go and make a search for the ring, though it had been lying in the alley for hours for every passing thief to find, and she had no real hope of finding it again. She would go and make a search, and then she would come back and make her living as a cat.

It wasn't so hard a life, if one took it like a philosopher. She could get used to the taste of raw mouse, and if she didn't it was no matter. She'd known plenty of cats that lived on a diet of human food, better fed than many men; as a child she'd had a cat that ate fruit, cheese, and herb-flavored bread (and anything else, so long as you were eating it and it wasn't supposed to have any). And people would scratch her ears and rub her under the chin and stroke her from head to tail. Nobody ever did that while she was human.

She would go and live with Daphnë, maybe, who was a kindly soul; or make the venturesome journey up the Epipolai to Xenokleia's house, keep the mice down in the granary. There were no other cats about, of course. If ever she wished to have kittens, she would go back to Alexandria — or (remembering the prickly business end of a tomcat, and his tooth-and-claw style of lovemaking) maybe she wouldn't.

But she found the ring; she found it by the musky human scent of the clothes that had fallen upon it. She could smell fatigue, and fear, and the mutton stew that she had eaten for dinner many hours before.

And a trace of something else. To cat-Cynthia it was clear that human-Cynthia had been without a mate too long, and a grain of cat-sense would have sent her in search of a lover, even the little Demetrios for want of anything better. Yet she hadn't done so. Humans: their ways were strange and unreasonable, their lives complicated beyond all cat-logic. Maybe she'd do better to stay a cat: take ship to Alexandria where the granaries were plump with mice, the streets lively with toms, and kittens could be loved for a few months and weaned by the simple expedient of walking away when it was time. . . .

But all the time she was thinking this, she went on nosing through the pile of clothing till she found the ring, cold to the touch and smelling sharply of

human, iron, and ice. She put her paw to it, but her toes were too short to fit through. So she lifted it with her tongue and took it into her mouth.

Again the feeling of flux, the rippling and changing along her flesh, like the unchancy metamorphosis of the Punic sorcerer but notably faster. (He must be nearly man-sized by now, and a nasty surprise for the Punic spies and the rest of humanity when they found him in the morning.)

Day was breaking. The fresh breeze of dawn was beginning to rise, clammy cold over her bare skin; she transferred the ring from her mouth to her finger and dressed as quickly as she could. She left the sorcerer's clothing where it lay, for thieves to make a shallow profit on or mice to nest in; the sigil of Tanit she lifted gingerly by its neck-cord and carried at arm's length toward the waterfront. She'd drop it into the sea, so that none could put it to an ill use.

A single ring of ripples, smudged out by the waves. She turned her back on the night's work and walked back to the Egyptian ship.

The men were still filing up and down the gangplank, going away empty-handed now and returning with jars of oil and crates of salted fish. The ship would be ready to sail on the next tide. The cat still sat in the prow, licking its forepaw. Cynthia looked at the palm of her own hand; it was unmarked. "Now, I wonder," Cynthia said to it. "How did you come by that paw? Was I some other cat, or was I you?" The cat stopped licking for a moment, and stared at her out of great topaz eyes. Then it yawned, and began licking again. As one of the poets has said, no cat ever gave anyone a straight answer. Cynthia saluted it, and rubbed its ears, and turned away to climb the cliff-road to the Epipolai. The sun's red arc had just broken the grey line of the horizon.

## 6. QUEEN OF THE DEAD

They had been at sea some little time, and the crying of the gulls in the Lesser Harbor had died away, when the bindings around Cynthia's waist were loosened and she could struggle free of the cloak that had covered her. The light was sharp in her unaccustomed eyes, and for some moments she sat blinking and breathing. (The cloak had been dusty, and rich with the sweat of the man who had worn it.)

The man sat opposite her, unmoving and silent: a small man of twenty or so, in a rough brown tunic. His black hair and beard were trimmed short around a heart-shaped face, a broad brow above clear hazel eyes, and a sharp narrow chin whose tuft of beard curled up at the end like a drake's tailfeathers. He sat on his heels, his body bent forward and his hands clasped on his knees, almost an attitude of homage – and the glint of a bronze earring in his ear told her he was a slave. But nothing in his patient waiting spoke of the slave whose life depends on others' goodwill, his happiness gathered piecemeal from others' inattention. He watched her as a man watches a horse he hopes to break to the saddle, or a lover his beloved, or a sailor the morning sky.

The sky overhead – and it was now an hour before noon – was golden, and the air over the sea was hazy. The water was growing choppy, and flecked everywhere with white, but the boat cut smoothly through the waves before a strong south wind. The southern sky was the color of brass, cloudy with dust; a sirocco was blowing up over the sea from Africa. The blistering wind might blow for days. This fool of a slave had better get them back to harbor — whatever harbor he could reach — while he still could.

The boat, she saw, was a fine one, carved on siderails and steering-oar, and brightly painted. A rug lay rolled up along the portside, the colors of purple and saffron visible along its edges. A bronze ring set in the deck led the eye to a trap-door, hinting at more riches stored beneath. The little thief had princely tastes.

She turned back to him — still silent, still waiting — and her patience snapped. “Well!” she said. “You can sit there till nightfall, like a little he-sphinx, or you can tell me what this is all about.”

“I need your help,” he said.

“You've chosen a fine way of asking for it.” She had taken a back-alley shortcut between the fish market and the herb stalls, and he had come up behind her, bundling her parcels and herself into that cursed cloak before she could turn round to look at him.

“Forgive me, lady,” he said. “I didn't have much choice. I came to Syracuse only this morning, and could not stay long. Certainly not long enough to invent a meeting in the market and to talk of this and that, slowly gaining your confidence, and all in the hearing of others —”

“Stop,” she said, and looked at the west. Most of Sicily had fallen out of their sight, but Aitnë still thrust its pale head and cloud of smoke above the horizon. She could navigate by that, make it to shore somewhere, maybe. There would be no getting back to Syracuse, not with this wind. “Tell me in one sentence what this is about,” she said, “before I knock you overboard.” (If she could. She was as tall as he was, and heavier, but the arms that had grappled the cloak over her head had been uncomfortably strong.)

“I need you to save my sister's child, when it's born.”

“What?” She blinked. “You need a midwife?”

“A midwife — and maybe a witch,” he said. “My sister is with child by the master's son, in Panormos. The master is a pious man, and fears the gods. You know what pious Carthaginians do with first-born children.”

Cynthia caught her breath. “And you thought of me,” she said. “You son of a drab, you knew where my weak spot is, didn't you? Where'd you hear of me?”

The man shrugged. “Word gets around. What now, lady? I can't compel you any further. Will you come with me, or shall I put in to shore and let you off?”

“Oh, I'm coming, never fear. When is your sister's time due?”

“Around the next full moon.”

“And the moon is waning now. Spread out your sail, man — what's your name, anyhow? We haven't much time. The first rule of midwifery says, 'Never trust a second baby to arrive on time —'”

“My name is Komi,” the man said, shaking out the sail as he was bidden.

“And this is her first child.”

“— and the second rule of midwifery says, “Never trust a first baby either. I’ll take the tiller.”

Running before that fierce wind, they made the Straits of Messenë by mid-afternoon. Till then they had had little time for speech, two people manning a ship meant for a crew of five or six. Komi had needed all his skill to bring it from Carthage to Syracuse by himself.

Now the rocky slopes to either side of the Straits blocked the wind a little, and though Komi still must sail carefully, they could hear themselves speak.

“The master is Hanno the merchant, who ships oil and wine from Tyre to Cartagena and back. Business has not been good, and the master mutters of the displeasure of the gods.

“You know what the Punic gods are like: easily offended, seldom pleased. Hanno should have — these are his words, not mine — should have given his son Myrgan to be burnt when he was born; but he withheld him. Hanno has gone in fear ever since, and such successes as he has had, he hasn’t dared to enjoy. Now Myrgan has gotten my sister Enzaro with child, and Hanno sees a chance to make up his default. Maybe to give Myrgan’s firstborn to the fire will make up for not giving his own. Mind you, he’s not at all sure the gods will accept his belated sacrifice, but he intends to try.”

“The gods have never asked us Hellenes to sacrifice children,” Cynthia said. “Or, at least, very rarely,” and she told him of Iphigeneia, whom her father Agamemnon had sacrificed for good winds to sail to Troy. “Unless you care to say that when we expose children we are sacrificing them to the goddess Luck — in the hope that someone will take them up. And in Alexandria, of course, the Ptolemy’s agents take them up and sell them. Maybe they would do better to let them die.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Komi said, so firmly that Cynthia looked up in surprise. He stood with his back braced against the gunwales, the end of the steering-oar in the crook of his arm. “By your leave, lady, I say it who know: it is better to be alive and a poor slave than dead and wrapped in silk and gold. You spoke of Luck: well, her wheel is always turning.” He leaned on the oar, and the boat slowly edged away from the Italian coast that was coming too near. “So long as we live, we may look for better luck ahead. But all the dead are dead alike.”

"Better to be day-laborer to a poor cottager than king over all the dead who perish."

"Who said that?"

"Akhilleus."

"He was right," Komi said, and leaned on the oar again, and smiled. His tanned skin looked like dull-finished gold under the hazy sun, and the wind blew his short hair into little peaks like the small waves that ran across the sea. "This is the place where once sailors had to sail between Skylla and Kharybdis. See those sharp rocks, where once they laired? But they're gone now, and all we need to fear is the Romans on one side and the Mamertine pirates on the other." He waved a hand toward the point on their left, where the fortress of Messenē squatted like a stony toad. The Campanian mercenaries who called themselves "the sons of Mars" had seized the city and slaughtered its inhabitants in the spring of that year.

"Yes, there's been talk of nothing else in Syracuse," Cynthia said. "General Hieron wants to go and burn them out, and I think the Council may give him leave to go and do it. Are they likely to attack us?" The boat was small, but richly fitted; it had been a prince's plaything before Komi had stolen it.

"Not if our luck holds. Pirates are practical men. Who'd come out in a wind like this? Therefore, what use for a pirate to come out looking for them? —"

And the wind blew up a great gust behind them, and the boat skipped across the waves, past the end of the Mamertines' point, into full sight of the big warship that crouched in its lee. Its better days were behind it, but its middle age was nothing to be despised. "Our luck just changed," Komi said. "Take the tiller, if you please, lady, and let me take that sail."

For a few minutes Cynthia thought the Mamertines had not seen them, or disdained to chase so small a prey. Then a rust-colored sail opened up to take the wind, and the ship began to move. The sail was many times the size of Komi's, and would give the ship speeds they could not match. "Hard a-starboard," Komi said. He had wrapped the sheets of his sail around his forearms, and braced his feet against the deck to hold the sail at an angle. Cynthia leaned against the steering-oar. The little boat began to slip sideways, sailing northeastward across the south wind. The Mamertine ship still followed, but now her weightier hull held her back more than her larger sail pulled her on.

“How long can we keep on?” Cynthia called, bracing her forearms against the tiller.

“As long as our strength holds out.”

“I mean, before we come up against the coast of Italy.”

“Ah, we're not going that far. In fact –” he glanced over his shoulder at the Mamertine ship. “In fact, we're going to go the other way right now. When I say 'three,' if you please, lady, hard-a-port.” He gathered in the sheets again. “One, two, *three*.” The sail billowed, nearly lifting his feet from the deck, and filled out again in the wind. The waves slapped against the prow and raised a great plume of spray that drifted away on the wind, and the boat set off toward the northwest. The Mamertine ship floundered behind them, slowly coming about and attempting to follow. Komi laughed. If he did not thumb his nose at the pursuer, it was only because his hands were busy.

“Curse him, when is he going to give up?” Komi muttered an hour later. With the Mamertine ship almost below the horizon, they had paused from sailing across the wind to rest their aching arms and shoulders. But the pirates had a full crew on board, and could trade off on tiller and sheets; they were beginning to close in again.

“He must think we've a noble passenger aboard,” Cynthia speculated, “who would be worth ransom money. Or treasure.”

“Maybe we have,” Komi said. “There's food and drink on board; I made sure of that before I stole her. Further, I did not inquire. If we ever get rid of this bastard, we'll go below and make a search. Lady, the talk of you that's reached Punic lands is of two sorts. One, that you're a powerful witch, who killed a Punic sorcerer sent to spread plague in Syracuse, who put down a Sikel rebellion in the hinterlands by drawing down the moon, who saved General Hieron from assassination by casting a sleep on his assailant. And the other, that you're no such thing, only a woman with a clever tongue, and it's all the lies of poets.”

“Mostly the lies of poets,” Cynthia said. “I learned a few tricks from a friend, but she's dead now. I did use a spell to attack the sorcerer, but that one won't work here.” (Turn herself into a Skylla and drag the Mamertines down? Not if she could avoid it; her last shape-change had nearly been permanent.) “I do know one spell that makes little things look large. If we found a drift of seaweed, say, with little spiny fish in it, I could make it look like a great sea-

monster, frighten them away. But I don't see anything — ” She let the tiller slip and strained her eyes against the glare. “Is that land ahead?”

“I think so,” Komi said. “One of the Aiolian Islands, Phaneraia probably. You can see the smoke of Hephaistos to our west, but we're past him already. See the plume of cloud overhead? The beaches of Phaneraia are full of the smoke and steam of the underworld, and it bubbles out in the water offshore.”

“How far offshore?” Cynthia cried, and without waiting for an answer, “Make for the island as fast as you can.”

Komi obeyed, letting the blistering south wind carry them forward. Cynthia ducked under the sheets he held to crouch in the bows, her eyes on the water ahead. The Mamertines continued to gain on them.

“Do you plan to run them aground?” Komi asked presently. “It could be done, we draw much less water than they do; unless they'll have the wit to hold off.” Cynthia made no answer.

After a while she saw, or thought she saw, smoky bubbles rising out of the water. She began to mutter the words of the spell Xanthë had taught her, and crept backward to the stern still muttering, and counting on her fingers (it was that kind of spell).

Bubbles were rising out of the water in their wake, bubbles the size of onions, bubbles the size of oxen: they burst as they reached the surface and let out clouds of thick steamy smoke that spread rapidly across the water until the Mamertine ship could no longer be seen at all.

Komi had made the sheets fast and joined her in the stern. “Well done, lady,” he said. “Now, if they have any sense they'll turn around and go back, and if they haven't any sense they'll follow us and they *will* go aground. How did you do it? If it's permitted to know. Is it done with that ring?”

Cynthia looked at the ring clutched in her left hand. “No, far from it. This is the ring given me by the nymph Arethousa, before she fell silent. It prevents any magic being done to the wearer — or by her. That's why I had to take it off. How far away is the —” And the boat came to a sudden stop, with a grinding sound like the whole mill-house falling into piles of stones.

“Not far at all,” Komi said with a rueful smile. “Where are my sandals? There they are.” He put them on and hopped over the side into the shallow water. “You can't go barefoot in these waters, the steam is like hot needles in

your feet. Oh, yes, the hull is still in good shape. That's good. The town's on the other side of the island and I wouldn't like to have to go cross-country here. This shore is an old holy place, unchancy to walk in — as well as hard on the feet. The old folk used to sacrifice here to the gods under the earth. No one remembers their names now; they're Sikels now in the town.”

“Kinsmen of yours?”

“Ah, no.” He climbed aboard again, and took off his sandals to dry. “By your leave, lady, I am a Sikan. A small but important difference. The Sikels are late-comers from Italy. We are the original inhabitants of the island. The old story is that we grew out of the rocks —”

Out in the smoky mist there was a splash, and a moment's pause, and a cry of pain, and some very crude Latin. Some Mamertine had leapt overboard barefoot, and had his mistake demonstrated to him in the most straightforward manner.

More splashing, and orders shouted in a mixture of bad Latin and bad Koinē. The ship-master was splitting his men into groups, sending them out to explore the beach. “Go a hundred paces out, then come back. Follow your own footprints if you have to. Sexte, beat the drum so they can find their way back.”

A slow drum beat began, like the stroke for a funeral barge. Under it, Cynthia whispered, “Can we get away?”

Komi shrugged, and got to his feet. He took a long-poled boathook from its mount on the port gunwale, and bracing himself in the prow he tried to push off from the sand. The boat did not move. “Maybe if I get out and put my back against it,” he muttered.

“We'll both get out,” Cynthia began, but Komi held up a hand. “Louka!” a voice was calling. “Louka! Why don't you answer?” They listened as the sound of feet splashing through the shallow water came nearer, and passed them, and faded away again. “The tide is going out,” Komi said in the barest whisper, “and I'm afraid we may be grounded till it comes back in. But I'd rather wait till they all get back on board to try to decide what they're going to do next, before we try to push off.” He sat on his heels, his back against the siderail, the boathook balanced lightly across his knees. Cynthia crept across the deck to sit beside him.

*Strange are the gods' gifts, she thought. Who, except maybe Sokrates, would have expected a Punic slave to have such wisdom in him? Who, except Zeno, would expect him to know virtue? To spare his sister the grief of a lost child, he is risking his own life, when he might have escaped and found freedom. What god was so clever, to find Virtue buried in the slaves' quarters? Was it only Luck?*

The drumbeat had stopped. The little waves lapped against the side of the boat, and the wind whistled in the rigging, an irritating half-sound like the thin whine of a mosquito.

The man appeared all at once on the railing, like a dagger whisked out of an assassin's sleeve. Cynthia's mind quickly looked through her handful of spells, and found none that would help. The Mamertine had armored himself as best he could before leaving his ship, and his brass-studded leather cuirass was wet up to his armpits. His helmet had been patched in two pieces, and was slightly too large for him. The edge of his shortsword had been nicked in a series of battles, but its point was still sharp. "Now I see," he said. "You're the witch of Syracuse, aren't you? What have you done with my mates?" He was looking along the sword's edge at Cynthia's throat.

Komi was on his feet, the boathook in his hands. "Save your trouble," the Mamertine said, and drove his sword at Cynthia's heart. Komi knocked it aside. Splinters flew, but the pole was sturdy and the edge too dull to cut it.

"You crow-bitten fool," the Mamertine said. "She'll drain the soul out of you, like she did to them." He aimed his sword's point at Komi, but the boathook kept him out of range. He tried a sudden lunge, and Komi rammed the boathook into his midriff; but for the leather cuirass, his guts would have been on the deck. The Mamertine backed off to regain his breath, but Komi pursued him down the deck, pace by pace like a little image of Nemesis. When the mercenary stopped with the stern at his back, Komi stopped too, holding the pole steady.

"Drop the sword on the deck," he said. "And you'd better drop the helm and the cuirass too, and then you may go overboard and swim to your own boat. Or if you'd prefer to be gutted like a tuna and pickled in salt water, that's your choice."

The Mamertine spat. "Mother-jumping slave's turd," he said.

Komi smiled with half his mouth. "Hail," he said. "And I'm Komi son of

Endreigon.”

The Mamertine raised his sword over his head, roaring like a bull, and Komi swung the pole sidewise and caught him on the side of the head where the helm didn't shield it. The mercenary toppled over the gunwale into the sea. Komi and Cynthia looked over the side, but could not tell if some of the bubbles in the unquiet sea came from the drowning man instead of from the fiery sands. In any event, the Mamertine never came up.

“I wish I could have gotten that sword,” Komi said after a moment. “I may yet need it. A person can't go carrying a boathook indoors, but a shortsword can fit anywhere – under your tunic, up your sleeve, in a baby's basket — ” His thoughtful look hardened. “Maybe one of the others had the kindness to die on land. I'll go look.” He picked up his sandals again and began to put them on.

“You're not going out there!” Cynthia exclaimed, forgetting to whisper, and then too late put her hands to her mouth. But there was no answer, no sound at all but the waves and the wind.

“Do you hear anything?” Komi said after a moment. “For my part, I don't. They're all dead, dead or stunned with the earthy gases. You can wander into pockets of the stuff in any little dip in the ground. I've been here before, don't forget. I know how to get about safely.” His hands rested lightly on her shoulders. “There are shadows under your eyes,” he said. “Poor lady, you've been doing a sailor's work all day in this raging wind, no wonder you're tired. Sit and rest till I get back. I shall be perfectly safe.”

Cynthia hesitated a moment too long; before she could speak her next “No” he had leaped over the side and vanished into the mist. She sat down on the deck, where the sail cast a pale shadow and the air was a thought cooler than elsewhere. She weighed the ring in her hand, wondering whether it would help or hinder Komi's excursion if she put it on and dispelled the magical mist. She hunched her stiff shoulders and rolled her head about, and rested her forehead on her knees to shield her eyes from the light.

The grass was dark under the shade of the trees, and the little flowers that dotted the ground shone faintly, like stars through mist. The turf was cool underfoot, and she stepped between two trees and stopped short. Beneath a scarlet-flowered tree a woman lay giving birth. She groaned and shrieked, although the birth was the easiest and quickest Cynthia had ever seen, and

before she could step forward to give aid the baby lay between the woman's feet, crying lustily. The mother picked up the child and cradled it in her arms, singing softly, and wiped away the birthing-blood and wax with a fold of her dark robe, and put it to the breast.

Then she opened fanged jaws impossibly wide and ate it in two bites.

Cynthia woke with a jerk, gasping for breath, her fists clenched tight as the ring bit into them. What ill-omened thing had she seen? The mist had grown thinner, and she could see the sun was falling toward the Gates of Herakles, an hour or two maybe till sunset. The Mamertine ship lay grounded to her west, dark against the reddening sunlight. Nothing moved except the little waves of the sea, touching the shore with little plumes of white foam. The tide had begun to come in. The beach sloped gently upward, pocked with little plumes of steam, to a ridge of compacted sand perhaps fifty paces from the water's edge. Almost opposite the boat, something lay atop the ridge, some darkish thing like a dead gull or a bit of venturesome driftwood. She jammed Arethousa's ring back onto her finger and the mist vanished with an almost audible "whoosh." And the thing along the ridge was a man's booted foot, dark with seawater, lying very still.

Sandals. Kilt up her skirt into her girdle. Where was the boathook? no, he had taken it with him. Cynthia vaulted the boat railing and splashed through the shallow water to the sand.

The sight from the top of the ridge was as she'd feared – worse than she had feared; she could not have made this up. All the men from the Mamertine ship lay sprawled along the sand, not in drifts like drowned men washed up with the high tide, but each separately, as if each had decided separately to lie down in his tracks and die there. She examined each man as she wandered among them: none was breathing, none had a heartbeat; all were beginning to grow cold.

She found Komi, barely breathing, draped like a cloak over the man whose short-sword he had just picked up. The hilt lay across his fingertips, hardwood sturdily bound with bronze wire across fingers slender as reeds and calloused with ropes and hard work. Cynthia tore off the ring — and held her breath waiting for something to happen, but nothing happened — and slipped it onto Komi's finger. There was no change.

He had fallen, as the mercenary he'd robbed had fallen, almost on the lip of

a shallow pit floored with smooth sand. The place smelled of sulphur and of rotten things, and she remembered what Komi had said: *Earth gases. You can wander into pockets of the stuff in any little dip in the ground.* She picked up the boat-hook he had dropped. Maybe, if she got him away quickly enough, he could revive . . . unless she had lingered here too long herself, for the air was darkening around her, and as she looked into the pit it seemed no longer shallow and floored with sand. It was as deep as a grave, as deep as the throat of Aitnë, and far down below there was the uneasy movement of little flames. Cynthia felt herself poured out and swallowed down that throat as smoothly as wine.

Little flames, and pale: they flickered all about her, as if about to go out. They should have been dying down into warm red coals, but the ground beneath her was cold. She moved along the floor like a pillar of smoke drifting in a slow draft. Pale flames guttered along the floor; and she also was a flame.

She tried to resist the pull, dig in what might have been her heels and move against the flow. She slowed down, but could not stop. If she could have got a good running start in the other direction, she might have made it out the other way – but not from a cold start. Or she could swim downstream, add her own strength to the current and reach the bottom sooner; but that didn't seem so wise a plan, not if she had any choice.

She was a tongue of flame – but she could not speak. Not that it mattered; there was no one on whom she could call for help. Oh, if Arethousa had not fallen asleep, and all the gods with her. But the gods were gone — or had never been, the lies of poets, the stock-in-trade of mountebanks.

The flame Cynthia flickered and sputtered, as if with green fuel or a high wind; but she went on drifting in that little breath of a breeze, down to where the long throat of that ancient lava tube widened into a chamber high as a tree and round as ripples in a pond. Its floor was a shallow funnel-shape, like a theatre, still preserving the form of the whirlpool of molten rock that had been swirling down some crack in the earth at the moment it froze solid. Dying flames guttered along the rock, drifting slowly toward what lay in the center.

Dim as a star that one can see only out of the corner of the eye: look directly at it, and there was nothing to see but formless blackness. But when

she turned her attention elsewhere, to the flames that struggled along the floor, then what lay in the center glowed with a dull red, blood-tinged like sunlight filtered through closed eyelids or a cupped hand. Now she remembered her dream. The thing was a grave: it was a womb: and Cynthia began to be very much afraid.

*O Zeus, father of gods and men, hear me. O Persephonë, Queen under the earth, rescue me. O Isis who raised the dead, hear me and come to my aid.* (Lies of poets. Names without realities, empty names.) Then something spoke.

*But I am Isis, and I am Persephonë. Did you not know? Me you served when you brought my children into the world; me you served when you slew my children and sent them back to me. All that is living I bear into the light; all that lives I devour again and swallow down into the darkness.*

*Here, at the earth's navel, once my children brought their lives to me, pouring them out in their fullness into my lap. So you have done for me today, pouring out these lives and your own, and you have pleased me.*

(*O Hermes, Cynthia prayed. Grey-eyed Athenë, hear me.* The pallid little flames around her were the shabby spirits of the Mamertines, drifting around the rings of the frozen whirlpool till they reached the center and were swallowed up in the womb/gullet of earth. As she was drifting, as she would be swallowed up. *O Wisdom and the Aither of Euripides. Have you all died back into the earth?*)

*All, the answer came. To me all flesh comes, and there is no escaping me. You also shall come to me.*

She had moved halfway round the first ring of the circle when a light broke upon her, like the sun bursting through a cloud or from behind the eclipsing shoulder of the moon, and gave her its name. *Virtue, sought by gods and men.* A flame like her own, but brighter, a pure brilliance reaching high overhead – but now dangerously near the center, soon to be sucked in.

Funnels; spirals; cones. The brilliance of Komi's spirit ignited her own, and a memory opened up in her mind like a flower.

A hot day in Alexandria, long ago. The smells of dust and sweat and oil. Two geometers on the steps of the Library, drawing cones in the air with swift fingers and slicing them through with the flat of the hand. And in the

dust of the street below, three little boys played a game of rolling stones.

Cynthia neither smiled nor took a deep breath nor pushed off with her toes, having neither lips nor lungs nor toes. But she made a long swoop across the rings, picking up speed as she neared the center, where Komi hovered at the edge of the pit. And as she moved she chanted at the heart of her flame, and counted along its sputtering edges, because it was that kind of spell.

All around her the flames rose high, the greasy spirits of old mercenaries blazing like fat on the fire: a dozen times, a hundred times magnified. Invisible in a whole forest of flames, she skimmed like a fishing bird over the surface, seeking the one spark that tasted of Virtue, and caught it up —

It was like being made part of the sun. Nothing stood between his flame and her own; she knew him as she was known, in the flowering of a tree full of stars. So the gods must speak, or whatever divine intelligences there were: and the language of their speaking was love.

— and without stopping sped on up the tube and burst out of the earth, like Athenē from the brain of Zeus, or that slave woman's baby who had popped into the world after one pain, not giving Cynthia time to spread out her apron.

When they came back to themselves they were running, hand in hand, along the beach as fast as they could. Their boat lay ahead, dimly to be seen in the sunset glow and through the sand raised by the howling wind. A glint of metal in Komi's other hand told Cynthia that he had brought that damned shortsword with him after all. Then she realized she was still clutching the boathook. She had to laugh, and then she had to cough.

Komi stopped her and held her by the shoulders. “Be easy. Breathe, love, breathe. We're safe now, I think.” Then he had to cough himself, and they stood together catching their breath, their heads leaning on one another's shoulders.

The sun had gone behind the moon again, the blaze of Virtue hidden in human flesh. But she knew it was still there; she felt its hidden warmth in his breath on her shoulder. Their arms had wound round each other's bodies, holding them close as flesh would permit.

“Wups,” Komi said after a moment. “We're going to have to catch the boat.” The tide had come in and floated it off, and it lay a bowshot's length offshore. Komi picked up the shortsword again, from the sand where he had

dropped it, and waded into the water. Cynthia followed.

“Komi,” she said as the water rose to her waist, “there is a god within you.”

He raised one eyebrow. “Then there's one in every man. I salute them all — particularly yours.” Now he must swim, awkwardly and one-handed, the sword above the water, till he reached the boat. He scrambled over the side and reached down to pull Cynthia up after him. The wind had risen till it screamed like the Furies in their ears; without trying to speak further he found the ring in the deck, raised the trap-door, and beckoned. She tucked the rolled-up rug under her arm and followed him below.

Here it was dark as pitch, except for the little light that seeped in from the trap-door. She could see lamps, and a tinder box, hanging by the foot of the step. They would come in handy later. She unrolled her rug and motioned to Komi to close the trap.

Velvety darkness, and relative silence, and the sound of breathing. “Well,” he said.

“Well,” she echoed. “What do you say? Was that really the Queen of all the Dead? I for one have my doubts. People die every day, every hour; but that cavern was empty but for us and the Mamertines. I have her down for a little local goddess who hadn't had a good meal in centuries and didn't care what lies she told.”

“Does it matter? To her, or to something, we must all come in the end. I pray whatever gods may be for length of days between that time and now.”

Cynthia abandoned the argument. The man was sitting at her elbow, not moving. Had he gone shy, or remembered the customs of the upper world? She would make him forget them. She put her arms round him and bore him down to the rug. The joining of flesh ran a poor second to the bonding of their spirits; but it was way ahead of whatever was in third place. There were soft cushions, and water, and wine and a prince's picnic basket. With any kind of luck, the wind would last for days.

## 7. THE GIFT OF MINERVA

Even when one is in love — even when one is drowned and deep in love as Atlantis in the sea — even then there comes the time when a person has to relieve herself. Cynthia approached the gilt-handled chamber pot with distaste, for neither of them had gone abovedecks during the storm, and it had been blowing three days. But — yes, the howl of the wind, muffled as it had been by the thick planking of the deck above them, had fallen silent. She could hear the tiny sounds of Komi's breathing; he was too lean and fit a man to snore. Cynthia carefully picked up the pot and crept up the ladder, pushing up the trapdoor with her shoulder.

The morning was cool and bright; sun, sky and sea all looked fresh-polished. Their boat, on the other hand, had had most of its paint stripped off it by windborne sand and looked much less like stolen goods than it had before. The boat had drifted away from the shore, and the island Phaneraia was no more than a sullen mountain-shape fringed by smoking beaches. The northernmost bits of Sicily and the southwesternmost bits of Italy were blue smudges on the horizon, and toward the east —

“Oh, curse it,” Cynthia said aloud, and emptied the chamber pot overboard.

“What's the matter?” Komi said, coming up the ladder.

“Ship on the horizon. No, it's not the Mamertine hulk, that's still beached, I think. Over there.”

Komi gripped the mast with hands and feet and climbed it almost to the top. He squinted into the east, where the rising sun turned the sky golden and blackened the approaching ship. “Hellene ship,” he said after a moment, and slithered down again. “That's a stroke of luck; they're not likely to meddle with such small fry as us. What's left of the food?”

“Not much.”

“Then I'll catch us some breakfast.” With one of Cynthia's hairpins bent into a hook, and a few fathoms of light line, he had three little fish lying gutted on the deck by the time Cynthia had the brazier lit to cook them. Then he looked up and said, “Ah. Our luck just ran out.” The ship that had pulled alongside them had been made by Hellenes, no doubt of it. But the stern-eyed nobleman at her prow, and the dozen or so armed men lined up behind the

siderail, and maybe even the fellow with one foot up on the railing and the grappling hook in his hand, were just as certainly not Hellenes but Romans.

“Maybe,” she said. “How's your Latin?”

“I have none.”

“Then I'll have to do the talking — and that stuffy-looking Roman won't care for that. Ah, well. Keep an eye on the charcoal.” She went to the railing nearest the Roman ship, and the nobleman stepped between two of his soldiers to face her. “Hail, my lord.”

“Hail, woman. What brings you into these waters?”

“The storm that blew three days ago drove us through the straits of Messenë, pardon, Messina, and on northward to here. It was only by the favor of the gods that we weren't drowned.” All that was true enough, except for the parts she had left out.

“The favor of the gods! O happy people, if you have that.” And descending suddenly from the high style, “I wish some of it could rub off on me.” He shook his head, Roman-fashion. “Forgive me. I am Gaius Duilius Nepos.”

“I'm Cynthia daughter of Euelpides; my man's name is Komi son of — ” (an instant's horrified blankness, and a snatch at the first letter of the alphabet) “ — of Akhilleus. Formerly of Alexandria, lately of Syracuse.”

“And cannot your husband speak Latin? No? Oh, well,” Duilius said predictably. One of the soldiers — a decurion, if Cynthia read him right — stepped up to Duilius and murmured in his ear. “Really,” Duilius said, and to Cynthia, “The decurion asks if you are that Cynthia, called the witch of Syracuse, who put down both a plague and a slave uprising, all in one year. And he says that if you are she, then truly you have the gods' ears, and you may be able to help us. But that if not, you are probably spies and we should hold you for questioning.”

At the thought of “questioning” Cynthia's heart turned over — and they had to get to Panormos, and that within the month — but she wasn't going to tell the Roman that. “My lord, the tongues of men have made my deeds much greater than they were. Yet I have spoken with Arethousa, patroness of Syracuse, and had her help in the past.”

“Come aboard, then.” Duilius said. “You, there, lay a plank between the ships and help our guests aboard. You, Luci, go and bank their coals for

them. Come, we can at least give you a better breakfast than grilled sprats.”

And he did so, offering them watered wine and sausage rolls and honeycakes. He ate one bite of each, as if to reassure them that nothing was poisoned, and drank a few sips of wine. Seen up close, he was a younger man than they had thought, thirty perhaps, with the face of an eagle and hair as black as a raven's wings. He stared out over the sea and said nothing until they had finished eating. Then he poured more wine and began,

“I own not inconsiderable lands in Italy, south of Rome and around Neapolis. They are fertile, and farmed by good honest people. We gathered surpluses enough, even with the demands of the army for the Taras campaign, that I thought of trading with other nations for such goods as we don't produce in Rome. I sent out messages, and presently the trader Maharbal of Carthage came to Rome to discuss this trade with me.”

The Roman's jaw tightened. “He stayed in my house. He was my guest. This was while there was peace between Rome and Carthage —” he broke off. “Ah. Join us, Mago; this concerns you.”

The young Carthaginian glanced uneasily at Cynthia and Komi, and at the Romans, and slowly approached. There were deep shadows under his eyes, and he looked sick. “Mago was the companion of Maharbal,” Duilius explained, “his nephew and secretary. While we were still in negotiation, as I said, the affair of the Mamertines in Messina came to a head.

“For reasons I still cannot comprehend, the Senate resolved to drive the outlaws out of the city they had taken — though they had allowed other just as base to remain in other places, on the soil of Italy itself. To no one's surprise, the Carthaginians moved in to garrison Messina and protect it. It seemed almost certain that there would be war — and that I could hardly guarantee Maharbal's safety, even in my own house. So I hired this ship to convey him safely back to Carthage.

“We left Ostia two days ago, though that same storm was blowing and we could make little headway against it. But I felt no anxiety, for I assumed that Maharbal was safe on the ship, now that we were out of Italy. But last night, as I think, someone put a drug in the wine served to our Carthaginian guests. This morning we found Mago sick near to death from the drug, and Maharbal dead — from a dagger's stroke.

“I have questioned everyone on the ship, both my own men and the Greek

sailors. No one knew anything — rather, none will admit to knowing anything.” He sighed. “We are honest men in Rome. We tell the truth, honor the gods, and keep our word. How am I to tell, out of all the people on this ship, which one is lying to me?”

“Just a moment,” Cynthia said, and translated a summary for Komi. “What do you think? Is there anything we can do to help this careful, upright Roman?” (She said this rather than “cursed fool,” which was in her thoughts, lest Duilius know more of the Koinē than she hoped he did.)

Komi scratched his chin and said, “Hmmm.”

“Because if I cannot find the guilty man,” Duilius went on, “then I must go on to Carthage, to return Maharbal's body and his nephew to their people, and offer myself in place of the killer. That is the only honorable thing I can do.”

Cynthia translated. “If we go to Carthage,” Komi said, “I'm a dead man. And so, I think, is Duilius.”

There was the sound of a throat being cleared, from one of the sailors at the railing, a pleasant-looking Hellene with blue eyes and a straggly beard. “Forgive the intrusion,” he said. “Your man's right, mistress witch. The Carthaginians will kill master Duilius if they get hands on him. Speaking for the men of this ship, to whom Duilius has been a very fair and honest master, we'd rather it didn't happen.”

“So what am I to do?”

The sailor shrugged. “Find the killer. Easier for you than for the master; he's not a stupid man, but he said it himself, he doesn't know a liar or a rogue when he sees one.”

“And if he goes to Carthage we all go with him?” The sailor shook his head “yes.” Cynthia got to her feet, feeling she could sit still no longer, and went to the railing. Go to Carthage, and that stubborn honest fool Duilius would die, and Komi with him, as a thief and runaway slave – and Cynthia too, because she could not conceive of any life without him.

She stared at the dancing waves as though the answer might be written on them. What god — if the gods had not all fallen asleep, as she had cause to know — what god might have helped her now? Wise Athenē? Better yet, Autolykos prince of thieves, son of Hermes and grandfather of resourceful Odysseus. What would Odysseus have done in her place? Sneak away

clinging to the belly of a dolphin instead of a sheep? She closed her eyes and tried to empty her mind, so that a divine voice could speak to her if it chose to. But there was nothing, only the little slaps of the waves against the ships' sides, and the scream of gulls.

She opened her eyes. Komi's abandoned fishline had caught something bigger than sprats, a young tuna maybe, and the gulls were swooping overhead watching it. And a thought slipped into her mind, easy as a foot into an old shoe. "Whose birds are these?" she said, in a voice that did not seem to be her own.

"What's that?" Duilius said, but she answered herself, "Those are Athenë's birds, whom you call Minerva. She has sent us aid." (Never mind that Athenë's bird was properly the owl of the Akropolis. The Roman didn't have to know that.)

"Look —" the gulls had found the gutted sprats, and had descended onto the deck of Komi's ship to squabble over them. "They have accepted our offering."

"With enthusiasm," Duilius said, looking hopeful for the first time since they had met him. "A good omen."

*(Of course, Cynthia commented silently. A hungry gull gobbles dead fish and he takes it as a message from the gods. The plan was branching out in her mind, taking on leaves and flowers of divine beauty. Thank you, Athenë, Autolykos, Odysseus. If in truth you sleep, this is a fine dream you've sent me.)* "Now I know what to do," Cynthia said to the waiting Romans. "I need to go back to my ship for a moment. Steady the plank, my good man. Thank you." She crossed over before Duilius could say anything. "Thank you, good birds," she shouted after them as they flapped away toward Phaneraia. Cynthia took a moment to pull up the tuna on Komi's line and drop it into a bucket. If they survived all this, they might still want to eat it. Then she went below.

Before Duilius had a chance to get anxious again, Cynthia came up the ladder carrying a bundle wrapped in purple silk. (A tunic found aboard the stolen ship, too big for Komi and too small for Cynthia, but the Roman was not to know that either.) "I shall need a dark room," she said as she came on board. "What I have here may not be seen by the eyes of any man. It is the veil of Minerva, given to me in the Temple of Isis in Alexandria." (Lies, lies;

she'd never even set foot in the place. Surely Odysseus was on her side.)

“My cabin,” Duilius said promptly, and made a sign of reverence. (So did all the men within earshot — including Komi, who still had not understood a word, but knew a cue when he saw one.) “We can cover the window with blankets.”

They blanketed the window and shoved Duilius's Spartan furnishings aside; they hung another pair of blankets inside the door, and they took the lamp away. While Cynthia was inside making arrangements of which she would not speak, Duilius set up a jar of water and a basin outside the door, as she had commanded.

“Now let my words be heard by every man,” Cynthia said when she came out again. “Inside that room, safe from the profanation of your eyes, hangs the veil of Minerva, all-wise daughter of Jupiter. Each of you will wash his hands, then go inside. Stretch out your hands till you touch the sacred veil; then, holding it between your hands, swear to her that you are innocent of the blood of the Carthaginian Maharbal. Then come out again, and stand there by the railing.

“One of you, of course, will have sworn falsely. One or more, perhaps. The goddess will tell me. Or perhaps she'll simply strike the guilty man down — it doesn't matter; she has promised me there'll be no mistake. My lord, you shall go first, as a sign that the innocent man has nothing to fear.” (*Because if Duilius is the murderer himself, then he is such a great actor that he deserves life, or else I am such a fool as deserves to perish.*)

Duilius did not speak, but nodded in the Roman fashion. He was as pale, as he carefully washed and dried his hands, as though it were his young bride in the room, instead of what was actually inside — well, for a pious Roman, maybe it was understandable. He went in, closing the door behind him; he came out again; he went to the railing, clasped his hands in front of him and did not speak.

The next man followed, and the next. Cynthia did not try to impose any sort of order on them, other than making sure that those who had come out did not go in again. One or two of the Romans looked so distressed that Cynthia said, “You know, you are only swearing that you are innocent of the blood of Maharbal. Anything else you might have done is between you and your own priests.” The gods knew, and Cynthia did not care, what

imperfections these stiff-necked Romans might have on their burnished consciences. Mago went in, and the sailors one by one.

Every man had gone in, from the decurion to the grimmest of the sailors (his hands looked startlingly pink compared to the rest of him). “Now,” Cynthia said.

Beginning at the near end of the line, she went to every man and lifted his hands between her own, raising them to her face; quietly she drew in breath and let it out again, while looking the man directly in his eyes. Some of the men trembled with fear; some blushed and could not meet her gaze; the blue-eyed sailor caught her eye and winked; the Roman soldiers stood as if on parade, their faces grim. Mago still looked sick. Last of all she came to Duilius, who gave her his hands with a look of perfect trust. His hazel eyes were steady and clear, confident in what they did not understand. He made Cynthia herself feel unclean, not quite as grimy as a sailor's unwashed backside, but close enough. She made an effort and smiled.

She turned to look at the long line of men, and raised her voice. “The wise goddess has spoken,” she said. “One man is stained with the blood of Maharbal; the others are innocent. That man —” she paused for a moment, but no one crumbled at the knees to save her the trouble; they had no sense of the dramatic. “I'm sorry, my lord; I don't know whether this will please you or grieve you. The murderer is the nephew, Mago.”

Now the Carthaginian did crumple, and fell retching to the deck, fouling himself with the sickness he could no longer keep at bay. Sailors dumped a bucket of water over him; soldiers hauled him away. The rest of the men went back to their stations.

Duilius remained where he had stood, shock in his eyes. “Why?” he said. “Why would Mago murder his uncle? His own flesh and blood?”

“I don't know,” Cynthia said gently. “Though you might be able to get him to answer a few questions between here and Carthage, when he finishes puking. Maybe he planned to inherit his share of the family business. Maybe he just didn't like him. There is a lot of evil in the world, O virtuous Roman, and no one has ever found a way to make it go away. I need to take away the things in your cabin. And then, may my husband and I have leave to go?”

“Readily,” the Roman said, and walked her to the door with respect. When she came out again with her purple bundle, she saw the sailors loading

bundles onto her deck; Komi was already back on board, shaking out the square sail and tying it to the yard.

“A small gift,” Duilius said. “Far less than what I owe you; you have saved both our lives and our honor.”

“Your lives, maybe,” Cynthia said. “I can hardly save what is imperishable. Go with the gods, my lord. Komi, we need to catch the wind.” She almost ran across the plank bridge and saw it withdrawn. “Get away from here,” she muttered under her breath. “Just in case.”

“I'm working on it, I'm working on it,” he said, and let out the sail and let the wind fill it. They moved away to the west, the Roman ship tacking to the south. When it seemed no bigger than a peapod floating on the water, and their own ship running lightly before a good east wind, Cynthia let out the breath she had been holding and sat down on the deck.

“So,” Komi said, “I perceive you found the man his murderer and got us turned loose; but what did you *do*?”

She told him what she had said and done, and he laughed. “Apart from the question of what the veil of Minerva would be doing in the Temple of Isis —”

“Oh, pious Romans don't ask questions like that. They've already decided their gods are the same as the gods of Hellas, never mind in how many differences in their stories and their habits. It's no strain for them to believe in a few more.”

“So what was the thing really?”

“One of those big table napkins, the fine linen ones. I hung it up from the rafter and sprinkled it with that bottle of mint essence I'd just bought in the market the day you snatched me out of Syracuse.”

“And only the guilty man didn't dare to touch the 'veil,' and only his hands didn't smell of mint. Well done, love. So the Wise Goddess didn't speak to you at all?”

“I don't say that,” Cynthia said. “*Somebody* put the idea in my head.” Among the Roman's gifts was a pile of wine-jars; she picked up a small one, broke the seal, and poured the wine overboard. “Thank you, Athenë, Autolykos, Odysseus. Whoever. To the God Unknown whose altar stands in Athens. Komi, take a look in that bucket, would you? If the gulls didn't get

that tuna, we can eat him for dinner.”

## 8. THE CURSE OF TANIT

Day was breaking, a calm perfect sunrise without a cloud in the sky, in shades of rose and gold. Cynthia and Komi sat with their arms around each other, watching the growing light reveal the planking of their boat, the path along the shore, the blocky shapes of the city of Panormos rising to the west.

As the light grew, they could see how many merchant ships lay in its harbor, putting off or taking on rich cargoes for the ceaseless Punic trade that bustled all over and around the Mediterranean Sea. One could also see how many of them were no merchants, but ships of war: a fair number. Ten, twenty, thirty of them. No one doubted that the Carthaginians and the Romans meant to go to war sooner or later: maybe it would be sooner.

There was now light for them to see each other by. Cynthia saw a small dark man with a broad brow and a narrow chin, light-footed, deft-fingered, a sailor of small boats since he could walk. Komi saw — well, the gods knew what he saw, under the surface of a tall hawk-faced widow of twenty-two, but he had found it fair.

Without a word they embraced and parted; each knew what was to be done. Komi must find a better docking place for the boat than he could have found in the dark, while Cynthia made her way into the city.

The city gates had opened as soon as it was full daylight. People were coming in three and four abreast, bound for the markets mostly, under the eyes of a pair of bored city guards. Cynthia passed them in the company of three peasant women carrying clean linen, while the women were given to understand she was with the boy with the donkey and the basket of lemons. Once inside, the strand of people unraveled and went separate ways, leaving Cynthia to get her bearings.

Komi had given her careful instructions, a chart in words for navigating those treacherous shoals, the streets of Panormos. *Just inside the gate the streets branch five times. Take the second to the left, passing between the inns called the Fortunate Ferret and the Winepress....*

She had lived in Punic cities before, during her father's long wanderings, and had never taken harm; but it might be different now. She had fought the priest of Tanit in the streets of Syracuse, cat to rat, and killed him; and though

she had told no one the word had somehow leaked out into Punic lands. She paused at a crossroads. There was the fountain with the blue tiles; she turned left here.

The sun was warm already, promising furnace heat by afternoon. The thought was oppressive. Between two buildings Cynthia caught a glimpse of the center of the city, rich houses and temples, and a shining dome that housed a furnace of another kind. The Tophet they called it, the fane of the god they called the King: in Punic, Moloch. Cynthia made to spit, and then held back; someone might see. *Dirty Punic gods.*

Right at the house with three windows above the door. Down the street (past two dogs fighting, three little boys playing stone-paper-scissors, and a woman with a water jar), and right again between two blank walls. On the left-hand wall someone had painted the sigil of Tanit: a crude figure in a full skirt, a triangle with head and arms. There was no face, and the images of Tanit went veiled.

Word had made its way back to her, eventually, that the priests of Tanit knew how she had slain their emissary in defense of Syracuse. But how had they known? had there been witnesses, hidden in the dark from even a cat's eyes?

Unless Tanit herself had been the witness — assuming she wasn't dead, like most of the gods these days. Zeus and Hera, Hermes and Apollo: their names were still sung, their rituals carefully performed; but the gods whom men really adored were Peace and Harmony and other goddesses whose names were those of abstract virtues.

She glanced at the ring of iron on her finger, the gift of Arethousa, patroness of Syracuse. Cynthia had never seen the nymph again after the day she had received the ring, but its power to shield from magic still held. From any ill-wishing of Tanit the ring should protect her; and against the actions of mortals she would simply have to use her wits.

But if she ever got back to Syracuse, then by Prudence and Virtue, she was going to get out those books of magic and study them. She knew only a handful of spells, none of them helpful at the moment. Three chants for taking away the toothache, and one for bringing it on. She knew many tricks for easing childbirth and gripes in the gut, little bits of village witchery. And the shape-changing spell, which she would never try again without Komi at

hand to take it off from her. And the enlarging spell that had turned tiny bubbles of mist into the semblance of a fogbank. And the one that turned a curse back on its sender — but the curse had to accomplish itself first before it could be returned, so that was no good for protection.

When she reached the house she knew it, from the pattern of the windows on the walls to the crack in the paving-stone at the service-door. But caution and their plan made her say to the woman sweeping the pavement, “Is this the house of Hanno son of Barca, the oil merchant?”

“It is. What's your business with the master?”

“Not with him; with a woman named Enzaro. Does she still live here?”

“And if she does?”

“I'm a midwife,” Cynthia said. “I met her brother Komi in a foreign port, and learning that I was coming to Panormos around his sister's time, he asked me to look in on her; and I have come.”

The woman squinted, peering at Cynthia against the morning brightness. The sun was just rising over the eastern housetops. “You're a Hellene, aren't you. Never mind, you may be sent by the gods for all of that. Enzaro has lain in childbed these three days, and still lies there; her womb will not open. Will you come and see her?”

“Of course.” Now came the tricky part. “What of Komi, then? Is he at home, or is there any news of him?”

“No. He and the young master, Myrgan, they went to Carthage in the spring and haven't returned. The gods grant they are well.” The woman didn't seem at all confident of it.

As Cynthia stepped toward the doorway, she stumbled on the hem of her long gown and fell against the wall. She slapped it once, twice, and got her balance back.

The woman's face had gone ashen. “A bad omen.”

“No, a good one. I stumbled outside the doorstep, not on it. So may all ill-luck fall short and remain outside this house.”

“May it be so. Come with me.” As she entered, Cynthia cast a glance at the wall: the two smudges from her charcoal-smeared hand were not very dark, but visible enough for one who was looking for them. The slaves in a

household know everything that happens in it: if this woman knew nothing of what Komi had been up to in the past month, she could be sure Hanno knew even less.

The woman led her, not to some little dark room, but up a flight of tiled stairs into the better part of the house. Seeing Cynthia's lifted brow, the woman said, "It's Myrgan's child Enzaro's bearing, you see, and the master thought to acknowledge it in Myrgan's name by letting it see the light of day in Myrgan's own room."

"That's quite an honor. Does he mean to bring up the child as if it were legitimate?"

"Oh, no." The woman looked shocked. "The child is Myrgan's first-born, and Enzaro's too for that matter. He'll give it to the Lord, as is proper. Not that it'll do him any good."

"Why not? Is your master not a pious man? Does he not fear the gods?"

"Pious? He's all of that, now, when it's too late. Sacrifices and mortifications and prayers at all hours; he's up in the Lady's shrine now, begging her for mercy. Fear the gods? He'd better.

"It was Myrgan, you see, who should have gone to the Lord. He was Hanno's first-born, and his poor lady's too, and she died in childbed, and the baby was all he had left of her." The voice dropped to a whisper. "So he withheld him, and did not give him to the fire. And the gods will punish him."

"Hmmm," Cynthia said. "He seems to have prospered so far."

"Of course," the woman said scornfully. "Don't you know *anything*? Well, you're a Hellene. The gods have raised him high, the better to cast him down. They are jealous, and quick to anger."

"And best of all," said Cynthia drily, "he's never been able to enjoy any of his success."

"Of course not. Come, it's this way," and she led Cynthia into a pleasant room, its white walls decorated with a frieze of sea-creatures, and a window that looked out over the sea. Under it sat a clothes-chest painted with dancing figures.

A brazier on a tripod, full of banked coals, held a pot of water keeping

warm against need; on the other side of the window stood a birthing-stool. An old woman lay curled up asleep on the floor: the local midwife, worn out after three days and nights of watching.

The girl in the bed could have been no more than fifteen, and she had Komi's triangular face and dark lashes. As Cynthia watched a shadow passed over her face, and she said "Uh!" and awoke.

"It's all right," Cynthia said, slipping her hand under the bedclothes to feel the rigid abdomen. "Just another pain; you've had no little few of them so far."

The girl nodded, breathing shallowly till the contraction passed off. "It's morning, isn't it? What's the weather like?"

Stepping over the sleeping woman, Cynthia peered out the window. "Well, well. At dawn this morning there wasn't a cloud in the sky; now there's a big mass of them in the west."

"The one thing we know of the weather,  
If fine, or if stormy, it will change,"

the girl quoted. She had Komi's sparkling hazel eyes, too, and much of his cheerful disposition. "Maybe it's an omen. Burst open, you clouds, and give forth your rain. I wish I could. Then I could get some sleep."

"Yes, it's a temptation to fall asleep, during a long labor," Cynthia said, "but then the next pain takes you unawares and ill-prepared." She turned back the covers and cast a practiced look between Enzaro's legs. Nothing doing there yet. The old woman still slept; Cynthia sighed and put a hand on her shoulder. "Grannie, wake up."

The old woman woke, confused and frightened. "Don't worry," Cynthia said. "I've come to help. Nothing's happened yet. Has her water broken? Was there a bloody show?"

The crone shook her head "no." "As you said, girl, nothing has happened. The doors of her womb are shut. I begin to think it's witchcraft."

"Who would pay a witch to hold back a slave's baby? Even when —"

"Even when it's a first-born, destined for the fire? Maybe nobody gives a curse about Enzaro. Maybe someone wants to torment Hanno — him up in the shrine, bowing and bellowing and pleading for the gods' favor."

“Maybe. Well, grannie, you're worn out, and I'm young and fresh. Go home and rest. Maybe tomorrow will bring better news.” The old woman crept away.

All right. She settled herself on the floor beside the bed and laid a hand on Enzaro's belly. “Go ahead and sleep. I'll feel the cramping before you do, and wake you.” The girl's eyes closed.

A little time passed, long enough to tell a hundred or one of Aisop's fables. Then Cynthia felt the muscles tighten under her fingers, and said, “Enzaro.” The hazel eyes opened, and the girl breathed shallowly while the moments passed and the knot in her belly tightened and loosened again. By the time it was quite gone she was asleep again.

The birthing-stool was one of the ordinary kind, three-legged with a back and arms to support the mother, and instead of a seat two beams set well apart for the midwife to reach out and catch the child as it fell into the world. The stool was old, its bright paint worn – Cynthia reached out with her free hand and tested it with a jiggle – but the frame was sound enough. “Enzaro.”

“Oh. Yes.” They waited together till the cramp went off, and Enzaro fell asleep again.

This went on all morning.

From time to time someone would come by to see how things were getting on, usually bearing in hand some excuse for being on this floor at all. The old woman who kept the door, carrying a broom. A young man with a basket, peering round the doorframe (“Get out of here, you scamp! this is women's business!”). The door stood open, of course; to close it might close up the womb that now should open.

An older man came by, carrying a chamberpot, his eyes well averted as he asked, “No luck yet?”

“Good morning, Pots,” Enzaro called out. “No, no luck yet. I've worn out one midwife and I'm starting in on the next.”

The next to come in was the household cook, bearing a tray with bread, olives, little fried fish, and some wine. “Can I have some water, please?” Enzaro said drowsily. “I don't want anything to eat.”

“No, you shouldn't eat. Here's water. It's getting hot, I'm afraid.” She removed the bedding, covering Enzaro with a single sheet of linen.

“Whatever happened to that storm?” But it was still hanging off in the west. Enzaro fell asleep again. Cynthia took her seat on the floor and ate and drank one-handed. And the morning wore on.

The old man called Pots came by the door again, eyes modestly averted, listening by the door as he went by. One might have thought he was Enzaro's kinsman, but he hadn't the look of the sharp-faced Sikans; he looked like ordinary Punic stock.

Never mind the *why* someone would pay to block Enzaro's labor; *how* was the question. Xanthë had never mentioned such a thing. But then, Cynthia had never consented to learn any of Xanthë's favorite abortifacients; maybe she had assumed she wouldn't be interested in this either. Nor was she, except in how to undo it.

And there was nothing about it in old Palamedes's books of magic, not as far as she had read in them. When she got back to Syracuse she *must* go on with those books.

– *If* she ever got back to Syracuse. She had never decided how to explain that her man was a runaway Sikan slave; maybe there was no graceful way. Maybe they would do better to set up as metics in some Hellene or even Roman town where they weren't known. But she must get this child born somehow, and get out of here with it before someone in the house found out about Komi.

There was a song creeping forward now on hesitant feet from the dark back rooms of her memory. A song about a young wife who'd had this trouble, and the way her man solved it. Oh, she remembered only bits and snatches, but he had gone out into the street, bidding all his neighbors congratulate him on his new son. And the witch had cried, had cried,

“What rascal has combed out her hair, that I tied with my  
hand into witch-knots?  
Or who has unknotted her sandal, to let her go light of a  
newborn?”

— and the husband had gone and done those things, and the child was born before he could turn around. It was worth a try. She found a pair of worn sandals under the bed — and the laces were knotted, which had to have been done after Enzaro had last taken them off. In the ornamented chest she found an ivory comb: Myrgan's property, no doubt; perhaps all the more appropriate

for that reason. Enzaro's long black hair certainly had enough knots in it to account for any number of witches, but she'd been tossing about in labor for three days, which would also account for them. She combed them all out and plaited the hair. A thought of tying off the end with a cord was instantly dismissed.

After the next cramp wore off, Enzaro remained awake. She raised herself on one elbow and drank more water. "Where did you meet Komi? Is he well?"

"I met him in Syracuse, and he was very well; a charming young rogue with his wits about him." No need to tell the girl what else was between them: what she didn't know, she couldn't tell.

Enzaro sighed. "Yes, that's our Komi. And Myrgan, the young master? How was he?"

"I didn't see him."

"How could you see Komi and not see Myrgan? They're always together, messing about in some boat or other."

*Because he left him cursing behind in Carthage, Cynthia thought, and one of these days his father will find out.* "Every sailor goes ashore once in a while. He bumped into me in the market and made me drop a bottle of essence of mint." How many questions was this girl going to ask? Awake, she was as bad as her brother.

Ah, but the gods must be on somebody's side, if not Hanno's. There was Komi, peering through the doorway. Enzaro cried out in delight, and Komi stepped round the birthing-stool to kiss his sister's cheek.

"Komi, I'm so glad to see you. I didn't expect you back till autumn, if then. Where's Myrgan? Oh, gods, and here I am lying-in in his bedroom." She started to get up, but another cramp set in and she lay down again, panting.

"I wish I could do this and get it over with," she said when she could breathe freely. "I don't know why it won't *come*. Do you suppose it knows something?" The sparkle had gone out of her eyes. "Poor little scrap, I carry you safe for nine months, and go to all this trouble to bring you into the world, and then in the same hour of your birth you've got to have your little throat cut and go into the fire. Is that why you're afraid to come out? But it's a hard world, child, and death is everywhere in the midst of life. You may be

getting the better deal.” The girl looked up, and the corner of her mouth twitched. “Oh, look, I've made the midwife weep. I'm sorry. Komi, you never said: where is Myrgan?”

“Ah, he's not here. I've been telling them downstairs about the beautiful Carthaginian lady he's smitten with, and how he's forgotten all about boats and the sea, and how his father mustn't know of it —”

“That's not answering my question!” Enzaro snapped. “Komi, you're in trouble, aren't you? *Where is Myrgan?*”

“I told you her wits were quick,” Komi said. “To the best of my knowledge he's still in Carthage. There really is a lady, and the gods really should forbid his father ever hears about her. And I'm not in trouble yet, though I shall be soon.”

“What have you done?”

“Why, I've stolen a boat —” he counted off on his fingers — “left Myrgan — come to Syracuse and abducted Cynthia here — crept by stealth into Panormos harbor and brought her here — all to steal your baby the moment it's born, and Hanno can buy off his dirty old gods some other way. That's all.” He spread out his hand as if the whole thing were childishly simple.

“Oh!” Enzaro's face flushed, and her body went limp. Cynthia knelt beside her, all alert: if pity for the child's fate had been holding her back, this news might be all she needed to set her going. But a cramp came on and went off without effect.

“Cynthia,” the girl said. “Are you the one they call the witch of Syracuse?”

“Miscalled, yes, once or twice.”

“Then you must walk carefully here. You've been spoken of in Panormos, and not well spoken of. They say you slew a priest of Tanit who went to set a plague in Syracuse.”

“Did I? Who told you that?”

“Oh, I've heard it. You know, the fine folk talk of this and that, they don't think slaves can hear, and so we hear everything. And Pots has spoken of it; he's an older man than Hanno, and fears the gods.” Another contraction came and went without effect, and Enzaro spoke a bad Punic word under her breath. She sat up a little higher and patted her abdomen like a naughty

puppy. "Come on, child, you've got an unusual bit of good fortune here; you mustn't miss your tide."

"It may be there's something unnatural in this," Cynthia said. "You're young and healthy and you ought to have given birth two and a half days ago. The old woman said she suspected witchcraft, and there's an old song —" she told them the fragments she remembered, and how the story came out. "Hanno's got plans for your child; maybe someone's out to foil them. Someone other than us, that is. Sandals, hair, doors and windows. There's something else we haven't found, that's all."

"Komi, you're going to have to do what the young husband did in the song. Go downstairs and tell everyone it's done: mother and child alive and well. Tell them it's a boy. And if someone starts shouting, 'Oh, who's undone this, that, or the other?' then for the gods' sake, listen. If that doesn't fetch anything, you may have to go out in the street, though that's risky —"

"Do you think I care?" Komi said, and was gone. Presently they heard his voice ringing downstairs, echoing through the house; and the sound of cheering, and a wail of indignation, and running footsteps. "Quick," Cynthia said. "Your back to the door. Here, take this." She rolled up one of the discarded blankets into a bundle of suitable size and put it into the girl's arms. And the footsteps were loud on the tiles outside, and in through the door burst old Pots, his slave's garb clashing with his look of rage and authority.

"Who?" he shrieked. "Who loosened her sandal straps, to let the child go free? Who took the knotted serpent from her bed —?" He stopped, seeing Cynthia. "Oh. It was *you*." And Komi ran in and twisted his arms behind him.

"No, but it's about to be." Cynthia looked under the low bedframe; seeing nothing, she rolled Enzaro to one side and slid her hand under the mattress. Her fingers touched a small round box; she grasped it and pulled it out. The box, of copper with an openwork lid, had inside it a little snake, dead and dried, and tied in a knot. She opened the box, broke the knot apart, and threw box, fragments, and all out the window. And Enzaro said "Oh!" with a sound of great surprise.

Komi's captive laughed. "Go ahead, 'Zaro, you'll have no more trouble. You and I have served our purpose: the Witch of Syracuse has come here to her death."

"Have I? and what is a Punic sorcerer doing, carrying chamber pots in the

house of Hanno the oil-merchant?"

"Why, I'm not the sorcerer, witch. The priest of Tanit himself made these charms, and I laid them out at his bidding. The Lady herself told him how you slew her servant in Syracuse, and how she sought your death. But you have some foul magic about you that turned all her sendings. But it won't turn spears, and you shall die for the offence you've done the Lady —"

"Cynthia!" Enzaro interrupted. "I think we are getting somewhere."

"Turn your backs, you two." Komi turned the old man forcibly to the wall, while Cynthia helped Enzaro onto the birthing-stool. And not before it was time: one contraction and the head appeared, round and dark, and then the child fell into Cynthia's hands with a gush of blood and water.

The infant drew in a breath and let it out in a thin gurgling cry. In the silence that followed they could hear the commotion downstairs, with cries of "It's a boy!"

"In fact, it's a girl," Cynthia said, clearing the baby's mouth and face of blood and slime. "Everything else in order, though." She tied and cut the navel cord and began to wrap the child in the long strips of linen that lay at hand.

"I don't mind," Enzaro said. "Good luck to her."

"Are you all right, 'Zaro?" the old man said. "Good." And shouted at the top of his cracked old voice, "Help! Help! Witch!" Komi clouted the side of his head, and he fell in a heap to the floor.

"Have you killed him?"

"Have I? No. But he'll sleep for a while. They'll have heard him below, though. Take the child and run —" he listened — "no, they're coming up the stairs. Hide somewhere till this blows over. I'll take care of 'Zaro. It's all *right*, Cynthia. I used to change her breechclouts, for the gods' sake. Get out of here."

Cynthia snatched up the child and ran down the hall, away from the back stairs — but there were voices coming up the front stairs too, visitors or a search party. Here was another stair, leading upwards. She feared she knew what was above, but any port in a storm; she picked up her hems with her free hand and scurried up the stairs.

It was dark here, and she had to feel her way one-handed. She climbed, and found where the staircase made a turn, and followed it. Now she could see a little glimmer of light from above. She stopped long enough to make sure the baby was all right — she was breathing quietly, having fallen asleep after that one cry — and to finish winding up the swaddling-bands. Then she drew a fold of her stole over the small bundle in the crook of her arm, and continued to climb.

In the upstairs room a dozen oil lamps had been set in a half circle. Now they were guttering out, half of them dark already. By what was left of their light Cynthia could see a man lying prostrate on the floor.

His clothing was dark, his face hidden in his arms; he lay flat on his belly in a pose of utter exhaustion. Gold glinted on his fingers. Certainly this was Hanno, the master of the house, worn out with prayers and entreaties and fallen asleep in the shrine of Tanit.

Ah, curse it, here came someone up the stairs. Cynthia edged her way up shallow steps, avoiding the line of flickering lamps. Just what she needed, to send one of them crashing to the step below. The image of Tanit had full skirts of heavy silk; she settled down behind them and pulled her stole over her face.

"My lord? My lord Hanno! We have some trouble." The man's voice was smooth, even in his present distress, and he spoke with an upper-class accent. The steward of the house, maybe; a lifelong servant at any rate, grown up with Hanno as Komi had with Myrgan, and the likeliest of all the slaves to survive bringing the master bad news.

"What is it?" Hanno had woken quickly, without confusion. (Well, the man was a successful merchant, he could not be an absolute dolt — except where it touched his gods.) "Is the child born? There's trouble on your face. Don't fear to tell me: is the child dead?"

"Don't think so, my lord, but stolen. The midwife snatched it up while the mother was still on the birthing-stool, and ran off with it."

"The midwife? Old Pitti? She couldn't run to save her life."

"Another midwife, my lord. A Hellene, a younger woman. The mother says her brother sent her to aid in the birthing. And there's no doubt the child was born under her hand, whereas Pitti could accomplish nothing in three days."

"But a Hellene, and the enemy of the gods. And the mother's brother sent her? Is this Komi we're speaking of? Komi's in Carthage, with Myrgan."

"There seems to be some difference of opinion about that, my lord. Some of the household say, yes, he's in Carthage. Others say, no, they've seen him here today. And one old fool says the gods blew him here on the wings of the sirocco; she says that's what he told her. Things are a bit confused downstairs."

Hanno made a little sound like a sniff. "That boy always would say anything. Find him. Find the midwife. And tell the household to collect themselves and keep their minds on what they are doing. I'll stay here and pray till you find them; I'm not fit any more for running up and down and chasing mysterious Hellenes."

"Yes, my lord." She heard the steward go, his feet whispering down the stairs.

"Not that I'm fit to pray either," Hanno went on, as if continuing a conversation. "I have sinned, against the Lord and against you; I withheld the sacrifice. But he was all I had, all I have. Have mercy upon him, Lady. Intercede for us with the Lord King. Let us find the child. In the same hour it is found, I will give Myrgan's firstborn to the fire. Then spare us, in your great mercy. Let me live to see my son's children growing up in my house. Have mercy, forgive me, for I have sinned against you —"

*This is indecent.* No Hellene cared much about nakedness in public or in private. Cynthia had nothing to compare to the crawling feeling of wrongness Hanno's prayers gave her, as if the man had taken off not merely his clothes but his skin, and laid his soul bare. She uncovered one eye and peered cautiously round the edge of Tanit's draperies. Oh, this was not good at all: Hanno was no longer lying prostrate, but kneeling, upright, sitting back on his heels, his eyes fixed on Tanit's image. His little nap must have done him good: his eyes were wide open and he looked good for another three days at least.

As she drew her head back, a corner of the image's veil brushed her face. The idea struck her, full-formed, like a wave of the sea. The enlarging spell.

The only problem was that Hanno was watching the image already; she was not sure just how the transition would look to him. There was some dust on the floor behind the image, dust in the folds of its skirts; she would do the

best she could with that. She recited the enlarging spell, counting on her fingers, and with the last count pulled the linen veil from the image and draped it over her own head.

Hanno at first saw nothing: the billowing clouds roiled in the shadows, untouched by the feeble lamplight. Then a light began to shine through them, pale at first and then brighter, the white shape of the Lady's veil, gleaming in lamplight suddenly a dozen times brighter than it had been. (Cynthia, for her part, could scarcely see at all, could only guess at what Hanno saw, the veiled figure taller than it had been, descending one shallow step to tower over him.) He bent down and covered his eyes.

"Hanno, get up." Her whispered voice echoed around the room, vast as wind over the plains. Hanno obeyed.

"Look at me, Hanno. Do not be afraid; you will not see anything to harm you." Trembling, he let his hands fall from his face.

"Hanno, your sins are forgiven. Because of your long faithfulness, I have forgiven you." *Hermes, patron of liars, help me now again.* "I have interceded with my Lord, the King: the life of Myrgan will not be held against you. I chose that he should live, to beget this child for me." She let her stole fall away from the linen-swaddled bundle in her arms. "This child will never go to the fire; it is mine. Hanno, do my bidding." He nodded shakily.

"Go downstairs. Tell your servants only to stop their foolish searching and go back to their duties. As for you, eat bread and drink wine and give thanks for the bounty of the earth; then go to your bed and sleep. When you wake again, you may tell them all you have seen. Tell them your grandchild is in the arms of Tanit. Go now."

Somehow he got to his feet, somehow made his way down the stairs without falling. And he was gone.

Cynthia let out a long breath and made the gesture that broke the spell. She took the dusty veil and draped it again over the image (the wooden thing had no face at all). She would wait here a while till the household went back to normal, then sneak away. She covered the child with her stole again, smiling at the little wrinkled face. A good baby; she had slept through the whole thing

"Oh, very clever," a voice said, gentle as breath, and Cynthia felt the hairs stand up on her neck.

Without changing, the shape of Tanit had changed. The idol had grown no larger; it did not move; but it seemed to reach backward into the darkness, back and back into a lightless gulf that was before the world began. Not surprising that Hanno, seeing Cynthia in her magical seeming, had thought he was seeing this; but if he had seen this, then Cynthia could never have beguiled him.

"Hide behind *my* skirts, will you? Now I lay my curse upon you, and its fulfillment shall be swift."

"If I understand correctly from your toady downstairs, you've been cursing me this year past and I still live. Arethousa wrought well."

"Arethousa's dead, her magic fading. You have no power against me."

"Am I Hanno, to believe whatever I'm told? If you had the power to burn me to ashes where I stand, you'd have done it without so much talk. It is you who have no power over me."

"Insolent mortal, you shall see what power I have on things around you. Get out of my shrine."

Cynthia opened her mouth and closed it again. The goddess could have the last word if she liked; words were only words. It was very quiet below. She crept downstairs and heard nothing but a faint murmuring drifting up the back stairs. *She was trying to scare me to death, like any gutter-priest. She's good at it, too; if I believed in her, it might have worked.* No one showed on the way to the front door.

After the quiet inside the house, the noise outside came as a shock. Men were running about in the street, shouting "Here!" and "Hurry up!" and a lot of rough Punic swearing. Cynthia shrank back against the wall, but no one paid her any heed. Either all this turmoil had nothing to do with her, or Arethousa's ring still protected her.

She found the place easily enough — an old weathered pine blown nearly flat against the hillside. She crept in under the branches and lay down on a thick mat of fallen needles. She would wait out this day, maybe two.

She should have brought water with her — but she was not thirsty yet, and the baby slept peacefully, not needing anything yet but to be kept safe. If

Komi didn't come, she would set off by herself, begging her bread as she went. The countryfolk would be generous to one in need, so long as she didn't stay for long. Finding milk would be a harder task – but it was midsummer and the last few years had been prosperous; there should be a good crop of babies among the farmfolk, their mothers full of milk and willing to share. She began to calculate how many days lay between her and Syracuse, and how she would avoid the Mamartine fortress and General Hieron's army that lay besieging it.

Time passed, perhaps as much as an hour. Then the old pine's branches rustled, and before Cynthia could die of fright Komi's face appeared, surrounded by greenery like a satyr's, saying cheerfully, "There you are! You have the baby? Good! come on out. Things have gotten a bit more complicated, but I think we'll cope."

Cynthia crept out and got to her feet, brushing pine needles from her clothing. She saw at once what the complication was: beside Komi stood Enzaro. She held out her arms, and Cynthia surrendered the baby without a word.

"I thought you were staying."

"I did too, at first," Enzaro said. "But after all the noise started up and Komi made himself scarce, I had some time to think. And I thought, 'No one is going to believe I wasn't in on this, I shall be beaten at the very least.' And I thought, 'Why should I stay? There's nothing in this house to hold me.' So I put on my clothes, bundled up those bits of linen, and went to find Komi."

"She knows all my old hiding-places."

"So long as you feel fit enough to travel," Cynthia said. She had seen women who languished in bed for days after a birth, and others who got up an hour afterwards and finished doing the laundry. Enzaro's color was good, her eyes clear, and she carried her baby in the crook of her arm, with an air of confidence; if this was the first child she had borne, it was not the first she'd cared for.

Komi led the way down the ravine into the bed of a glittering stream. "We'll do well to get clear; I think the fleet is headed out for Messenë at last." He ducked under a tangle of bushes to a place where a tree had fallen into the stream, giving him something to moor to. "Look, that storm is finally moving in."

Komi and Enzaro walked confidently down the trunk and hopped into the boat; Cynthia followed more cautiously. Komi pushed off with the boathook and paddled out till he could raise the sail. A good west wind was blowing ahead of the storm, and it filled the sail and carried them along briskly.

A shadow fell over them, and they looked up. The westering sun had gone behind the stormclouds as they billowed up, a dozen shades of blue and grey and purple, robust as cabbages. And below them a score, a hundred white and colored shapes. Sails, a fleet of ships: a Punic war-fleet. "There they are, headed for Messenë, hoping to keep the Romans from coming to Hieron's aid and gaining a foothold on Sicily in the process. We won't want to go through the Straits till it's over; maybe we'll go to the Aiolians. I told you I had friends on the north coast of Phaneraia. For the present, any place that isn't Panormos is good enough for me."

He made the sheets fast and sat down beside Enzaro, who sat in silence holding her baby. Cynthia sat on her other side. The young mother seemed hale enough, neither gasping from exhaustion nor pale from excessive bleeding. Slaves seldom got the chance to lie about idle and grow soft. By all the signs Cynthia could read, Enzaro would be all right.

There would be time enough later to explain everything. Thinking that Enzaro would see Komi briefly and Cynthia never again, they had thought it best not to mention that Cynthia was more to Komi than a midwife hired for the occasion. That he was more to her than all the world put together. They would find time to tell her later, when they had found shelter.

The wind at their backs strengthened and grew colder, and a few drops of rain fell, big juicy ones. Then the whole storm hit them, a drenching from Poseidon's largest bucket. Komi jumped up and took the sheets, keeping the sail in trim. The women pulled their stoles over their heads.

"Better go below," Komi shouted through the howling wind.

Enzaro shook her head "no." "You know I get sick if I can't see the sky."

Now the storm slackened off a little, dropping only moderate rain instead of rain by the tubful, and they could see through the rain's veil the Punic war fleet, still well behind them.

"We're going to have to make for shore," Komi said, "while we still know where the shore is. That village up on the cliffs is Kertyra — I don't know if

you can see it — and there's a little tiny harbor down below. Well-shielded with rocks, but I know where they are. Hunker down, you two, if you won't go below, and keep out of the way."

He gathered the sheets in one hand and took the cords of the steering-oar in the other. As a stablegroom, sent to bring two high-spirited horses to the chariot, takes the bridles each in one hand, turning and bending as the sleek-bodied beasts rear and lunge, but always drawing them onward on the way he wants them to go: so Komi guided the boat by its sheets and steering-oar into Kertyra harbor. Cynthia watched him with pleasure, as one might watch a skilled and well-loved dancer, seeing in the dance the image of the dance they danced in the dark.

And the storm hit them again, the full force of the winds and a lash of rain, pushing the boat sharply sideways. It bowed and shied like a frightened horse. In the sudden darkness Cynthia heard Komi shout, "Oh, gods —" and a great thundering crackling sound drowned out his voice as they struck a rock. The boat cracked like an eggshell, and the sea poured in.

The waters closed over Cynthia's head. Kicking hard, she rose to the surface; spluttering and cursing, she flailed about in the dark. Her hand struck something, painfully hard, and she grabbed it and pulled herself in close. A timber from the boat, a side-rail perhaps, riding high and buoyant. She got her arm over it and groped around in the water with her other hand. On her third pass she touched sodden wool, and Enzaro bobbed up like a cork. Cynthia got her to the rail (or the rail to her; in this wet floating darkness it was hard to say which), and both women shouted like a well-trained chorus, "The baby! Is the baby all right?"

A wail from the folds of Enzaro's stole answered them. The sudden soaking in cold water had woken the child, and she didn't care for it at all. They would have to get to shore quickly, before she took a chill.

Now the raging storm was moving on again; it was merely cloudy, merely raining. Kicking steadily, pushing the timber and all its passengers through the water, Cynthia brought them to a sandy beach in the lee of the harbor. Such backward glances as she could spare gave her no sign of Komi, but she knew the man could swim like a fish; she would not begin to worry yet.

They took off their clothes, wrung most of the sea water out of them, and put them back on, wrapping the woolen stoles to cover as much of them as

possible. Wool is warm when wet, and it cut the chill of the wind. Enzaro draped the swaddling bands over a bush, to rinse out in the rain and dry in the sun when there was any, and tucked her daughter naked into the warmth of her stole. The child went back to sleep.

Cynthia paced along the shoreline, watching the water. Well out to sea, safe from shallow shoals and lurking rocks, the Punic war-fleet sailed by. There was a scattering of broken timbers floating on the surface, a half-empty amphora, a purple cushion that floated for half an hour before it finally went under. But nothing moving: nothing human. For a long while Cynthia tried to reassure herself: Komi had been carried further downwind, or out to sea, clinging to the mast; presently he would come swimming in to shore, blithe as a dolphin, or come strolling down the beach, jaunty as a conquering hero coming home. But her heart knew the truth already.

She twisted the ring of Arethousa this way and that on her finger, pulled it down as far as the first joint and then pushed it back again. The curse of Tanit had glanced away from her, reflecting like sunlight off a mirror; and from Enzaro too when Cynthia touched her with the hand that wore the ring. But nothing had shielded Komi, and the curse had struck him down. Now here she stood like a reed, whole and hale to the eye, but empty inside. How the faceless goddess must be pleased.

Empty and dark inside, empty as a gourd, dark as a well-shaft. There were caverns by the sea with pipes and crevices that pierced the rock to the upper air; when the tide came in the air rose in these pipes and whistled like whole armies of Furies. Something was rising in Cynthia now, grief perhaps, or rage, or something without a name, hidden in darkness, but she knew it could break worlds if properly applied. And the spell came to her mind, the spell for turning a curse back the way it had come. Such a little spell, only five words. They were rising from her throat; they were trembling on her lips. She strove to hold them back as one strives not to vomit.

In the darkness within a sound echoed, rebounding and re-echoing with no way to get out: Komi's last despairing "Oh, gods –" in his resonant voice. She heard it and heard it again; she could not bear to hear it. To drown it out, she spoke the five words. The ring fell from her finger to her feet.

And the sky burst open, the storm falling again like a landslide, the winds howling with deafening noise. All the rage of Tanit's curse, funneled through

Cynthia's spell, resounded like an actor's voice through his wide-mouthed mask, a dozen, a hundred times its real force. It blinded and deafened her, but scarcely ruffled her clothing; it could not touch her; it was bound away from her. She wanted to turn and see how Enzaro was faring, but somehow she could not move.

Once she had seen a Punic trireme wreck upon shoals, its back broken, its crew milling about like ants, and sink into the sea. She could see nothing now, but her memory told her tale again a hundred times. Again the oars fell idle, again the stern sank, again desperate men scrambled and fought to reach the upper deck or drowned in the dark below, as the ship's heavy ram pulled her prow underwater and the sea closed her fierce eyes in death.

When the storm cleared again, there were two or three ships still afloat. They must have been on the fleet's leading edge and missed most of the storm's force. They sailed on, probably not bound for Messenē any more; they would put in at the first port that could hold them.

The clouds were melting away into the sky, as pale as frost in the morning sun. Cynthia felt tired, and sick, and ashamed. None of those drowned men had known or consented to Hanno's plan to send Enzaro's baby to the fire; they had gone where their captains ordered them. Well, but if they had known, they would have consented, gods-fearing Phoenicians creeping under the heavy hand and eye of Moloch and Tanit. Some of those sailors had had women who loved them as she had loved Komi; not yet, but tomorrow or the day after, they would learn the terrible news and weep. You could call it poetic justice.

Cynthia swallowed hard, and sighed. She had not intended this; she would rather have seen every shrine of Tanit fallen to rubble, every image in splinters, and every black-bearded Punic sailor left alive. But the words had been spoken, and could not be recalled. And the sea rippled at her feet.

She took a step. The water was warm on her ankles, after the chill of the wind. Below, there would be no wind at all, no conflict of Hellene and Punic and Roman, where all the dead were dead alike. And Komi was down there somewhere. His voice still echoed within her: "Oh, gods —" Could she not stop that? not to drown out the voice, all that was left to her, but to give the patient actor Memory a different line to read?

*"I say it who know:"* he had said it the first day they met. *"It is better to be*

*alive and a poor slave than dead and wrapped in silk and gold."* Yes, he had said that, and prayed for long days between himself and the end, but they had not been granted. But the deathless actor Memory stood mask in hand, to speak her lines, his words, to an audience of all the immortal gods so long as breath should last.

Well, she would simply have to make breath last as long as possible. She stepped back out of the water and recovered Arethousa's ring.

Night was falling, a calm perfect sunset without a cloud in the sky, in shades of apricot and lemon. Enzaro sat with her daughter at her breast, one finger propping her tiny chin, teaching her to suck. They would beg shelter in Kertyra for the night, and begin their journey in the morning. Cynthia plucked the drying swaddling bands from the bush and folded them against further use. And the sun went down, and nothing was left but memory and the wind.

## 9. VENGEANCE

"Captain, the lines are fast."

"Very well. Secure the gangplank." The passengers from Syracuse gathered up their belongings, or directed their servants to do so, and made their way one by one down to the wharf.

The dockmaster looked them over. A merchant, and the poet Theokritos, and a nobleman and his companions, and the attendant slaves.

The nobleman was Arkhimedes son of Pheidias, nephew to that General Hieron whom the Council of Syracuse had recently raised to the dignity of Tyrant, after his successful expulsion of the Mamertine pirates from Messenë. The nobleman was young, the first wisps of beard still trying to take root on his chin, but he had still better be treated with respect.

"Welcome to Alexandria, my lord. From here, on so high a tide, you'll see her better than from anywhere else than atop the King's roof. All this before us, within those walls, is part of the Palace. And there to the north, the Temple of Isis, shining in the sun."

"Splendid," Arkhimedes said. "Who was the architect?" He shifted his shoulders within his fine tunic, as though he would rather have been swimming naked in the sea.

"I'm sorry, I don't know. Welcome to Alexandria, gentlemen." Behind the young nobleman came another youngster, dressed not quite so finely, and behind him an old man, gaunt and vacant-eyed, whose robe had once been costly but had seen a lot of wear since then.

Last came a tall woman in black, her swollen abdomen bound up in sashes to ease her back. Near her time, she must be, and it must have been an urgent need that had led her to cross the sea at such a chancy time. She guided the old man's steps down the gangplank and pulled her stole over her eyes against the hazy autumn sun. "Welcome to Alexandria, my lady. You can see the Temple of Isis there, to the north."

Their baggage had been discreetly searched, their collection of books examined for titles unknown to the Library (and none found), and an agent assigned to guide them to the Palace of King Ptolemy.

"Well, that seems to have worked," Demetrios said, throwing his cloak back over his shoulder. In doing so he caught sight of old Palamedes, humming tunelessly in the warm sun, and Cynthia leading him by the hand. "I trust the King will have physicians in his house, as well as poets."

"Without a doubt. We'll have your father seen to, and Cynthia too. If any physic can help her. What was it came on her while she was away?"

"Friend, do I know? She vanished from the market at high noon; she came back after the war, with that Sikan woman and her baby, and having once delivered them into safety, she sat down like a stone and stopped moving. She still eats what's set before her, so I don't suppose she'll die, but I fear she may go mad."

Walking dutifully behind them, leading Palamedes by the hand, Cynthia listened to them and thought about that undiscovered country, madness. A better place than where she was, perhaps — but no, how could she remember Komi if she lost her wits?

She pulled her stole closer across her eyes, till she could see nothing but Demetrios's feet before her. The air was dry, making her hair crackle like a stroked cat. The steady footfalls of the King's escort on either side of her, the cries of the gulls, the voices of the servants and soldiers who clustered before the steps of the palace, all were dulled to her ears.

Then someone screamed.

It was as though the prickly autumn air had gathered itself into a lightning bolt and dropped itself at her feet. Her eyes flew open. She dropped Palamedes's hand and put back her stole. There it was, an overturned chariot with a broken pole, and the fallen driver climbing to his feet, and the wild-eyed stallion plunging and rearing while men came running to reach for his bridle. A cloud of panicky pigeons rising from the ground, whirling in a dust devil of their own making, their wings clattering. And a little cluster of anxious men by the wheel, bending over a greybeard who lay clutching his leg and moaning.

Cynthia went past the royal escort as if they were not there, and moved the old man's companions aside like so many nervous sheep. "Let's see your leg, Grandfather. You, boy! Bring the bag with the red strap!" She tucked up the old man's robe, exposing a blue swelling larger than her hand, and the skin over it cut, but not too deeply. The bone appeared not to be broken. Still, so

great a bruise could cripple the whole leg if left to itself. When the slave came up with the bag, she took out a strip of linen and bound it firmly round the bruised place.

The King's men had gotten the frightened horse under control and led him away. Cynthia sat back on her heels and looked at her patient's companions: three young men so like him they must be his sons. All four had blue eyes like Hellenes. The anxiety was fading from their faces, and they smiled.

"What's your name, Grandfather, and where do you live? I want to visit you tomorrow with a poultice for this."

"I am Ezra ben Yaakov, and I advise the King on matters of commerce. I live in the Weaver's Street, in the Delta." He jerked a thumb eastward. "Right behind the Palace. It's not far."

"Good. Can you men get your father home all right? Then get him to bed, prop his leg up, and don't let him set foot to floor. I'll be around tomorrow."

The King's escort were around her now, urging her to her feet. "Tomorrow," she said again, and followed the guards through gates and up steps and between walls to a guesthouse set in a water-garden. Six palm trees made shade overhead, and a white lotus in the pool made the air fragrant. *Life, Cynthia mused. It does go on, however much unasked.*

"The water for your hands and face, my lady."

"Mmm? Oh. Put it over there."

"And will it please you to bathe in the pool later on? If you are going to the Temple of Isis – "

"Tomorrow, maybe. That's all." *Now that's strange. That is the third, I think, total stranger with the same invitation. Maybe they're trying to drum up business?*

The slaves dismissed and the door shut behind her, Cynthia unwound the sash from around her belly. She caught on her toe, as it slipped floorward, a polished turtle shell and set it on a table. The white papyrus shone through the neck- and leg-holes: the six books of magic that Palamedes no longer had the wit to read from. If the dockmaster had known of them, they would have gone off for copying, with no guarantee that it would be the originals that were returned. Cynthia had worn the shell, bound to her in a sweaty false-pregnancy, since they had left Syracuse, and it had just paid off. Now she

lined up the six scrolls, peering at the titles inked along the outer edges. She had made her way partway through the first, labeled "ELEMENTA," which had turned out not to be Euklides's Elements of Geometry, but something less logically arranged. She tucked the other scrolls back into the shell and bound it back into place – the whole compound was full of slaves, their own and the Ptolemy's, eyes and ears everywhere. When they got a place of their own, nearer the Library and further from the Palace, then she could have a convenient "miscarriage."

In the evening Arkhimeses went to dine in the King's hall, but his friends stayed in the guesthouse and ate simpler fare without ceremony.

"I'm not sure you should be reading that," Demetrios said, as he chewed the leg of a roast duck.

"I see no reason why not," Cynthia said. "Listen, it even says here that I may. 'To make fire. This spell is so simple that even a woman can learn it.' Thank you very much, you old magician, for the confidence you place in me. He's right, though, it's only three words." She spoke them and pointed at the wick of a lamp resting on the table, and it obediently burst into flame. Demetrios jumped, and gulped his wine to keep from choking.

"Here's another. Two words spoken over your cup or plate renders any poison harmless. We should teach them to Arkhimeses, if he's going to rub shoulders with kings and princes." She tasted the wine in her cup, spoke the words, tasted again. There appeared to be no difference. Apparently the friends of Arkhimeses weren't worth poisoning; just as well.

In the morning she selected dried herbs for a poultice, soaked and pulped them. She stowed all the scrolls away again in the belly of the tortoise, and summoned a slave to keep an eye on Palamedes. Arkhimeses had made a late night of it in the King's hall, and was only getting up as she left her room.

"Good morning. Going out? To the Temple of Isis maybe?"

"Oh, you noticed that too."

"Noticed what?" said Arkhimeses, and yawned, and turned toward the breakfast table. Cynthia opened her mouth and shut it again, and threw her stole around head and shoulders. She made her way through the water-garden, between walls and down steps and through gates, out of the Palace.

The outermost gate guard told her how to find the Jewish quarter called the

Delta, and the people there told her how to find Ezra's house in the Weavers' Street. Five houses up from the fountain, with a bronze knocker at the door. .

. .

It was a pleasant neighborhood, not glittering with wealth but well-kept and clean. Except for those stains on the doorpost, there – and the next, and the next. And here at Ezra's door too, with the bronze knocker that rang sharply under her hand, the doorposts and lintel stained with splashes of dark brown—

Zeus! It was dried blood!

And at that moment the door opened, and one of Ezra's sons led her to his bedside. She poulticed the bruise, which was looking as well as could be expected, and he asked her about her travels, and she asked him about the customs of his people, and they fell to talking like old friends.

". . . it's the blood of the Passover lamb, with which we mark our homes in the spring. (And it hasn't rained much since then, you see.) Long ago, when we were slaves in Egypt, God sent a curse upon the firstborn of every Egyptian household, except for ours where we marked our doors and ate the Passover meal and departed in haste; and so we do to this day."

"And yet here you are back in Egypt."

"Oh, yes –" (an eloquent shrug) "— but this time it's to our advantage."

". . . and the ring of Arethousa shielded me from Tanit's curse, but it struck my husband and drowned him in the sea –"

"Ah, there. No, go ahead and weep; your tears bear witness to his worth. Listen: the souls of the just are in the hand of the Lord; death's torment can no longer touch them. They seemed, indeed, to die – in the eyes of those who know no better – and when they left this world they seemed to be destroyed. But they are at peace."

"And does that hold for everyone? or only for your own people?"

"I am convinced," Ezra said, "that the Lord knows all the just for His own and will not let a single one of them be lost." A pause. "But I don't know what they would tell you in Jerusalem. Come, have another honeycake."

It was mid-afternoon before she left Ezra's house, and long shadows were stretching eastward across the street. The roof of the Jews' house of prayer

was still in sunlight, its cornice bright with a frieze of flowers picked out in gold. And just visible to the north, the much-famed Temple of Isis, its pillars gleaming white in the sun, wound round with golden vines. She supposed they were vines. Her eyes were good, but not that good

"Cynthia! Is it you? Oh, it is!"

Cynthia looked again. The woman clutching her arms was her own age, maybe, but soft and rounded with easy living. Subtract half the flesh, take away several years—"Gorgo! By all the gods! Life's been good to you."

"Off and on. My man Diokleidas is well off, but a terrible fool. Yesterday he bought me five fleeces for seven drachmas, such a bargain, he thought; but it was all tail-ends and mud. Did you ever marry, or—" she glanced at Cynthia's abdomen, and glanced away.

"Married and widowed. And I've traveled around the sea. My father died in Italy."

"Oh, what a shame, without seeing his grandchild, and your man too. But children are a great comfort. You'll see."

"If the gods will it," Cynthia said, clenching a fist where Gorgo couldn't see it. "I'm glad to have seen you so well. Now I must—"

"Oh, no, no, you mustn't run off like that; why, I've only just seen you. I was just going off to see Praxinoë; you remember her, don't you? She lives just along here."

Gorgo had Cynthia's arm firmly tucked into her own, and she had the advantage of weight. Cynthia gave up the struggle. It would do her no great harm to spend an hour in the company of old friends, even if they had gone soft and foolish.

"Gods, what a crowd! They're like ants, there's no counting them. Though Ptolemy's done well by us these days; no more cutpurses creeping up in the street. Don't step on us, my good man. I'm lucky I left the children home. Here's the place."

She knocked at the door, and after a few moments a girl with unkempt hair opened it, squinting against the afternoon sunlight. "Hello, Eunoë. Is Praxinoë at home?"

"No," the girl said.

"Gorgo dear!" The voice was high-pitched, almost shrill. "I *am* at home to you. Come in, come in, it's been a long time." Praxinoë bustled them through a heavy door into the women's court. "And Cynthia, by the gods! It's been ages. Sit down. Take this cushion. Eunoë, you lazy girl, bring wine."

Cynthia settled down to endure it. The wine was good, and the two of them could be left to chatter away to each other like sparrows in a grainfield.

"And of course, we both spend a lot of our time attending the service of the Goddess."

"Ah," Cynthia said, as neutral a comment as she could make.

"Have you visited Her temple?"

"No; everyone keeps telling me I should, but just at present I have other things –"

"Do you not believe in the Goddess?" Praxinoë was watching her as a crow watches a fat earthworm.

"If you had seen as many Goddesses as I have, you wouldn't believe in 'em either."

"*Seen?*" Gorgo's eyes were bulging, and she clutched her breast as if she found it hard to breathe.

"Well — let's see." Cynthia held up a finger. "I had a vision, or a dream, of the Earth-Mother that eats her children. Then, I went under the earth in Phaneraia and saw some nameless old earth-goddess, worn out and forgotten, with only a few dozen souls left in her larder.

"Then I went to Panormos and ran into Tanit in one of her shrines, and sorry I am to say it, we did not like each other. So I went away again." *And after she drowned my man, I turned her curse back against her and sank a whole fleet-full of her worshippers.* She sipped her wine. What the women didn't know wouldn't hurt them. "So I don't think I want to encounter Isis, or she me, thank you."

"But – but you *have* met Her."

"All the Goddesses are the same Goddess."

"Demeter, and Aphroditë, and Syrian Astartë, they are all the same."

"And to have seen Her in three different guises: you must have been

greatly favored."

"You must go to Her at once."

"Lady, there's a litter at the door."

"So soon? Good. Come, Cynthia, we'll attend you on your way." Each of them had a good grip on one of her arms, and if she had dug in her heels they could have picked her up and carried her. Eunoë held the door as they led her out.

There was not only a litter at the door, gilded and curtained and carried by four massive men: there was a procession at the door, flute players and flower girls and half-a-dozen shaven priests in white linen. They bundled Cynthia into the litter on the near side, and she swept open the curtains on the far side to assess her chances. There was the holy place of the Jews, which had been given the right of sanctuary by the King – but hundreds of people stood between her and it; she would never make it. The priests took stations around the litter; the procession moved forward.

*But no order was given, was her next coherent thought. Praxinoë never said anything but "bring wine." But someone in the Temple knew I was here.*

"Sing praise to the mother of all life," the priests chanted, "the mistress of the elements, the first-born of time."

*It's Isis herself who knew I was here, who set lures for me in every unheeding mouth, who set a trap for me in Praxinoë's house and sent Gorgo after me like a ferret. Maybe it's true that the Goddesses are all one Goddess; and that Goddess has laid an ambush for me.*

*Well, she has found herself a worthy opponent.* And she settled back into the cushions and began furiously to think.

It took perhaps half an hour to get through the crowd from Praxinoë's house to the Temple. She had spent no longer than that indoors; the litter must have been sent out at once. Isis was quick on her feet. The bearers set down the litter and Cynthia stepped out, scorning the hand a priest held out to her. "Don't you touch me," she said, and had the pleasure of seeing him step back.

"Be of good cheer, daughter," an older priest intoned. "Your child will be born among the initiated."

And Cynthia allowed herself a smile, just a little one. So Isis didn't know everything – or at least, her priests didn't.

They ascended the steps: nine in number, broad and smooth, in shining marble. And here were the great pillars, entwined not with vines as she had thought but with gilded serpents, their long bodies as thick as your thigh, with crystal eyes that glittered. Within the colonnade was a wide pool abloom with lotuses and the feathery crowns of papyrus. A narrow bridge stretched across it, and Cynthia went over it with two priests ahead and four behind. No knowing how deep that water was. She could swim, of course, but better not to let them know that yet.

Beyond the pool was a pair of huge doors. Inside them was a large hall with a great statue of Isis, wearing enough paint for a whole warehouse, and holding a sistrum in one hand and a boat-shaped dish in the other. Her eyes stared, unseeing, over their heads. The priests paid no attention to her; they hurried Cynthia across the floor to a little side-door painted the same color as the wall, and thrust her through it.

Inside, the only light was from torches held by two veiled women; the shape of their heads was strange till Cynthia realized they were wearing bulky woollen wigs. A third held a cup made in the shape of a lotus. She stepped toward Cynthia and put the cup into her hands.

The stuff smelled sweet and musty. Cynthia murmured two words.

"What's that?" a priest asked sharply.

"A blessing," Cynthia said, and drank. It tasted like ordinary wine.

There followed a long quarter of an hour while she sat on a bench just inside the door, and the priests and the veiled priestesses stood watching her. In front of her the dark corridor went forward about a spear's cast and turned to the left. Soon, when they thought her properly tamed, they would lead her into a labyrinth as great as Minos's, maybe, and she would have her work cut out to find her way out again.

And a map appeared in her mind, a map no pen had ever drawn: her old neighborhood, far to the west of here, where she had run about till she was twelve. Probably all changed now, but still clear in her memory. *Let's see, we entered this place from the east. Say the steps were the houses of those three Corinthians, then the lotus-pond is where the camel market was, and the hall*

*would be the new market plus about two rows of houses, and the door we came through is Philon's bake-house. Then we're looking down Threadneedle Street, and it turns left onto Fleshers', and then I'll just have to see.*

More of the veiled women had come in from somewhere; there must be ten or twelve of them now. Some carried torches; some carried baskets; one came up to Cynthia carrying a little box of gilded wood, shaped like the full moon.

"Sing," she said. "I am the Queen of Heaven: I am the morning star."

"I am the Queen of heaven: I am the morning star," Cynthia repeated dutifully. Her voice would never be her fortune, but she could carry a tune at least.

"I am the mother of all living," the woman sang, turning to walk down the dark corridor that mapped to Threadneedle Street, and Cynthia followed her, repeating each line of the song. "I will rise up and go about the city. You women of Byblos, have you seen my love?" Down Fleshers', along the alley behind the Golden Goose, and a sharp turn right across old Medea's doorway —

The torchbearers had gathered up ahead, making a pool of light around something on the floor: a shape like a hand.

She bent down and picked it up: a hand, the dried and embalmed hand, smelling strongly of resin and spices, of some long-dead man who had been torn to pieces like Osiris and scattered abroad. One of the basket-bearers took the hand from her, and stowed it away.

"I sought him whom my heart loved; I called for him, but I could not find him." The tears brimmed in her eyes. The veiled woman took her hand and led her along.

So the script of the drama was plain enough: she was to take the part of Isis, singing her songs and traveling her sorrowful journey, searching for the fourteen scattered members that were the fourteen days of the waning moon. If she'd taken the drink in the form it'd been given to her, she might have come to believe it all.

After the first few turns, it proved easier than she had expected. They led her here and they led her there, but it all boiled down to a great double-loop around the Golden Gander at one end and the house of Xerxes the rug-merchant at the other; and every time she went over old Medea's doorstep,

she found another body part. She was even beginning to recognize the wall-paintings by now: here, a man and woman dressed in fine linen, their hands raised in worship, the woman holding a sistrum. There, a pool set round with date-palms and fruit trees. The air was reasonably fresh; they could not be too far underground. No sign of any window, though, or skylight or smoke-hole through which an agile and desperate person might escape.

The thirteenth piece was the skull, and the fourteenth the lower jaw. They had not given her the mummy's torso to find; perhaps it would be too heavy to carry, or too large to conceal in a basket till needed. But that was all that remained, unless —

The priestess was leading her a different way now, past Medea's into Crocodile Street, and along where the bridge over the canal should have been. And there she was, sure enough, opening her golden box where she thought Cynthia couldn't see, and laying down some small object on the floor.

*Of course.* Cynthia came forward and picked it up, a little thing like a segment of a crumbling dead branch. *What's-his-name, Typhon, scattered Osiris's members across the earth, but the phallos he threw into the sea and the fishes ate it. Like Komi. And she made a substitute of wood.* "I sought my brother, my spouse. I flew around the earth wailing. I did not alight till I found him. I made to rise up the helpless members of him who was at rest. I drew from him his essence, I made for him an heir."

*But no one can gather up Komi. That dirty bitch Tanit killed him, and if it's true they're all the same, then that dirty bitch Isis killed him, and now she expects me to put Osiris back together for her —*

Straight down Canal Street now, without a turn, and there was a light at the end, a high-vaulted room with something like an altar in the center. The torchbearers were singing, "The cord is broken, the seal is undone; I have come to bring thee the Heart of Osiris; thy heart is to thee, O Osiris. I have not come to destroy the god on his throne; I have come to set the god on his throne. I have risen up like a falcon: I have gone forth like an eagle: morning star, make way for me."

In the center of the room, on a dais only a few steps high, the mummy of Osiris lay on its bier, naked and neatly reassembled. *And what if I put the last part back where it belongs? Will the dead god sit up and speak?*

At the head and foot of the bier two women stood, dressed in linen, angular shapes on their heads whose ritual meaning was a blank to Cynthia. The one at the head was clearly carved of wood: there was a patch the size of your thumb where the paint had peeled away from her ankle. The other —

The other turned her head and looked at Cynthia. "There you are," she said.

"Here I am," Cynthia said, and spoke three more words. The bit of rotten wood in her hands blazed up, and she threw it quickly atop the mummy.

Someone screamed. Cynthia spoke the words again, at the top of her lungs, and the torches blazed up like fiery trees. The priestesses tore blazing veils from their heads. The stench of singed wool from their black wigs was heavy in the air. Burning resin roared and crackled. Horrible to tell, the burning mummy was moving, raising its arms, trying to slap out its own flames, till the hands fell away from its arms.

The air was getting thick. Cynthia dropped to hands and knees and found her way to the door. She ran back down Canal Street and retraced her path as quickly as she could. There were angry voices behind her. Threadneedle Street, Philon's bake-house, there was the door. She pushed it open and ran across the hall while a pair of acolytes stared, too surprised to follow. There was something to be said for long legs. She slowed down a little for the bridge across the lotus pond, picked up speed between the white columns.

Outside, to her surprise, night had fallen. The full moon was brilliant overhead, the color of new bronze. She had spent more time in that place than she had thought. There were people in the streets, rogues and wastrels, but they gave her no trouble; indeed, they fell back at the sight of her and turned and ran. Back toward the Palace. Here was the north gate — but it was locked and barred, and the guard paid no attention to her knocking.

Maybe it didn't matter. The cries of angry pursuers had died away. Perhaps she had lost them, and could make her way round to the harbor gate, or —

Someone was singing: a drunken whore, her veil askew, walking along the moonlit streets, scattering fragments of song like petals. She vanished between two darkened houses, where even the moonlight did not penetrate — and Cynthia heard a little gasp, and nothing more.

Out into the moonlight, between the darkened houses, they came like fluid streams of gold: two, four, a steady line of them, the golden snakes that had

entwined the marble pillars of Isis's house. Cynthia gathered up her skirts and ran again, scrolls rattling in her tortoise-shell belly. No time now to get them out and search for a counterspell. Without thinking she had turned to the east, toward the Delta: maybe she had hoped the faceless God of the Jews would have little sympathy for an angry Goddess. There was no one in the street, not even a thief, to distract the effortlessly gliding serpents. Weavers' Street. She ran up two steps and pounded on the door. "Ezra! Ezra! Let me in!"

The door opened: Ezra's eldest son, with a rushlight, and some daughters-in-law peering round his shoulders, and Ezra himself, out of bed against medical advice, leaning on a staff and reaching out to draw her in. "Come, come. What are those things? Never mind, they can't get in. See?"

The golden serpents had gathered in the street; back and forth they went, never daring to come closer. One stretched out its head, leaning toward the door with tongue flickering, and drew back as if it smelled something unpleasant.

"Go away, you old serpents," Ezra said. "Or stay if you like; you can't get in. The Lord of Hosts protects this house. They can't get past the Paschal blood, you see, any more than the last Egyptian curse could. Someone bring more lamps, and food and drink. I expect they'll go away when the sun rises, but we may as well make sure." He sat down on a bench his daughter-in-law had brought him, and made Cynthia sit beside him. "Last time, you know, the high priest Aaron laid down his staff on the ground and it turned into a serpent. And all the Egyptian magicians said, 'That's nothing, we can do that too,' and they laid down their staves and they turned into serpents. And Aaron's serpent ate up all the Egyptian serpents and turned back into a staff in Aaron's hand. So you really can't expect a son of Aaron's house to be afraid of a lot of silly reptiles like that."

They sat up while the moon westered and set, while Ezra and his family sang to their God whose name must not be spoken, and Cynthia marveled at the power of faith. As the sun rose, the serpents faded like mist and were gone. "Told you so," Ezra said.

"So you did," Cynthia agreed. "I wish I believed in anything as much as you believe in your God; I could pick up the Temple of Isis and drop it into the sea."

"I wish you could too," Ezra said. "Now, from what you've told me, I think

you've made Alexandria too hot to hold you. We'll have to think how to get you out safely. I don't know if the Lord will part the Red Sea for you, but we ought to be able to manage a small boat."

## 10. THE SICK ROSE

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm,  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy,  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

— William Blake

The gangplank creaked under the weight of the last cargo going on board, a great square linen basket that seemed to weigh as much as a man. Once they got it on deck, the bearers paused to catch breath. Then they turned toward the place where the other baskets were piled, but a woman stepped forward to intercept them.

"No, no. This one goes inside. This one with the red cord on it: that goes in the cabin; we'll unpack it ourselves."

The woman was about fifty, with wisps of iron-grey hair emerging from the wrappings of her headdress. Her clothing marked her as a superior servant in a great house. The bearers obediently carried the basket inside the cabin in the sterncastle, where two serving maids shrieked and giggled and hid their faces, and set it on the floor with a thump.

The old woman closed the door behind them and latched it firmly; a Jewish bride of good family traveled as closely guarded as a high-born Hellene. "There, now." She untied the red cord and flung up the lid of the basket. "It's safe now, Cynthia. You can come out."

Cynthia stretched and got up, grunting as her joints unfolded, and carefully climbed over the rim. "Ah, air. How splendid." She stretched her long arms and legs as best she could in the low-ceilinged cabin. "The bearers set me down to argue the merits of two dancing-girls, and I thought I'd never get off the dock." She took another deep breath and looked around. There was, praise any presiding gods, a window in the stern wall — not safe to open the shutters yet, not till they left the harbor. The cabin was just about big enough

to hold, side by side and head to head, the four pallets that sat in neat rolls under the single bunk. Fortunately, the other women seemed friendly. "Bethaniah, I'm so happy to see you. Could I have a drink of water?"

"Certainly." The old woman found a jug and poured into a cup, while the newcomer took an embroidered carrying bag out of the basket, then stooped to lift with a grunt the wooden chest she had been sitting on.

The mistress of the household, a sweet-faced girl of thirteen, threw her veil back from her face and came forward to greet her. "Welcome to our little cabin. I hope you'll be happy here."

"Thank you, lady. I hope I shan't be too much trouble."

"Oh, please, call me Sarah; and may I call you Cynthia? Any friend of Uncle Ezra's should be a friend of mine. No, you'll be no trouble, there's room for an extra pallet, and we packed plenty of food for everyone. Did you really have everyone in Alexandria out hunting for your blood?"

"Well, not everybody — only the priests of Isis — but there were a fair number of them." She told them a cut-down version of the story, leaving out all the interesting parts about vengeful goddesses and their snaky emissaries. Ezra had warned against mentioning such things before the maids, and Bethaniah had heard it all already. ". . . And Ezra said, 'You've made Alexandria too hot to hold you; I shall have to smuggle you out.' And here I am."

"And very welcome too," Sarah said. "Do you have a place waiting for you when we get to Joppa? You're a midwife and a physician, Uncle Ezra said; I'm sure my bridegroom's household could find a use for you. With any luck I may find a use for you myself by next year!" and blushed. She had skin like a ripe peach and soft brown hair, and blue eyes like her Uncle Ezra's — it must be in the blood. "The family live mostly in Jerusalem, but Shimon and I shall be living on the estate in Galilee, up north —"

There was a knock on the door. The maids squealed again, while Sarah replaced her veil and Cynthia backed into the lee of the door before Bethaniah opened it. The one knocking might be a friend, or a worshipper of Isis making one last attempt — or on this Punic ship, a worshipper of Tanit, which would be just as risky.

She had a moment to think, while Bethaniah undid the latch, *Maybe it*

*would be easier to let them catch me, and then No: who would remember Komi if I died? A promise made to one's self is a promise nevertheless.*

"I knew I had it somewhere," a man's voice said, his Koinē heavy with a Punic accent. "A package we picked up at Joppa on the way down here, from the house of Judah ben Nahum. That's the mistress's father-in-law to be, yes? It's for her." Bethaniah took the linen-wrapped bundle and latched the door again.

The package contained a long gown made of fine linen, ornamented at neck and hems. Little figures of plants and birds and animals had been cut out of cloth of different colors, stitched into place, and embroidered to give added detail. From far-off there seemed to be a wreath of flowers, and closeup a line of dancing creatures running around the wearer's neck. Sarah's eyes shone. "Is that for me?"

Bethaniah smiled. "I don't see any other brides in this room."

"I'm going to put it on right now."

"You should wear it when we get to Joppa, to meet your new family at the dock."

"That's a whole week! I want to wear it *now!*"

"Why don't we wait for the ship to get out to sea, and everything settled down, before you try it on? You don't want to get it dirty." And Sarah, sulking only a little, sat down with the gown on her lap, her forefinger tracing the cheerful birds, the bright rose in the center of the bodice.

What Bethaniah said to the captain once they were at sea, about carrying one more passenger than he had bargained for, and how much of Ezra ben Yaakov's silver changed hands in the process, Cynthia never knew. The empty linen basket went out amidships with the other baskets, full of kosher food for the journey and linens for the wedding, and Cynthia also was free to go out and wander about the ship's narrow walkways, smell the mud of the Nile Delta as they slipped slowly along its seaward edge, and make a fig in the direction of dwindling Alexandria.

When she came back in, Sarah was wearing the ornamented gown. It fitted snugly around her neck and fell in graceful, modest folds around her young body. The veil she would wear on her arrival would obscure most of the ornament as well as most of Sarah herself, but they would make a very pretty

sight for her bridegroom on the night. Sarah danced around the little cabin, making the butterflies flicker on the sleeves, practicing the reverence she would make to her new parents-in-law, and the smile for her bridegroom as he lifted her veil. The maids giggled, and Bethaniah and Cynthia watched indulgently; they too had been brides once.

But by evening, when the ship pulled up at a little beach for the crew to go ashore and cook their supper, Sarah had fallen silent, and by nightfall she was burning with fever.

"Too much excitement," Bethaniah murmured to Cynthia, and undressed Sarah and got her to bed. Cynthia looked at her eyes and her tongue, and felt her forehead; and sent Bethaniah ashore with a packet of herbs to brew into a tea. Sarah drank it like a good child and fell asleep, and by morning seemed much better.

There were good winds most of the second day, and the ship moved along briskly past the sandy beaches, little clumps of palms or willows, tiny fishing harbors. Sarah stood at the small window for a while, till she grew weary of the endlessly-repeating frieze of landscape and demanded to try on the gown again. Bethaniah said No, and coaxed her to sort through the baskets and boxes in the cabin, the books and the lengths of fine gauze, the little alabaster bottles of perfume and the jewelry that formed part of her dowry, rings and earrings and splendid necklaces of gold, silver, blue lapis. This took up half the day. By suppertime she had wheedled her way into the gown again.

Rings on her fingers, necklaces on her neck, she danced in the center of the cabin while her companions sat at the four corners, clapping their hands in cross-rhythms and making little cries of praise for a step well made. The soft tendrils of Sarah's hair escaped from their restraining braids and curled round her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes shone. Bethaniah and Cynthia exchanged glances. *Let her dance while she can*, their eyes said. This time next year, if all went well, her sisters-in-law would dance for her while she labored with her firstborn. A pity, maybe, to marry a girl off so young — but Cynthia herself had married at quite an age, almost nineteen, and miscarried of her only child after Demodoros died; so perhaps it was better this way.

By nightfall Sarah was feverish again and slept fitfully, crying out in shapeless dreams of danger.

In the morning, when there was light, Cynthia turned back the bedclothes

and looked her over. There was a rash on her back and chest, with a particularly nasty-looking oozing patch on her left shoulderblade. Cynthia put a poultice on it, and gave Sarah another medicinal brew, and said, "Stay in bed till you feel better."

"I want to wear my new gown."

"Not in bed, you don't want to wrinkle it." The girl's face crumpled, like that of a much younger child preparing for tears. "Look, there are pegs here on the wall; I'll hang it up and you can see it." Sarah's eyes closed, and she turned on her side to rest her small hand over the bright hem, and fell asleep again.

Cynthia went out onto the deck, where there was a little more room but not much. A fine breeze filled the sails; they tugged and strained against the sheets as if they wanted to leave slow-moving boats behind and fly off on their own – as they well might. Cynthia had dealt with boats a time or two; they were at least as tricky as young horses.

The captain stood up in the prow, his eyes on the sky. A black-bearded sailor sat beside the rudder post, his arm draped over it lest it drift off course. The rest of the crew were nowhere in sight: belowdecks, probably, sleeping off a night's watch.

Cynthia found a bundle of something, dates maybe, lashed up in sackcloth, knee-high and suitable for sitting on. She stretched out her legs in front of her, stared out to sea, and tried to think.

After a while Bethaniah joined her, taking a seat on the next bundle to the right, and said, "What's the matter with her?"

"I don't know yet. If it weren't for that rash, I'd suspect she was seasick. With the rash, I wonder if it's a sickness in her spirit. Maybe only excitement, and the natural restlessness of a young, lively, slightly spoiled girl confined to a small cabin all day. Or perhaps she's sadder than she appears, at leaving her home and her family. Did she want this marriage?"

"She seems to want it very much," Bethaniah answered. "How much can any person tell about the heart of another? She wept a little, yes, at leaving her home and her childhood friends. But her mother died long ago and her father's a cold man; it was I who brought her up, and I'm coming with her. Rachel and Hannah grew up with her. And her bridegroom sent her a picture

of himself that makes him look very fine indeed, and she fell in love with it at first sight. So far as I can tell, she's as eager for her bridals as she seems to be."

Cynthia shrugged. "Maybe she is seasick. We might try putting her veil on her and taking her ashore when next we stop to cook supper or take on water."

They tried that in the evening, Cynthia and Rachel walking up and down a little stretch of pebbly beach with Sarah while Bethaniah and Hannah stayed in the cabin. They picked up shells along the shore, and talked back to the birds singing in an olive tree on the bluff overhead, and took turns stirring the pot of kosher salt beef stewing for their supper. (The big pot of shellfish cooking for the sailors smelled a lot better to Cynthia's nostrils, but her companions were forbidden to touch such things and she chose to be discreet.) Sarah seemed much better when they put her to bed; but by morning she was feverish again. She had pulled down the linen gown from its place on the wall and laid it over her like a blanket, though the cabin was warm enough, and lay huddled under it, shivering.

Then Cynthia rose without a word and rolled up her pallet. Her embroidered bag hung from the wall; she took from it the coffer Ezra had given her, made from her old turtle's shell, as long as her forearm and hinged with shining bronze. There was a bronze lock on it too; she pulled out a ribbon tied round her neck and unlocked the shell with the small key that hung there. Cautiously, because the papyrus was old and might crumble, she took out the half-dozen rolled-up books that were inside and laid them atop her pallet. All this without a word; but while she did this Bethaniah had taken the gown from the bed and folded it neatly. Cynthia tucked it into the turtle shell and locked it away again.

"I'll make her another drink when we stop at midday," Cynthia said. "Till then, you girls let her sleep, and tie that window open; let her have some air. I could do with some myself. And don't touch those scrolls." She gathered up the turtlebox and went outside. Bethaniah followed her.

They took seats on the two bundles of dates and Cynthia opened the turtle shell again. "You think there's something wrong with the gown," Bethaniah said. It was not a question.

"Medea sent her rival a gown steeped in poison," Cynthia muttered. She

sniffed the fine linen of the bodice and touched her tongue-tip to it gingerly. Finding nothing there worth mentioning, she tried the bits of bright fabric at the neck. "All I taste is indigo and madder and such things as you'd expect. And Nessos the centaur, as he lay dying at the hand of Herakles, told the hero's wife to dip her husband's shirt in the blood — and she did, the silly goose, and it killed him." She tasted another petal, made of deep yellow fabric. "Hmph. Saffron. *That's* not poisonous. Do we know of anyone who opposed this marriage? A girl who might have wanted to marry young Shimon? Or her family, which would come to the same thing? No, but they'd all be in Jerusalem, wouldn't they, and you wouldn't know them."

"I don't know much," Bethaniah said. "Lord Judah ben Nahum has two sons. The elder's already married and has sons, and will have his father's property in Jerusalem and thereabouts. The younger, this Shimon, will have the lands in Galilee, up to the north. There are some daughters too, and one of them married Sarah's cousin and lives in Alexandria. She says the boy's as handsome as the picture makes him out to be, and good-tempered, if a little spoiled, and should make a decent husband once he's properly trained. He's fifteen, I think. No, I don't know who might've opposed the marriage, or wanted the youngster for herself."

"Better keep an eye out, then, when you get to Jerusalem. You might learn something. Now, let's see." She lifted the gown from her lap by its colorful neckline. "Which is the front? This is, with this big rose in the middle, so the left shoulderblade should come about here —"

"Where that raw patch is on her back —"

"Yes, and look, this is the place, it's oozed onto the linen." The discolored spot on the wrong side of the fabric was the size of Cynthia's smallest fingernail. She brushed her fingertip across it, raised it, and cautiously ran it over her lower lip. "There *is* something. A hair or a bristle, or something."

"I've done that sometimes," said Bethaniah. "Stitched a stray hair into a seam, without knowing it, till I put it on and it prickled. Let's see it." She held the bit of fabric close to her left eye. "Yes, it's a hair, just a short bit of one, sticking through the back of the linen." She plucked at it with her fingertips. "Too short to get a grip on —"

"No, don't try to get it with your teeth. Stay right here, don't move." Leaving Bethaniah holding the bright-colored thing warily in her lap, Cynthia

ran into the cabin, where Sarah lay in a shallow sleep and the maids sat gossiping under their breath. Just under the lid of Cynthia's chest lay a bag of sewing things: thread, fine needles of bone, a sharp little knife. She took the bag outside.

On the right side of the fabric, above the left shoulder, was a bunch of blue flowers. Short-stemmed, like a child's bouquet, it was all made out of one bit of blue cloth, the separate blossoms outlined with fine white thread. Cynthia cut the stitches that held it to the gown, and in doing so realized that not all the embroidery was in white. Here was one line of pale green, undulating between one flower and the next, like a worm or a little snake. She cut the last of the stitches and pulled the blue cluster free. To its underside someone had fastened a coil of pale hair, three or four long strands wrapped around a finger and stitched in place, unseen on the right side. Cynthia's knifepoint cut these few binding stitches, and she slid her thumbnail under the coil of hair, lifted it to the sun. It shone like pure silver.

"Why do you sigh like that?" Bethaniah asked.

"In my bag there, there's a little box," Cynthia said. "Open it, please, and dump out what's in it. It's honey drops, I don't care if the ants do get them." She was gathering up every fragment of severed thread from her lap, even chasing one bright fleck along the decking till she caught it, and rolling them into a little fuzzy ball. "Yes, thank you. You might stick those needles into that bit of wool." She took the box and carefully closed up the hair and the threads inside it. "Now let's see."

The next figure was a bird made of red fabric, its bright eye a tiny bead of glass, its raised wing a separate piece of cloth stitched against the body. Cynthia cut the bird loose from the gown and, finding nothing under it, cut the stitches that held the wing to the body. Under the wing the bristly shaft of an arrow had been stitched in dark thread, aimed into the bird's heart. Its point was a small thorn, held in place by stitches fine as eyelashes.

"What is it? What do all these things mean?" Bethaniah demanded.

"Whoever made this gown wants Sarah to die," Cynthia said. "Maybe someday you'll find out who. A servant in the house, maybe, who's loved Shimon all unnoticed. Or a friend of one of his sisters'. Or, who knows, maybe his brother's wife, stranger and worse things have happened. Whoever she is, she's stitched her hatred into every thread of this gown, and hidden

poisonous tokens of her malice in it. I've no doubt we'll find some evil thing under every bird and beast and flower."

"You say *she*," Bethaniah said. "Well, of course, no man could've made this thing. But he might have hired it done."

"If such a thing ever occurred to him," Cynthia said. "What's needlework to a man, anyway? He buys it, or his wife or mother makes it for him, and he puts it on and wears it. He wouldn't think of the hours that went into every garment, one stitch after another, and so little to take up her attention while she sits stitching, so that her mind turns to dwell on what she loves or what she hates, stitching her love or her hate into every line —"

A sudden gasp of indrawn breath, and both women looked up. Hannah had come out of the cabin unnoticed, and stood with her hands pressed to her mouth.

"What's to do?" Cynthia asked, and Bethaniah, "Is Sarah worse?"

"I don't know. We can't wake her. What have you been saying? Is the gown bewitched?"

"Just a minute," said Cynthia. She folded the gown back into the turtle, and the box with its bits of nastiness inside it, and tucked the turtle under her arm.

They went inside and found Sarah lying still and silent, breathing as if she had a congestion in her chest. Bethaniah roused her enough to get her to swallow some water, but she never opened her eyes. Cynthia jerked a thumb toward the cabin door, and Bethaniah and the maids followed her out.

The sailor at the sternpost whistled cheerfully through his teeth at the sight of the maids; but Bethaniah gave him such a cold look that he fell silent and fixed his eyes on the sky.

Cynthia showed the girls what she had found, told them what she had guessed. "And this, I think, is the cause of Sarah's illness. She is under attack by the unseen army of someone's hatred; and we, as the generals would say, are going to fight this war on two fronts. No, three, because I shall use such healing herbs and potions as I may. But I doubt they'll have much effect till the spell's laid. I'm going to look in my books to see if there's anything useful in them — what's wrong?"

Bethaniah had gone pale. "That's witchcraft," she said. "We're forbidden —"

"You're not going to do it; I am," Cynthia said. "You three are going to take that gown apart, pick out every stitch, save every thread; and you, Bethaniah, hold each figure close to that near-seeing eye of yours till you find out what's wrong with it. Then, you'll take new thread and sew it all up again. Use those needles of mine stuck in that bit of wool; those were bought new in Alexandria last week."

"Very well, but why?"

"I can't tell if it's been done here or not — but in old tales, one way of cursing a garment is to sew it with a needle that was used to make a shroud. We'll take no chances."

"Couldn't we just burn the thing?"

"We could, but I want to save that for a last resort. Once we burn it, it can't be unburnt; and what if the fire were to set the spell in place, like the loaf shape onto bread dough or the King's name onto a mud brick?"

"I do know one counterspell for turning a curse back on its sender. I may try it, once we've got all the evil things out of the gown. Before that, I should think, it wouldn't be much use. The remaining matter would start to work on her again. We've got to get every smallest fragment out of it."

"Like purifying the house of every crumb of leaven before Passover," Bethaniah said. "You understand, you two? Every crumb." And the maids' faces lit up with understanding, as though Bethaniah had translated out of Latin, and they set to work on the gown with such care and attention as made Cynthia begin to hope.

They worked at it all day till the light failed, Bethaniah and the maids picking the gown apart, Cynthia reading through her scrolls. She found nothing to help; they found a great plenty to harm. Weapons in stitchery, crumbled bits of herbs that no one could identify, but no doubt were poisonous. There was an image of a fish, perky and bright-scaled, with another image beneath it from which the Jewish women averted their eyes; it turned out to be a local Punic fish-god named Dagon, an old enemy of the God of Abraham.

And there was a basket full of fruit, bunches of grapes, rosy apples, crisp melons. The images underneath were of animals: a crab, a pig, a rabbit. Bethaniah had to explain that all of these were "unclean" under the Mosaic

law, and any pious Jew would rather die than eat them.

They had almost finished before the light got too dim to work by. They folded all the pieces away and made sure every thread and scrap was in the box, and locked all away in the turtle for the night. They spread out their pallets on the floor, edge to edge and head to head, and Cynthia fell asleep listening to Bethaniah trying not to weep.

In the early hours before the dawn, when it's said true dreams come through the gate of horn to human dreamers, Cynthia saw in a great darkness a little circle of light, and in it she could see a pair of hands at work, fitting, turning, stitching. But the thread that bound down the work, though it looked just like thread, Cynthia knew to be a serpent. The needle was its poisoned fang; death dripped from it. They were hemlock leaves and dark-berried nightshade that lay down under the stitches, bound not to linen but to young, soft skin. Cynthia reached out and seized the needle, the serpent's tooth, snatched it away. The hands reached up to take it back, while the thread lashed about in the air. Cynthia tried to back away, but the thread had wound about her ankles, binding her legs in a cruel grip. The thread was poisoned; her flesh burned. The hands snatched and sprang back; for one long instant Cynthia could see the right palm hanging in air, its own needle thrust through it. Then she began to wake and realized that she had a cramp in her leg and must go through those long moments of pain before her body woke up enough to move, and there was nothing to do but endure it.

When she woke at last, and could sit up and grasp at her toes and begin to stretch the cramp out, the pale light of dawn was beginning to leak in around the shutters. Hours yet before she could get up and walk it out. She lay back again, working the sore spot against the kneecap of the other leg, and neither slept nor woke till day came. But in the interval, she caught hold of an idea.

"We're going to take it one step further," she told the others when it was light. "Not only take out the harmful bits; we're going to put bits of our own back in."

"We are forbidden to cast spells of any kind."

"Not spells." (Oh, for an orator's tongue, for the kind of persuasion that could tell a man to go to Hades and get him to stand in line to book his passage.) "Antidotes. Look, someone who hated Sarah put a lock of her hair into this gown to ill-wish her. Well, those who love her are going to put in

*their* hair to wish her well. We take out the herbs that are poisonous; we put in those that are good for healing. Where the other put in pictures of unclean animals, you put clean ones. What's 'clean,' anyway? Cattle, I suppose; sheep —"

"Goats. Chickens. Most birds with clean living habits. Fish with fins and scales —"

"Oh, yes, and that fish that you got so upset about, the one with the Punic god in it; well, you rip that out and put in an image of your own god instead."

"No one has seen the face of the God of Abraham; and if any had, it would be forbidden to make images of it."

"All right; all right. We'll think of something. We have three days till we land at Joppa."

The gown came apart and went back together, re-sewn with new needles and clean thread. Healing herbs from Cynthia's supplies went in where the poisons had come out; centaury against fever and valerian against pain, wild lettuce to bring on sleep and woad to stop bleeding; even cyclamen that aided in childbirth and orache that brought in the milk, in the hope they would be needed. Sheep and goats and sleek-feathered birds hid under the fruit basket, and under the fish where the Punic god had been, Bethaniah painstakingly copied four angular Hebrew letters from one of Sarah's books. They could no more speak their god's name than draw his face, but it was permitted to write it.

The big central rose they had taken apart petal by petal, finding little worms and beetles and a thick wad of leaves that Cynthia recognized as foxglove: medicine for an ailing heart, but dangerous for a sound one. They puzzled over what to put in its place, till Cynthia said, "Oh, crows take it, sometimes the best symbol is the thing itself," and they plumped out the flower with dried rose petals, still fragrant after months or years in the jar.

Bethaniah and Rachel had stitched locks of their hair under the shapes, and even Cynthia had added a dark strand of her own, its ends carefully tacked down so as not to prickle. The little green worm had been plucked out of the blue flowers, and other bits of malice cut away and stored with the rest of the lint in the small box; but to the casual eye the gown looked just the same when they tied off the last stitch and laid the finished work over Sarah as she lay in her bunk. She smiled, and moved her fingers over the fabric, but did

not wake. Shadows were gathering about her eyes, and her skin was dry.

Cynthia went out onto the deck again, the little box in her hand. She had not helped much with the stitchery: it was not one of her primary skills and she had been busy reading through the crumbling books of magic. She had found things practical, things incomprehensible, things that she might be capable of later if not now; but nothing of use in the present difficulty. (Except for a suggestion that one could unspell a garment by washing it in milk and hanging it out in winter till it froze. Neither milk nor freezing weather were available, and indeed Cynthia had never heard of a place where you could get both at the same time.)

*But I must continue to study these books, and learn from them, she decided, rather than waiting till there's a crisis. I shall learn these things and have them to my hand when I need them.*

For now, though, she was left with the box of fluff and fragments, and Sarah lying in a fever dream, and must deal with them as best she could.

Night had fallen, and the little evening breezes had died away early. The air was still and calm, and everything sweltered in the day's lingering heat. The sailors, sitting around their cookfire on the shore, had fallen silent. No bird called; no bat cried. Even the little waves fell against the beach sands without a sound. The whole world seemed to hold its breath, waiting for what she would do.

The last time, this spell had called up a great storm, or rather called it back and sent it raging against its maker. She hoped the anchor was well set. She opened the box, now almost brimful of cut threads and shredded animal and vegetable matter, and spoke the five words.

For a moment, nothing. Then a warm breeze started up at her back, big and gentle and full of soft sounds: the cries of the night birds, rustling branches, the lapping of the waves and the soft creaking of the ship itself. The wind lifted the fragments and blew them away, northward along the shoreline. (She checked the deck for lingering crumbs the following morning, and found nothing.) The air smelled sweet, and dried the sticky sweat on her face. And when she went inside to look at Sarah, the girl opened eyes bright as the morning sky and said, "I'm hungry."

On the Sabbath they rested, except when Cynthia went ashore to brew medications. Sarah recovered rapidly, and put the gown on and off again with

no ill effect. By the eighth day, when they docked at Joppa, she was as lively as ever, and danced with excitement while they waited for the boat to dock, the ropes to be made fast, the gangplank laid down.

On the dock stood a little group of people in fine clothes, young and old, and a young man in a white tunic edged in gold who craned his neck to see over the heads of the crowd, and two curtained litters. *Two?* One for Sarah, of course, to carry her to her father-in-law's house away from the eyes of the crowd —

The gangplank steadied in place, the little procession went ashore: Bethaniah with Sarah, and the two maids behind, and Cynthia trailing in the rear, not sure of her welcome. A man in a silken head-cloth took the boy's hand and laid Sarah's in it. Then he led them to the nearest litter and drew back the curtains.

An old woman lay there, her white hair shining like silver in the bright sun, her left hand plucking at the coverlet, her right hand curled like a dead leaf. From where Cynthia stood, she could see that a stroke had paralyzed the right side of the woman's body. Laboriously she turned her head to look at her son. Cynthia faded back into the crowd before the dulled eyes could see her.

Bethaniah was standing to one side, her face wet with happy tears. Cynthia caught her eye and glanced toward the litter.

"Yes, I see," Bethaniah said. "'My enemies dug a pit for me, and fell in it themselves.'"

Sarah gathered up the bottom of her veil and leaned into the litter to kiss the withered cheek. Who knew, the old harpy might come to love the girl like everyone else. Cynthia turned back to the ship, pulling a pouch from her belt, to dicker for a passage to Athens.

## 11. HONEY FROM THE ROCK

"We've docked at Panormos," the captain said through Cynthia's door, and she felt herself go cold and fought the feeling down. This was not the Panormos of Sicily where Komi had died, but the one in Asia Minor, the port of Miletos. She unlatched the cabin door and saw the sun just rising above the rocky shore, behind the captain's head.

"We'll be unloading and then loading again, all day," the captain went on, "and we'd be greatly obliged if you either stayed in your cabin, or went ashore." His tone was respectful; the passenger had paid well, and besides, she had lanced a boil on the mate's neck and had the reputation of a witch. "We'll sail an hour before sunset."

"I'll go ashore," Cynthia said. It was an easy choice between a day shut into a cabin with one small window, and a day spent wandering a lively Ionian port. No sense in taking chances, though. She packed her simples and the turtle-shell full of books into her bag. Her remaining supply of silver was sewn into her hem; just enough, if her reckoning was right, to get her to Athens. Maybe. She took her small change in her mouth. Any quick-moving thief would find nothing to steal but a worn black gown and her bedding, both of which she'd cheerfully replace if someone else paid the loss. She slung her bag over her shoulder and went ashore.

Parts of Milesian Panormos were waking with the sun; parts had been up all night. Right at the foot of the dock a man was unrolling a faded red carpet and laying out his wares: a dented copper pot, a pile of cheap pottery, a clay statue of Artemis with her arms and nose chipped away. Further on, little fish were grilling over a fishwife's brazier, filling the air with a scent sweeter than honey. "LOU-ka!" the woman screamed, "I need more CHAR-coal!" So much for that story in Herodotos that Milesian women never called their husbands by name. Maybe it had been true in his day. Cynthia spent her small change on little fish on hot bread, and a flask of wine and some ripe apricots, and wandered through the market watching men and women haggle over prices and children run about underfoot. Over the rooftops she could see the first of the pilgrims climbing the road to the Temple of Apollo Didymaios, not quite visible in the hollow of the hills above.

She was licking the last of the juice from her fingers when the little girl

tugged at her sleeve. "Please, lady. Aren't you Cynthia, the witch of Syracuse? Please come and see my mother; she's very ill."

Cynthia looked the girl over and decided she was probably in earnest: a little maiden of ten or twelve years, if Cynthia was any judge; in a year or so her breasts would bud and her father would be looking out a husband for her. Her eyes were red and her cheeks streaked with half-dried tears. Her little white gown, however, was as clean and bright as if it were new, and she had tucked into her hair a few flowers that were still unwithered. "What's the matter with your mother?"

"She's weak and tired all the time. She lies abed all day. She has vomited many times and now she won't eat." (That could be any of some dozen ailments and at least six of the spells in Cynthia's turtle-shell.) "And at times I think she's going mad. She said her hands and feet were numb, and that the light was whirling before her eyes. And now she seldom speaks, and what she says makes no sense."

These words lit a candle in Cynthia's mind, a tiny pale light that illustrated nothing, not yet. "What had she been eating before this?"

"What she always ate. Now she only drinks water."

"I'd better go and see her. Take me there."

"This way," the girl said, and led her through the town and up into the hills behind it. This was a major road, stone-paved throughout its length, that led to the temple of Apollo for those who didn't care to take the hundred-stadia march along the Pilgrim Way from Miletos to the north.

There were others on the road, travelers and peddlers and beggars and thieves; and a gang of workmen with a stonewagon, ready to continue the rebuilding that had been going on since Alexander's day; and a party of Hellenes with an ox for the sacrifice, its horns wreathed with flowers, its eyes placid and dull.

They climbed to the top of the plateau and turned a corner round a well-placed stone, and saw the temple of Apollo, its painted and gilded pillars shining in the sun, settled into its sacred grove, the village of Didyma huddled at its feet. All the temenos was ringed with whitewashed boundary stones.

Close to the road stood the shrine of Hekatē Propylaia, Hekatē-at-the-

Gates, where worshippers paused to pour unmixed wine. Here peddlers lurked with charms and amulets and figures of all the gods and goddesses by turns. "Ey, sir! It's a fortunate day for you! The god will smile on you, answer all your questions, see! the very finest pewter —" "Probably lead," Cynthia muttered, and cursed as the man turned her way. But he went straight past her as though she had not been there, to cry, "Ey, lady! Such a bargain! The four gods on one medal!" to some other victim. Perhaps Cynthia and the young girl didn't look prosperous enough.

The priests on duty at the entrance must have thought the same – nobody took any notice of them — or perhaps they would be asked for contributions later on.

Inside the great gate marking the entrance stood a round building with no roof and many doors, the altar of ashes, the place of sacrifice. A pair of priests standing outside it caught sight of the Hellenes with the ox and moved forward to take charge, arrange them in a procession of suitable length and lead them forth.

The girl led Cynthia straight past the village and along the Sacred Way toward the temple of Apollo. So the mother had not been living in Didyma when she fell ill, then; perhaps she had come to seek the help of Apollo the Healer and had not received it, and was now too weak to walk. They passed by the temple entrance and turned to the west.

Here a smaller ring of boundary stones enclosed the shrine of Artemis Pythië. Between the stones, through the trees of the grove, they could see the outcrop of rock that brought forth the goddess's sacred springs; and at the entrance stood the Hydrophor herself, her chief priestess, carrying a golden cup, with several of the attendants. The girl led Cynthia between them into the shrine, weaving back and forth as between close-growing trees. None of the women took the slightest notice. It was as if the ring of Gyges shielded both of them from sight; and Cynthia, who had seen already many strange things in the homeplaces of goddesses, felt the hair rise on the back of her neck.

She took a step into the temenos, and another, and suddenly a great flash of light flowered in the cool western morning sky and blinded her. She tripped and fell flat, and heard a deep voice rumbling like a stormwind, like thunder over her head. "Is that the best you could find?"

Foolish people (knowing no better) frequently are tricked into taking a man's voice, heard through an actor's speaking mask, for the voice of a god. No one who has heard the voice of a god will ever mistake it for the voice of a mortal. Cynthia pulled her stole over her head and wondered if this was death at last. But she heard the little maiden saying, "Uncle, don't be foolish. If you burn her to ashes she can't do *anything*. Cover yourself; you can't talk to her like that."

The light that blared through the woollen stuff of her stole and through her eyelids dimmed, and the deep voice rumbled, "Woman, look at me."

She uncovered her head and obeyed. The figure before her might have been man-sized and within arm's reach, or mountain-tall and far away. He stood naked, a bow in his left hand, a little animal sitting in his right palm. It turned its head to look at him. She had seen his likeness on coins and medals all morning. His hair was long and curled; there was a little smile on his lips, such as one saw on the old *kouroi*, the figures of young gods. A cruel little smile, with nothing human in it.

"Listen, mortal," he said. "If you cure my sister of her illness, you shall have my favor. If not, not. If you fail to cure her —" he raised the bow in his left hand.

"Yes, Uncle," the little maiden said, "you've made your point. Now let the woman do her work. Don't you have somewhere you're supposed to be?"

The god favored his niece with a look of annoyance that would have turned a mortal to cinders, and vanished.

"He's always worried somewhere," the girl explained. "Now he has to be in Delphi, and soon after he runs to Kolophon and from there to Xanthos, and then back on a run to Klaros, then to Delos or back here to Didyma, or wherever the oracle drinks from the sacred spring, or chews the bay, or shakes the tripod, and calls him." In the darkness he left behind, the little maiden shone like the moon behind a cloud.

"That was Apollo," Cynthia said.

"Yes."

"And his sister is —"

"Artemis. You know: Leto's twins."

"And she's your mother?" Artemis was, going by the tales, the most virginal of the gods, saving only Athenē who had sprung motherless from the brow of Zeus. "What is your name?"

Now she smiled, like the moon breaking out of cloud. "Aretē," she said.

Virtue. And it explained why her gown was so clean and white, her flowers unwithered, why none had seen her unbidden. "But I knew you," Cynthia said. "I knew you in the form of a man. Komi was his name."

"Oh, yes." The maiden's eyes glistened with tears. "Yes, he was one of mine. *I'll* not threaten you. Only, please, for the love we both bore him: cure my mother."

"If I can."

Cynthia got to her feet and looked around. This was not the same temenos she had seen before she stepped into it: tiny, close-walled naiskos here, altar over there. Only the outcrop of rock was the same, with its springs that bubbled out of the clefts and fell into golden basins below. The white pillar-stones marking the temenos boundaries had receded to a great distance, and beyond them the pale shapes of mortal worshippers moved about, dim as clouds. Within the vast plain of the temenos there were a few trees here and there, and over against the west a dark grove. One great oak stood nearby, and in its shade a woman lay on a bed inlaid with ivory. The cloth that covered her was rich with Tyrian purple, interwoven with threads of gold. From a branch hung a bow and a quiver.

Cynthia came close and knelt down to look at her. She seemed a woman of some forty years, thin and pale, with a few lines in her face and throat. A little of her daughter's light seemed to shine out of her, and indeed Cynthia felt she could almost see the sheet and pillow through the goddess's skin.

There was no point in asking why Apollo Paian, the Healer, could not heal his sister himself. If he could, he would; therefore he couldn't. If she lived long enough, she might discover the reason why.

"First, study the patient's appearance." She could almost have recited the description in Hippokrates word-for-word: the nose sharp, the eyes sunken, the ears cold and drawn in and their lobes distorted, the skin of the face hard, stretched, and dry, and the color pale. "How long has she been like this?"

"Like this?" Aretē had come close; she bent down and brushed the fair hair

away from her mother's face. "She's been feeling poorly ever since I can remember: two hundred years, maybe, as mortals reckon time. But *this* — the vomiting, seeing things that aren't there, speaking out of madness or not at all — that began this spring."

"What was the weather like this spring? I mean, what was it like here (if she was here)? I was at the other end of Greater Hellas then, halfway to the Pillars of Herakles."

"The *weather*," Aretē said, frowning in concentration. "It was a very cold, rainy, late spring. You'd think such things would not bother us immortals; but if they *did* — why didn't she recover once the weather got warm?"

"Well, I don't know that yet. A mortal, at least, might take such a chill in such a spring as he'd never recover from, no matter how warm it got." She looked around. A bowl lay on the ground beside the bed, made of gold with an ivory spoon in it, and a golden cup. She picked up the bowl; it was half-full of something clear as water and firm as soft jelly. Ambrosia, she supposed, the food of the immortals, prepared in a soft form like to the barley-gruel fed to sick mortals. She raised the bowl to her nose and sniffed: there was no smell so far as she could tell.

"You shouldn't taste that," Aretē said.

"I hadn't planned to. What's in this cup? Water?"

"The water from her own spring. It's all she will take now."

Cynthia took a cautious sip. The water tasted pungent, almost, and slightly bittersweet. The candle in her mind burned a little brighter. It was like — Curse! she couldn't put her mind to it. She got up from the bedside and looked around again. The great plain within the temenos seemed perfectly flat, or even bowl-shaped — or maybe that was just a trick of the light. There were stretches of green grass, and she could see deer wandering out of the woods to graze. (A white stag raised its head to look at her, and lowered it again.) But much of the plain was a powdery cracked limestone with bushes of laurel and heather and rhododendron growing out of it, the sunlight bright on their rustling leaves. And as she stood looking blank-faced across the plain, a bee flew by her ear with a loud buzz and hurried away into the distance. But the light in her mind blazed up and illuminated that bee, lit up the golden fur on his body, his glassy wings, his tiny dark-eyed head. Stories welled up in her mind like the springs of Artemis: poisoned armies,

raving warriors, foragers who should have stayed with beans and horsemeat. She turned back to Aretë.

"What place is this?" she asked. "This vast plain that fits so neatly within a little ring of stones?"

"It's the plain of asphodel, the plain of immortal things," said Aretë. "The little patch of ground inside those boundary stones stands for, or in a sacred sense it really is, this wide plain where the herds of Artemis graze without fear, where all healing plants grow."

"Oh, it is, is it? May your words be as true as the truth." Cynthia almost gripped the young goddess by the shoulders, but thought better of it. Yes, almost at her feet grew a clump of spiky asphodels. The only flower that grew in both worlds, some poet had said. Well, he was wrong: the heather was wearing ten shades of soft rose and purple, and the rhododendrons must have been a glorious sight when they were in bloom. "Now tell me: is this plain on earth?"

"I'm not exactly prepared to answer that question," said Aretë after a moment's thought. "I'm only a young goddess, lady; give me a little time to learn."

"Does the same sun shine on it, that shines on earth?"

"Oh, yes."

"Does the rain fall on it, water its plants and sink deep into its soil?"

"Yes."

"And does that water, presently, bubble up out of the ground into these springs? And this is what your mother has been drinking all year?"

"Yes, yes. What is it? Is she poisoned? Can you cure it? How could any poison harm an immortal goddess?"

"Yes, it's poisoned; yes, I know a treatment. As to your last question, I'm not prepared to answer *that*, not yet.

"Listen. Xenophon tells of a band of soldiers traveling overland near the region of Kolkhis. They found wild beehives, ate the honey, and fell ill. They acted mad — or drunk. They fell to the ground in their thousands, unable to stand, miserable and despondent. It took them days to recover. Later they found out that the honey they had eaten had been made from the flower of the

rhododendron. The people of that region know better than to eat it themselves. 'Mad honey,' they call it. Medea lived there, princess of Kolchis, witch and poisoner. Dionysos danced there with his Mainads."

"Mad lads," said Artemis suddenly. "My skip, the moondering wan, high with Kastor's brother and his brother Kastor."

"The rhododendron blooms here every year," Aretë said, "but this never happened before."

"That's where the weather comes in. The spring was cold and wet and late; there was nothing for the bees to feed on, except the rhododendron. They made it into thin, greenish, watery honey that dripped from the combs; and if, as I guess, their hives were not well-shielded from the weather, then every time it rained, the honey washed right out of the uncapped combs. And into the water your mother has been drinking all year."

"Water," Artemis said. "Wetter. Wether, wither, whether. Why not."

"No, don't give her any," Cynthia said. "I dare say in her good days it still wouldn't have harmed her. But with this weakness upon her, bringing her down almost, no offense meant, to the feeble strength of a mortal —"

"About half of that seems to make sense," Aretë said. "Let's assume it does. You said there is a treatment?"

"Sound honey, and pure water," Cynthia said. "Or rue as an emetic, but I don't want to make her vomit now, she's too weak. There'll be nothing but traces left inside her anyway. I'll go find honey; can you get water that doesn't come from these springs? Rain water would be fine."

"Yes, I can have it brought. But the honey —" she gestured toward the plain. "Won't it be poisoned too?"

"Not the new stuff, that they've made since the other flowers bloomed. Sometimes you can get good and bad within parts of the same comb. But the good will be thick, the bad green and watery. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Wait." Aretë ran her hands over Cynthia's face and hair. "That will protect you from stings – as long as you don't become afraid."

Out on the plain, time was still passing as it did on earth; the sun had risen almost to the noon. Cynthia looked back to mark the place where the great oak grew by the outcrop, and went off to look for flowers.

The grassy lawns where the deer grazed were as much clover as grass, thick with white blossoms, and the bees were foraging over it as greedily as babes at the breast. The white stag lifted its head again to look at Cynthia, and sighed as a weary man might have done, and stooped again to graze.

The bees were no ordinary bees. If there were bees of the gods, they were these: bees the size of sparrows, bees that hummed under their breath like a whole chorus of deep-voiced Skythians, bees that flew off with pollen clumps on their legs the size of horse beans. They could fly faster than she could walk, but when one flew out of sight another came into view over her shoulder, steadily leading her toward the hive.

It was plain enough that none of the spells from the scrolls in the turtle shell would be of any use to her here. There were charms to keep bees from swarming or, once they had swarmed, to coax them to settle in a new hive: nothing to suit the present case. But Cynthia had had as friend a farmer who kept bees, and she knew the value of smoke.

The bees led her to a huge oak, still green and hale but split up the side to a point higher than she could reach. Cautiously she knelt and peered inside. It was dark, and it murmured, and smelt of wax and honey.

Piles of green heather branches at the entrance, on a bed of dry leaves to catch the spark and fire the whole stack. The leaves flared, the heather smoldered; its little leaves and flowers blazed up, crackling like hail, and then settled down to pouring out clouds of thick, pungent smoke. The hollow tree drew it in like a chimney. Inside, the murmuring rose sharply and fell again, more slowly. *"Tisn't that the smoke fuddles them, nor makes them more peaceable,"* her friend had said. *"Tis that they think the woods are afire and they must fly for their lives. So they go to fill their bellies with honey. And once their bellies are full, look you, they're happy and they don't sting."* She gave them a little longer, till their song had dwindled to a thick gluttonous hum. Then she picked up a branch of heather by its unburnt end and stepped inside.

The comb hung like curtains of thick-woven homespun from unseen ceilings far overhead. Here and there, where the cells were not yet capped, bees hung in clusters drinking their fill. Long-fallen combs crunched underfoot like shells on the seashore.

She looked overhead, peering through the thick smoke, with only the fitful

light of the torch to see by. She thought she caught a glimpse of the king bee, his long body as large as a wood-pigeon's, but she could not be sure of it.

What she needed was a piece of filled comb that she could break away with her hands, and most of these combs were entirely too big. Each separate cell must hold several spoonfuls of honey. Wait – there was a small piece, growing out of a great hanging comb like a wart on someone's earlobe. If she could break it loose —

She laid the torch on the ground and tugged at it with both hands. It bent, and swayed, and came loose with a chorus of pops. Honey oozed over her hands. She picked up her torch again and turned to go.

But the larger comb was still swaying and popping, and the anxious bees rose from it in a great cloud and it collapsed to the floor, folded up on itself with a sound like a long sigh.

The cloud of bees swirled and thickened into a pillar the size of a man, that bent its shapeless top this way and that as if to search for the person responsible. The song rose into a bellow of rage, a war-chant for an army of myriads.

It had been a mistake to lay the torch down on the floor: everywhere a twig or leaf or strand of dry grass had blown in across the wax, a little candle-flame had sprung up on a slender wick. It made for a lot of bewilderment and not much real light, and where in Hades was the doorway?

The pillar of bees was circling now, like a beast closing in on its prey — but no beast went upright, none but man, the most dangerous of all. She fancied that it would soon put forth a head to see her with, arms with poisoned talons to grasp and kill. She took in a last deep breath, dropped the torch and trod it underfoot till it was out. Then she trod out the little candleflames, one by one, till they were all quenched and the place was dark again. *Aretë, patroness of Komi, I trust in you.*

The bees roared like swarms of lions around her head, but none of them touched her. Perhaps they didn't sting because of the smoke; perhaps they didn't sting because of the blessing of Aretë, and because Cynthia was just too busy to fear. After some time her eyes grew used to the darkness; she saw a faint light glimmering through the smoke, and groped her way outside. Eyes watering, her clothes reeking of smoke and sticky with honey, she made her way back across the plain of asphodel to the oak tree beside the welling

rock.

Two of the Hydrophor's women were there, their faces empty as in a dream, carrying between them a cask full of water. "Rain water," Aretë said, "some housewife's laundering water from the village." The women put down the cask and turned to go. As they passed between the pillars of the gate they vanished and reappeared cloudlike on the distant horizon.

Cynthia poured out the spring water from the cup, the watered-down ambrosia from the bowl, and rinsed the vessels with rainwater. Then with the golden spoon she uncapped one of the cells and held a spoonful of honey to the lips of Artemis. The goddess drew in a long breath, as if the smell was sweet; and sighed, and swallowed.

Cynthia got four more spoonfuls into her before she opened her eyes, pale blue as the clouds on the horizon, and said, "Water." Aretë brought the cup, and her mother drained it without stopping. "More," she said, and drank another cupful before falling back into sleep.

"Two sensible words together," Cynthia said. "This might work."

They watched by her all afternoon, as the sun slowly descended the sky toward Panormos. *Four hours*, Cynthia thought, counting handsbreadths above the horizon, and then *Three hours; if she mends within the hour I could still get back to the dock before the ship sails* — if in any case Apollo did not blast her to ashes. Neither piece of good fortune seemed likely. If worst came, at least she wouldn't have to worry about stretching her dwindling silver as far as Athens. Artemis took more honey once, and water several times, but she did not speak again.

It was some time before Cynthia realized that there were others sitting beside them — and there was no excuse for it, since they were not pale and transparent like Artemis, but ruddy and hale, with rounded arms and sparkling eyes. "These are my sisters and cousins," Aretë said. "Philia, Elpis, Tychë."

Friendship, Hope, Luck: the young goddesses whose names were abstract qualities, whose worship was displacing the Olympians in the hearts of men — along with Tammuz and Kybele, Isis and Osiris, and even men themselves. The rituals went on unceasing — no one was anxious to break with long-held traditions, least of all those who made a living from them. But their hearts were no longer in it.

"For other gods are either far away or have not ears,  
Or do not exist, or heed us not at all;  
But thee we can see in very presence, not in wood and not  
in stone,  
But in truth, and so we pray to thee."

So they had sung to Demetrios ruler of Athens, while he still lived. And being a Hellene, Cynthia could not but wonder which was cause and which effect. Had men turned from the Olympians because they had faded and grown distant? Or were they fading because men no longer adored them in their hearts? But she did not say any of this aloud.

As the day wore on, other watchers became visible, pale and dim but perceptible, especially if she looked at them out of the corner of her eye. Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hermes, Hestia, Dis. None of them looked as ill and wasted as Artemis, but she could see straight through them, and they sat without moving and their expressions were grave at they watched at the bedside of their kinswoman to see if she would live or die. Pale, anxious; but maybe no worse than they had ever been.

So she thought until Athenë appeared. Not pale, not transparent, she was as solid as Aretë herself, bright as her painted statues in the temples, and her saffron-colored gown fluttered in the wind, and her grey eyes were as deep as the sea. The little owl on her shoulder fluttered its feathers and said softly, "Hooooo." Then it flapped its wings and nearly fell off as the goddess rushed forward. Artemis woke, and said, "Sister. Welcome to my house," and reached up a thin arm to Athenë's embrace.

The grey-eyed goddess rose and took Cynthia firmly by the shoulders. "Cynthia! Well met," she said, and kissed her on the cheek. The touch stung like hot iron, but only for an instant. Then all the weariness fell from her body and her filmy eyes cleared, and she stammered, "Forgive me, Lady, but have we met?"

"You called on me," the goddess said. "Long ago, in the middle of the sea. I haven't forgotten."

"Oh. Oh, yes. I called you Minerva, among the Romans." In fact, she had taken her name in vain, to cover up a spur-of-the-moment deception, but she wasn't going to mention that.

"But you called me," the goddess said, "and it was as though I had woken

from a long dream. So, seeing you were in a tight place and needed an idea, I sent you one."

Cynthia was fairly certain she had had the idea before she called on Minerva, but she wasn't about to mention that either; and besides, another idea was coming to her, one that swelled and bloomed like all of spring and summer in a moment. A great light was sweeping over the plain, and she turned her head and squinted behind her hand as Apollo burst into view.

"Uncle," said Aretë, and Apollo said, "Oh, yes," and dimmed his light again. He came and knelt by his sister's bedside, and she smiled weakly and took his hand.

"She's not cured," he said, glaring at Cynthia.

"As we mortals say, Lord, she's not right, but she's better," Cynthia answered. "Aretë, would you say she's back to the way she was before this spring?"

"About that."

"And you, my Lord, who travel so widely around the lands and seas: do you visit Rome?"

"What has that to do with —!" he began, but his sister's soft voice interrupted him.

"Yes, he does," she said. "The Romans did not know him before they started dealing with you Hellenes; but they know him now, sing hymns in his praise and offer sacrifices for his favor." She coughed, and groped for her cup; Aretë held it to her lips.

"And under what name do they call on him?" Cynthia asked when Artemis had finished swallowing; but Apollo bellowed, "My own!"

"Uncle," said a new voice, soft but entirely firm, "you will do better to let the physician do her work." This was another little maiden like Aretë, even younger in appearance, perhaps eight or nine. Her hair was dark and her eyes serious, and she wore one great pearl on a ribbon around her neck.

"Thank you," Cynthia said. She got to her feet and marshalled her wits. The more this sounded like a formal incantation, the better.

"Artemis, daughter of Leto," she began, "today I give you a new name. Far to the west, in the hearts of the people of Rome, temples of virtue and honor,

your name is Diana."

And the goddess drew in a great breath and let it out in a wail, like a newborn child drawing in its spirit with its first breath, with her new name. She was opaque and solid; the color stood in her cheeks; she kicked off the coverlet and rose to her feet. The white stag came round the bole of the oak tree and nuzzled at her hand.

She laughed, and embraced her brother, and Cynthia, and Aretë. Then snatching her bow and quiver from the branch of the oak, she cried, "Rome!" and vanished. Apollo disappeared a heartbeat later.

"You also, my Lords and Ladies Olympians," Cynthia said, "can do the same. Jupiter, Juno, Neptune, Mercury, Vesta, Pluto."

There was a great flash of light and color and they were gone, had been gone for some time. Only the five young maidens were left, the young goddesses, embodied virtues. "Well done," Aretë said softly.

"That should last for a few hundreds of years," the youngest said, "or as long as the Romans remain temples of virtue and honor."

"What about you?"

"Oh, we already have our Latin names," Aretë said. "Virtus, Amicitia, Spes, Fortuna, Sapientia."

"Or Sophia," the littlest maiden said, leaving Cynthia to wonder how Wisdom could be so young — until she looked into her eyes.

"Now, then," Aretë said. "There's the matter of your fee."

Cynthia shrugged. "I can say I've put my head into the lion's mouth and brought it out again. What I really want isn't in your gift."

"Well, no," said Sophia. "Korë wasn't here today, was she?"

"No," said Aretë. "I haven't seen her in a while."

"She's probably in Eleusis," Sophia said.

"You could go there," Philia said.

"I'm not Orpheus," Cynthia said. She glanced at the sun, barely a handsbreadth above the horizon. "I've missed my ship anyway. And he didn't succeed either, did he?" And crying aloud, "But if I had his chance, my head would fall from my shoulders before I turned it to look back."

"Go to Eleusis and ask," said Tychē. "There's always a chance."

"We'll all come and speak for you."

"And meanwhile —" Sophia held out a little coin, tarnished bronze and not worth much, and gave it to Tychē.

"When you get back into the town you'll see a merchant on a red carpet, offering for sale a very poor statue of Aunt Artemis," said Tychē. She gave the coin to Aretē.

"Buy it with this." And Aretē pressed the coin into Cynthia's hand, and for several long moments that was the only solid thing there was, as the red light of sunset washed her in a sea of flame.

When she could see again she was standing at the edge of the dock, her feet on the pavement, her bag on her shoulder, the coin in her hand. Beside her sat the merchant on the red rug. She tossed him the coin — the man smiled — and picked up the battered figure of Artemis. It was unusually heavy for a piece of clay, and it was no great surprise to her when by chance she stumbled over her threshold and dropped the thing, and it shattered and spilled out a hoard of gold coins. Enough to fill all the empty places in her hem, enough to get her to Athens or even further. Eleusis, for instance. She stripped off the honey-wet gown and put on the old worn one. Enough even to spend a little at the next market – Samos, probably.

She undogged her window latch and let in the salt breeze and the sun's last hour of light. What had the other maiden's name been, the one who seldom spoke? Elpis, that was it. Hope. Outside the anchor thudded on the wooden deck and the captain shouted to raise sail. Eleusis, maybe, and back again.

## 12. AN EXCHANGE OF FAVORS

Samos was a dark shape in their wake, flattening into a shadow on the horizon. Forward, the whole sky was an unblemished brilliant blue as far as anyone could see. Cynthia had a length of black wool and a length of rust-colored linen to make two new gowns with, bought in the Samian market, and she was setting the black sleeves to the shoulder-seams in the bright sunlight when she saw the man approaching.

No, not a man. He cast no shadow, for one thing, and the busy Punic sailors never raised a head as he walked past them to ask who in Erebos he was. What's more, he had never come on board at Samos. He was quite close before she saw the clinching argument, the little golden wings on his heels that opened and closed slowly like the wings of butterflies.

She bowed where she sat, over her lapful of woollen goods. "My Lord Hermes: or, I should say, Mercury."

"You've called me by both names," the god said. "You *can* see me? That's a relief. They can't."

"I don't think you have a name in Punic, my Lord," Cynthia said.

He considered this. "I don't, now that you mention it," he said. "I need to talk to you."

"Then we'd better go inside, before the sailors think I've gone mad and am talking to myself." She got up and led the way to her cabin.

The rough wooden door stuck in its frame, as it always did. A bronzed arm reached over her shoulder and touched it, and it swung open. Cynthia stepped inside, trying not to wonder what was afoot. Gods had always interfered with luscious young mortals, there were a thousand tales; but she was twenty-three, no longer young, and never luscious —

"Oh, nothing like that," Mercury said. "Getting entangled with mortals is more trouble than it's worth; I learned that a long time ago. And I could wish —" and cut himself off sharply. "Have a seat."

Two benches had appeared in the cabin, and a low table, and now the god brought out from nowhere in particular two trays and set them down. One held bread and olives and smoked fish, and a jar and cup of fine Samian

ware.

The other held a jar and cup that must be of glass, finely patterned with swirls of blue and green. The liquid inside was as clear as water. In the dish lay things she had no words for, little round things bright green as emeralds — but they quivered as Mercury set them down. Another, the size and shape of a roll of bread, but translucent as mist, its wisps drifting slowly about a common center. And strips of things that looked like beaten gold. Ambrosia and nectar, the food and drink of gods. Homer had implied that it was greatly different from the food of mortals; he must have known something.

Mercury poured dark-red wine into her cup. "Your wine is called 'The Tears of Teiresias,'" he said. "Let me know if it's all right."

Obediently, she raised the cup. (If he had wanted to poison her, he could have blasted her where she stood and saved himself trouble.) "Your health, my Lord," she said, and drank. "It's very good."

"Good." He poured colorless nectar into his own cup, and the room filled with its fragrance — roses, maybe, or the fresh wind of spring. She took a deep breath and let it out again. The young goddess Aretē had warned her she mustn't try to taste the food of immortals, and she had been right about everything else.

"You remember about Teiresias?" Mercury asked.

"Well, yes; the twining snakes, and how he changed his sex twice —"

"And after that, Zeus and Hera asked him, as one who'd know, which enjoyed bed-sport more, men or women? And he said, 'Women,' and Zeus had a great laugh at his consort's expense, and Hera was so angry she struck Teiresias blind. And Zeus said, 'I'm sorry, but I can't help you; what one god has done another god cannot undo; instead, I'll give you the power of prophecy —'"

"Is that the truth?" Cynthia said. "I always wondered — Oh, forgive me, I interrupted."

"No, no, please: ask."

"I always wondered whether it was true, that what one god has done another can't undo. How can the immortal gods be bound to such restraints on their powers? Or is it simply that if they were not bound, all the stories would fall to the ground? If the character in your play gets into terrible trouble and

then immediately the god out of the Machine comes down and makes it all right, you've got no plot, and you'll never win the Drama Festival award."

Mercury laughed, and tossed one of the green things (wobbling between one shape and another like a droplet of water flung into the air) into his mouth. "That's almost right," he said. "It's a matter of honor. It's not 'what a god has done, no other can undo;' it's 'what one god has done, another is bound in honor not to undo.' You'll remember how Hera turned Io into a cow, because she'd lain with Zeus. Zeus couldn't undo that; but she wandered into Egypt where she not only regained her shape, but rose to godhead as Isis. But if that hadn't happened, she might have wandered into some mortal's farmyard and been slaughtered — or put in the stockpen to bear calves for the rest of her life. It happens all the time. It's tricky, for a god to circumvent another's actions without breaking honor. Sometimes the shortest distance between two points is around three sides of a square." He drank again, and sighed.

"Well, my Lord, maybe it's just the wine, but I am beginning to think you want me to do something." The god smiled.

"And you can't tell me what it is, because that would be interfering."

The god smiled wider (the room was becoming warmer), and made beckoning motions, as if to say "Go on, go on."

"Then how am I find out what to do? — Never mind that, what *can* you tell me?"

"I can tell you," the god said, "that if you go to Mytilenē, on Lesbos, you will presently see and recognize what needs doing. And if you'll agree to do it, I'll teach you a fine charm for undoing enchantments."

"I thought I already had one," Cynthia said, looking at the iron ring of Arethousa, dim on her finger. "Though it doesn't seem to have done anything of late."

"Arethousa has fallen into deep sleep," Mercury said. "I can tell you that, you see; it hasn't anything to do with this other matter. In fact, it would be a good deed if you gave the ring back to Arethousa; I mean, drop it into her spring. If you get the chance."

"All right."

"And when you get to Mytilenē —"

"We're not going there. We're bound for Athens, not even making landfall anywhere between."

"Oh, that's no trouble. *That* I can handle. If you agree."

"And you're sure that when I get to Mytilenë, I'll know the task when I see it?"

"Certain sure."

"Oh, very well. *Most* of the gods I've met, and I've met entirely too many, have told me the truth eventually. I'll have to take you on trust."

"As I do you." Mercury's face and body were shining with delight, like the sun thinly veiled in cloud. "Give me your hand." He took it and clasped it firmly, like a merchant sealing a bargain. "Now we're in my part of the world and I can do anything. Quickly, let me teach you the charm." He recited a pair of hexameters in Ionian dialect:

"Kourë stood in her garden, deep in the shadow asleep  
there;

Out of the darkness, Kourë, rise up anew to the lightlands."

And when Cynthia had repeated it over thrice, the god vanished and the cabin was very dark.

She stumbled toward the window — the table and benches were still there — and opened the hatch to let some light in. But there was not much light to let in: the sky had clouded over and the sea had gone choppy — but there seemed to be no wind. Maybe it was from a different quarter? She opened her cabin door (it opened silently at a touch) and stepped out onto the deck. Banks of thunderclouds were building up toward the west, and a stiff breeze blew across the deck, scattering rope-fibers and dust, and struck her in the face. The sailors were running about reefing the sail and getting loose bundles under cover. "Better get back inside, lady," one of them called as he hurried by; and Cynthia did so. She barred her door and looked around the cabin to see if all was secure. The window hatch was banging in the gusts of wind, and the ship was beginning to roll. The god had taken away his own tray but left hers; she had better finish the jar of Tears of Teiresias before it fell and broke. Then she dogged the hatch, fell into her bunk, and spent the next several hours in a borderland between dreaming and waking, while the wind howled and the ship tossed and the furniture whispered back

and forth across the floor.

"Curse it," the captain said next morning, glaring under the rain-washed sun. "What good does this do me?"

The citadel of Mytilenē, like many others, had been built on a rocky spit of land connected to the island itself by a low isthmus. Long and patient digging had cut a wide passage through the isthmus, protecting the akropolis against attack by land and providing safe passage for ships between the northern and southern harbors when the sea was rough outside their sheltered waters.

A fine harbor, but not the Piraeus of Athens. They had been blown north by east instead of west by north, and the captain was not pleased.

"Well, none of us is drowned," Cynthia pointed out. "That's an advantage right there. Your hold's practically empty of cargo, is it not, Captain? It looks as if they've had a good harvest; maybe you can pick up a load on the cheap and sell it dear somewhere else."

"When they've had a good year, which I grant you," the captain said, "Lesbos exports wine. Sometimes olive oil. Athens also is an exporter of both wine and olive oil. It would be like hauling copper to Kypros, or tin to the Northern Isles. And it's still Athens we've got to go to next; my only cargo is a letter to be delivered there. Barring that load of Samian pottery I picked up at a venture — if it hasn't all got smashed to shards in the storm."

"I will bet you a dinner ashore," Cynthia said, "that there's been no breakage whatever. Go take a look."

The captain looked at her, not quite dubious, but cautious. The witch of Syracuse had never done him any harm, and some good, and she had paid her passage with gold. It wouldn't do to cross her. "Some time today, I will. We'll be here for hours, looks like, with the repairs we've got to make. I thank the gods the mast didn't break."

"The gods will appreciate your gratitude. I'll go ashore and keep out of your way." And surely a mostly-honest tradesman like the Punic captain would be pleasing to Hermes, now called Mercury, patron of roads, bargains, trade, the newly dead, and thieves.

Mytilenē's waterfront was like every other in Greater Hellas: piles of reasonably fresh fish for sale, nets to mend, sails to dry, sailors looking for

amusement, amusement looking for sailors. Further away from the harbor, the market street was lined with booths: bread, grilled fish, fruit, wine all offered for sale, as well as yard goods and squid's ink and baskets and pottery and eggs, and chickens with their legs tied together; and the smells of charcoal and frying oil drifting out of the doorways of ale-houses. Children ran to and fro underfoot, some begging, some offering to carry small packages, some with an eye out for purses to cut. Chickens squawked, flutes twittered, voices quarrelled. And the rattle of a sistrum, and voices raised in song, and (when they paused for breath) the soft bleat of a sheep. A sacrifice bound for the altar.

Fresh mutton: Cynthia hadn't tasted it since before leaving Alexandria. And if she joined the procession, made a witness to the sacrifice, then after the blood had been spilled and certain bits offered to the gods in the fire (fat and bones mostly, the parts the human worshippers couldn't eat anyway), the meat would be shared out among all the participants. She drew her stole just a trifle closer about her head, lest anyone happen to ask, "Who are you?" and followed.

The procession moved forward, along the Broad Street lined with the freshly-whitewashed houses of the rich. A manservant was washing the steps of one of the houses with mop and bucket, and chatting to a maidservant leaning out an upper window. A peddler went by with a handcart, crying autumn flowers for sale, and somewhere a child cried in infantile rage, and shouted "NO!" and cried again.

They turned right onto Temple Street and headed eastward, between the houses of little gods and greater gods, with the scent of incense going stale around their porticoes, all the way to the great Temple of Zeus, with its golden pillars, at the far end.

The sacrificial sheep seemed to be nervous, which was not the kind of behavior one would expect from a sheep. It was a young ewe, a year or so past its lambhood: its wool washed white, its head garlanded with flowers, its hooves polished. And its eyes rolled from side to side, and it shied if anyone came close to it. If it hadn't had a beribboned cord around its neck, held by a pock-faced young acolyte, it would probably have vanished into the crowd by now. Twice it had tossed the garland off its head into the dust; twice someone had replaced the wreath (slightly the worse for wear) on the fleecy head.

They passed through the golden pillars (gold leaf over wood, of course, and beginning to wear away) into the cool semi-darkness of the temple. Under a tall statue of Zeus All-Father, bright in new paint, a shaft of sunlight fell through the smoke-hole onto the altar of sacrifice, dusty with ashes. The sheep set its hooves and tried to back away, but the floor was paved with smooth tiles and the acolyte easily dragged it along, click-click-click.

The sheep bleated again, and jerked frantically against its cord, as if it knew what was ahead of it. Sheep generally didn't; for however many thousands of years the clever sheep that looked out for themselves had wandered off and been eaten by wolves, while the stupid sheep that allowed the shepherd to look after them had stayed at home and been eaten by shepherds. Perhaps a wild ram had wandered down out of the mountains and mounted this one's mother?

Cynthia moved up through the crowd to take a closer look. The head of the family offering the sacrifice had stepped to the fore, taken a little knife and cut off a lock of wool. Atop the wool he laid tinder, and a few sticks of kindling, and struck two stones together till sparks fell and set it alight. The sheep reared, and the acolyte with the cord leaped to grab hold of the fleece atop its head, and wrestle it to the ground.

The ritual continued. The singers sang, the acolytes waved incense in elaborate patterns all round the altar, the priest brandished the sacrificial knife

And the sheep, its head pulled upward to offer its throat, looked up at Cynthia with human terror and despair in its eyes.

This was what Mercury had meant.

"Kourë stood in her garden, deep in the shadows asleep there.

Out of the darkness, Kourë, rise up anew to the lightlands."

The fire flared up, casting blinding smoke in every direction except where Cynthia stood, and the sheep vanished. A naked woman lay on the floor. Somewhere outside, thunder rolled. The acolyte with the cord — but the cord seemed to have fallen away — let go his grip on her hair and rubbed his eyes as if they stung. Cynthia whipped off her stole and covered her, hauled her to her feet and half-dragged her away. Nobody seemed to notice till they had reached the edge of the crowd.

The acolyte took his fists from his eyes and seemed to notice only now that they were empty. The priest lowered the knife. Thunder rumbled again. The worshippers looked around, and cried, "Where's the sheep?" and looked around again. But they saw nothing. A sleek looking old man with a neatly trimmed beard was staring directly at Cynthia, not seeing her.

Cynthia leaned forward and murmured into his ear, "Zeus took the beast entire for himself," and the man repeated it. Soon the words were going through the crowd, to general approval. *But nobody got any mutton chops*, Cynthia thought, and led the woman out of the temple before the glamour should break.

She was young, no more than fifteen, with tumbled fair hair, and a delicate face. Her shudders were beginning to turn into sobs. Cynthia turned about looking for a hiding place, somewhere the girl could cry and recover herself unseen.

Nothing offered itself. No dark alleys on Temple Street, only bold-faced temple fronts, bright and airy with colonnades that promised holy things within. Overhead it was growing dark. Winds howled between the columns; what in Erebus was happening to the weather? There to the right of the Temple of Zeus, in the place of honor, stood the temple of Hera his sister-wife, and from it came an ominous rumbling, like thunder far-off or drums close to. The story fell together, the same as all the other stories, a poet's formula: *Zeus tumbled Whoever-it-was, and jealous Hera turned her into* — in this case, a sheep, and in an excess of clever cruelty arranged for her to be sacrificed in her lover's own temple. That frustrated, now she would rise up in wrath —

Cynthia turned her head. On the left side of Zeus's temple stood that of Hermes, the son of his left hand, whom Hera, no doubt, had never liked. Cynthia lifted the girl by the elbows and dragged her inside.

It was quiet here, and a pair of small fires burned on either side of the statue. The sculpted Hermes hadn't the grace of the living Mercury, but the symbolic power was the same. The wrath of Hera could not get in. They sat on the steps and Cynthia waited while the girl cried. Presently she dried her tears, and looked around, and looked up. Over their heads something was glittering, like a swarm of shining bees, pouring out of the Hermes-image's hand. Cynthia had just time to remember, *Zeus came to Danaë in a shower of*

*gold*, and then golden rain fell all around them and was gone, and Cynthia's stole fell empty to the floor, leaving only the fragrance of roses.

She looked up into the statue's sightless eyes. "All right," she said. "I'm not sure you owe me for this; it's what I would have done myself, given the opportunity. Good day to you, my Lord."

The storm must have passed over, outside; sunlight was pouring in the temple door. Cynthia wrapped her stole around her head again and left the temple of Hermes for the waterfront while the getting was good.

The Punic captain was waiting for her on the dock. "Dinner is on me," he said. "Not a cup broken. How did you do it? The Red Horse serves good shellfish."

The Red Horse also had dark corners, sturdy tables, very good wine, and music from a girl who twanged a lyre and sang in a Theban dialect. The captain seemed to be known here, and the waiters kept their cups filled.

A bronzed hand reached over the captain's shoulder with a plate of grilled shrimp. Cynthia looked up: the man's smile lit up the dark corner. "Buy wine," he said, and vanished into the darkness again.

"Eh?" the captain said. "What'd that fellow say?"

"He said, 'Buy wine,'" she answered. "Perhaps I will. What are your rates for freight, Captain?"

"Woman, have you gone mad? We've finished with the repair work and at dawn we set sail for Athens. Athens *exports* wine."

"So you said. But I think I'll take it on trust, and buy wine. Ah, here comes the crab in sour sauce."

When they left the Red Horse the sun was sinking, but the merchants were still open for business. She found a factor for a rich farmer inland, who was selling off his surplus to any that would buy it, and she bought enough jars to fill half the hold. The captain sighed, and said, "But you *know* things," and bought enough to fill the other half.

Over the next few days, as they cruised past island after island, stopping only to take on water and look at the damage Mercury's sudden storm had done to every waterfront, Cynthia had time to rethink her decision a thousand times. She had entrusted such savings as she had to the promise of a god: the

god of bargains, yes, but the god who spoke out of both sides of his mouth. And who seemed not to care whose waterfront got wrecked, so long as Cynthia daughter of Euelpides got washed up to the shores of Lesbos to run an errand for the father of gods and men. And who might not care about her either, not afterward.

But he had said *he* had to take *her* on trust. As if it were difficult, and as though he feared disaster if she didn't keep her half of the bargain. Well: she had. But he had never said what his half would be. Maybe he had taken her at her word, and there wasn't any other half

They came to the Piraeus, the harbor-town of Athens, just as the sun went down; the captain ordered the anchor dropped in mid-harbor rather than try to dock in the dark.

At dawn they put out oars and entered the great Kantharos harbor. The early sun shone on the white marble of the great stoai, pillared courts full of warehouses and factors' offices, between the docks and the great marketplace called the Emporion. A little later, pulling into the slips, they could see that the divine storm had done damage here too: warehouse roofs had fallen in, walls buckled; workmen were hauling away broken timbers and picking up shards of tile, or what looked like them.

"By the gods," said the first mate as he slipped the docking-rope over the bollard. "That's my brother Gisgo. Captain, by your leave?" And he leapt to the dock and ran to greet the other dark-bearded sailor. They talked, and they waved their arms, and pointed to the demolished warehouses. Then they turned and walked back to the ship. "Gisgo was here when the storm hit," the mate remarked.

"Captain," the other sailor said politely. "It was like the end of the world, only it was merely the end of a good many warehouses. Blew the tiles up off the roofs, and sucked the walls in like grapeskins, and then the tiles fell in again on the wine-jars. It was like that old song, the one where the rivers ran with wine. Funny, isn't it? for the Piraeus to run short of wine? They'll have more coming in by the cartload, ten or fifteen days, but right now there's a lot of dry throats in the Piraeus, and a jug of good wine is worth its weight in — well, copper, anyway."

"Like hauling copper to Kypros, or tin to the Northern Isles," the mate said with a grin (he knew what was in the hold); and the captain looked slantwise

at Cynthia, who merely smiled.

### 13. IN THE SACRED PLACES OF THE EARTH

"The path to happiness does not consist of achieving your desires, but rather the extinguishing of desire," Alexandros said. "I seriously doubt this journey will do you any good. But I think perhaps you won't progress any further until you have tried it."

"I'm certain of it," Cynthia said. She shifted her grip on the heavy staff, part of the ritual equipment, that held in a little sack her bedding and the new clothes she would put on when she reached Eleusis. "I must try at least."

The old philosopher was her closest neighbor — he lived in the ground-floor chambers of the house where Cynthia rented the loft — and the only mortal in whom she had confided. He tugged at his wispy beard and made a dubious face. "Only the good is worth seeking, and Virtue is the only good." He was quoting Zeno the Stoic, whose work he had studied for fifty years.

"My man Komi was Virtue walking," Cynthia said, "and if I can win him back from death, I will. Grandfather, we've had this discussion many times. Let's not part with a quarrel. Listen, they're starting." A song had begun to rise from many throats, raggedly at first but swelling in volume as the singers reached agreement on what note they should be singing.

"Come, arising out of sleep,  
Come, torches in either hand,  
Hail Iakkhos, hail Iakkhos,  
Never-fading morning star. . . ."

The image of Iakkhos in his cart led the procession, as was its function, and nine all-holy priestesses of Demeter walked behind, each carrying an ornamented basket on her head. In one of the baskets, none knew which, lay the *Hiera*, the holy things that the initiates would see in the course of the Mysteries. Cynthia kissed Alexandros's withered cheek and said, "Goodbye, grandfather. Stay well."

"Fare well," the philosopher said, and turned to climb the hill back into Athens.

The priests and holy images rode in wagons, but the initiates walked, and their clothes and myrtle crowns were soon covered in dust. Cynthia, warned beforehand, had worn the oldest gown she had and carried her best in the

bundle on her back, but she must still pull her stole across her face to breathe. She lengthened her stride and moved up the procession till most of her fellow initiates were behind her and only the holy wagons were in front of her.

Then she heard, *Come to me.*

No one who has heard the voice of a god will ever mistake it for the voice of a mortal. Which god, and where?

*Forward and to your right,* the soundless voice said impatiently. Cynthia obediently made her way to the wheel of the trailing wagon, twined with myrtle and with the last flowers of the summer. *That will do.*

*I have a task for you, mortal, and if you can accomplish it, I will make peace between you and me.*

This was Demeter, then, who spoke: the Great Mother of the Hellenic pantheon, whose other selves Cynthia had crossed on the other side of the sea. She could not cross Demeter now, not when she hoped to beg her divine daughter Korë for Komi's life. "What must I do?" she whispered, hoping the wagon driver would not overhear.

*There is an impious man among these initiates who means to profane my sanctuary. Stop him, and you shall have my friendship.*

"Who is he? How shall I know him?"

*I cannot see him; I cannot even find him. One of my divine kindred has sent him against me, and he is veiled from me. Watch, and find him.*

"I will," she whispered; and the wagon driver turned around in his seat and said in a kindly voice, "Back there, now, mother, don't hang on the cart. You'll see Her plain as day when the time comes."

And Cynthia thought, but did not say, *That's what I'm afraid of.*

She turned round and let the procession pass on either side of her, like a stream of airborne bats dividing to pass a stone in their cave's entrance. Which of these earnest-looking, dusty men — or it might not even be a man, since the goddess could not see him, and there were women and even children among the initiates. She glanced into every face, looking for — what? some kind of rage or madness? a look of avarice, maybe, thinking of what fabulous reward the other god had promised? She saw nothing of that kind.

But now four maidens, walking together, came abreast of her, their faces shaded by their myrtle wreaths. Strangely enough, no dust had fallen on their robes, the leaves circling their heads still gleamed, and a starry light shone out of their footprints, just for a moment before it faded under the dust. Cynthia bowed, and they came up and surrounded her.

Aretē glanced sideways at her, and smiled. "We told you we'd come along and speak for you."

"My thanks," Cynthia said. "Alexandros tells me you are the only good worth seeking."

"Yes, he says that. He's a sweet old fellow," the young goddess said. "Careful!" She caught Cynthia's arm before the mortal could trip over a stone in the road. The young goddesses, of course, never stumbled, never sweated, never grew tired.

"Who else is here today?"

"Sophia and Elpis, and Physis, I don't think you know her. Come and meet her." The little goddesses, whose names were Wisdom and Hope, smiled as Aretē led Cynthia between them to a tall, broad-shouldered lady, her fair hair braided and coiled around her head, her white hands large and full of strength. "This is the mortal Cynthia, for whose sake we are all going to Eleusis to ask Persephonē to give her her husband back," Aretē said. "Cynthia, this is my big sister Physis: in Latin, Natura."

The journey westward through the hills and around the shore of the Bay of Eleusis took the entire day. A few at a time, the initiates crossed the narrow bridge over the river Rheitoi and had saffron ribbons tied around their wrists and ankles to protect against evil. This took several hours, and gave everyone a chance to rest. By the time they crossed the bridge over the Kephisos the sky was growing dark and the torches were lit. Here the sacred hecklers, with heads covered, hurled abuse at important citizens among the initiates, who were not allowed to answer. This protected them from the evil spirits that feed on pride, and gave the tired initiates something to laugh at. Laughing and cheering, the torches blazing, they came at last to Eleusis and brought the image of Iakkhos to the outer court of the Sanctuary, not to be seen again until next year. Then everyone sang the long Hymn to Demeter, and the *kernophoria* began, when the priestesses danced with their baskets on their heads, and the singing and dancing went on into the night until the last tired

initiate fell by the way and went to find a bed in a hostel.

*Get up.*

Cynthia had gone to bed early and slept for several hours without dreaming. The soundless voice woke her, and wearily she rose from the narrow bed to go out and answer. None of the other sleepers stirred as she crept between them.

Outside the late moon hung low in the sky, and gave her a clear view of the Sanctuary, its carven marble cold and white as the moon itself. Two priests stood guard beside the entrance.

*No, come no further. Not yet. Look over there.*

Cynthia looked, and saw nothing at first. Then a shadow moved, half-crouched beside a low wall that ended at the pillar marking the entrance on the south side. Slowly he crept toward the entrance, all unseen by the guards. Then he lifted his hand and threw a stone; it fell on the far side of the entrance, and the guards turned to look. A diversion, to let him into the Sanctuary unseen. Cynthia picked up her skirt and ran.

The shadow had almost reached the pillar when Cynthia caught up with him. The days when she had fought the other children with fists and feet were long behind her now, and all she could do was to run into him, thrusting him against the wall. He fell, and cursed in a deep voice, and got up again and ran. (At least she knew now the offender was a man.)

The guards returned and helped Cynthia get up. "What were you doing out here, mother? The dancing's over till tomorrow."

"There was a man," she said. "Creeping along under the shelter of this wall. He threw the stone. I ran up to catch him, but he got away."

The guards looked at each other. One would think this kind of thing happened often on the night of the *kernophoria*. "Go back to bed," one said. "You can tell your dream to the priest tomorrow, if you like."

"Yes, lord," Cynthia said, and turned away. As she crept into bed again the voice said, *Tomorrow, when it is your time to take the cup, use your incantation to make it harmless. Then you will see clearly the things of earth, and be ready to stop the impious man when he makes his attempt.*

*The cup*, Cynthia thought groggily. The initiates, after their day's fasting,

would drink from the cup before entering the Sanctuary, in honor of the Goddess who had refused red wine and drunk the *kykeon*, a ritual potion of meal mixed with water and mint. There was nothing harmful in the mixture; why did Demeter want her to disenchant it?

Unless that wasn't all that was in it.

Could she descend to Korë's court if she did not taste of the *kykeon*? But even if not, dared she disobey Demeter's command? She lay awake the rest of the night, turning and sweating, and was glad when the morning came and the initiates' first duty was a bath in cold water.

When they had put on their new clothes, they were divided into groups and led apart to learn a strange song, about a little pig who went to market to buy himself a basket. It didn't seem appropriate, but they dutifully learned it. They also learned many verses in praise of the two Goddesses, the sort they had learned during the long months of preparation. They spent much of the day fasting and observing sacrifices to the Eleusinian Gods at the hand of the King-Arkhon of Athens. By the end of the day they would be glad to get their share of roasted ox and barley bread, and water.

But first there was the *kykeon*.

After a long day's thought, Cynthia had decided that even if foregoing the *kykeon* barred her from the court of Korë among the dead, even if she must wait another year and perform the whole ritual again, still it was safer than disobeying Demeter. But she must not ruin the drink for anyone else, and that meant going last. She feigned a twisted ankle and waited till the last moment to go up to where the two priestesses stood with the cup, a little wooden vessel built of staves like a barrel. She took it between her hands, said the words she knew, and drank. It tasted of barley-meal and mint.

When evening fell the torches were lighted and the initiates lined up before the gates. Each was questioned and identified and vouched for by one of the mystagogues who had trained them. Each recited, "I have fasted, I have drunk the *kykeon*," and Cynthia said it without faltering and was glad when her tongue didn't stick to the roof of her mouth. The initiates' names were recorded on wooden tablets and their wreaths of myrtle were replaced by wreaths of bright-colored ribbons, to show that they would soon be consecrated to the goddesses. Then they went to sit on a bank of stepped seats within view of the shrine, a little house among the forest of pillars with a

bronze-clad door that would soon open.

Cynthia could just see the door from where she sat: those on the opposite side of the Sanctuary couldn't see it at all. The holy things were kept there, and were to be shown to all the initiates; it must be that the Hierophant would take them out of the shrine and process around the Sanctuary holding them. *And if I were an impious man, and wanted to do the Goddess an injury,* Cynthia thought, *as I have been an impious woman in my day, and done several Goddesses an injury and well they deserved it — that is where I would try.* She would have to keep a close watch.

She turned a little and glanced at her neighbor, a woman a little older than herself and richly dressed. Her face was flushed, the pupils of her eyes contracted to tiny points. *And if the impious man drank the kykeon and is showing the same effects, he will not be able to see well at night.*

A flute began to play, and two priestesses stepped out into the center of the Sanctuary. They wore actors' masks and crowns. A chorus somewhere sang parts of Demeter's long Hymn while the priestesses danced around the shrine, miming the last day of the spring of the world, when Demeter and Korë wandered the flowery meadows of the earth together, foreseeing no ill.

Cymbals clashed, and a priest in a red robe, with a terrible mask and a shining crown, appeared in a golden chariot drawn by two men with masks like horses' heads. He snatched up the Korë-priestess and drove off, between the banks of seats in the north of the Sanctuary. Cynthia, turning in her seat, could see the chariot speeding up the Sacred Way toward the temple of Dis in its cavern in the side of the hill.

The Demeter-priestess walked around and around the shrine singing a long lament, the mother's grief for her stolen daughter. The woman beside Cynthia was in tears. Everyone in the Sanctuary except herself was watching the drama with the greatest attention: she could have bet that no one would notice her if she got up from her seat and started wandering. Except the other priests, of course; they must be hidden close at hand, and they couldn't all be full of whatever was in the *kykeon*.

From her place in the front row she could turn back and see a great many of the initiates – a quarter of all those in the Sanctuary, perhaps. She began scanning their faces, hoping to see a face with a live mind behind it, or some other sign. She had no luck. When she turned back to the drama some time

had passed; Demeter's long wandering over the earth, her visit to the friendly house of Keleos, her attempt to make an immortal of his son Demophoön, her petition to Zeus, and the return of her daughter for nine months of the year. A priest with the bearded mask and lightning crown of Zeus was finishing up a long recitation, perhaps a blessing, perhaps a warning. Then the cymbals sounded again, and the chariot of the underworld reappeared, descending the Sacred Way with Korë riding in it, crowned as a Queen, to descend into the Sanctuary and embrace her mother.

The chorus began singing again, and the initiates joined in: it was the verses they had learned, sung to the tune about the little pig. Even for Cynthia the effect was startling, as though the song had just taken form in her mind, and for the initiates it must be as if the gods themselves were singing out of their mouths. Demeter and Korë embraced. Thrones were brought out, and they sat upon them. And the Hierophant went to the bronze door in the wall of the shrine, took a key from his sleeve, and unlocked the door.

At first Cynthia could see nothing. Only a little table inside the shrine, made of marble with golden poppy flowers around its edges. And on it lay — curse it, she couldn't see. But the Hierophant picked it up and brought it out and began circling the shrine with it: a round golden platter such as was used in sacrifices. And on it, a little wooden cup, warped with age, and a knife of polished stone, and a clay figure of a woman's body, with huge breasts and belly but no head at all. Now the initiates were weeping in earnest, even as they sang, tears of joy because they saw — whatever they saw, it was dark to Cynthia. She saw only the things lying on the plate, and the sweating face of the Hierophant as he carried them around, and behind him a man who had risen from his seat and was coming up behind the Hierophant almost at a run.

Again she could only run to intercept him; she hadn't a knife and bloodshed was forbidden in the Sanctuary anyway. She leapt at him, caught him by the knees, and sent him sprawling. The Hierophant jumped, juggling his platter of holy things, which fortunately didn't spill. The man kicked Cynthia away and ran. She followed. If he couldn't be caught, and stopped for good (probably at the hands of a dozen angry priests, if they could keep him from a thousand angry initiates), he might yet come back.

The man had hurt his knee, it seemed, but fear gave him wings and he hobbled up the Sacred Way towards the Temple of Dis. But there were priests there too, standing on guard, and he must burst between them, Cynthia

on his trail, till he came to the caves at the Temple's back. They were no vast caverns to be lost in, but mere shallow scoops in the rock, giving nowhere to hide. Here he stopped, and here Cynthia brought him down.

After a moment's stunned silence she raised her head. Why, she had been mistaken about the cave, it extended a fair way into the earth. In fact, she could not see where it ended. In fact —

There was a pillar of rock standing in the middle of the cavern, man-high and just too wide to put one's arms around. There was an inscription on it which she couldn't read.

The man got up. She could see his face now, in the faint reddish light that hung about the place. He had a blank, shocked look, such as might ripen into despair. He looked at her and turned away, and walked down into the cavern, and Cynthia followed. The cavern narrowed into a tunnel, and it began to slope downward.

She did not question where she was; she had been in the underworld before, different parts of it at least. Either that last fall had killed them both, or — possibly Demeter had smiled on her at last and sent her down to her daughter's court to make her plea.

*We'll come with you, a voice said. We promised.* Three maidens, robed and crowned, fell into step beside her. Aretë, with flowers in her hair; Sophia with the great pearl hung around her neck; white-armed Physis.

"Where is Elpis?"

*I was afraid you might ask that. She is forbidden to come here.*

There were others going down the tunnel, she could glimpse them ahead and behind, but they never quite caught up to her or she to them. The young goddesses led; Cynthia and the man marched downward side by side. He was tall, with black hair going grey, clean-shaven, with the skin beginning to hang in folds alongside his face.

"So what god hired you to profane Demeter's holy things?"

"How did you know —"

"She told me what happened, and to watch out for you. She merely couldn't tell me who was behind you."

The man considered this for a moment. "Well, good," he said, and was

silent for the rest of the journey.

The Court of Dis was painted in black and gold, and red tapestries hung from the walls. The King of the Dead and his Queen, Persephonë whom mortals had called Korë the Maiden, sat side by side on thrones of onyx. The King said mildly, "Welcome, kinswomen."

The Queen glared at Cynthia, and said to the man at her side, "You wait. I'll deal with you later."

"You," she said, turning back to Cynthia. "You don't belong here. You are not even an initiate. What do you think you are doing?"

"I come here by your mother's leave," Cynthia said, "to beg you for the life of my husband, Komi son of Endreigon."

The goddess gave her an exasperated look, like a mortal asked by the fourth peddler in a row to buy the same leaky bucket. "Orpheus tried that," she said. "I made him a fair bargain and he couldn't keep it." Cynthia said nothing. "Do you think you could succeed where he failed?"

"Try me."

Korë smiled, not a pleasant sight. "Why should I? Orpheus offered me a song for Eurydike's life: a song worth one of your mortal cities and everything in it. What can you offer me?"

"I'm a physician," Cynthia said. "What's that to an immortal, you may ask; yet a year ago I saved the life of your kinswoman Artemis."

"I don't need a physician," Korë said angrily, and then, curiosity overcoming her, "— did you indeed? I haven't seen her since I came back to the upper world this spring. They tell me she's found a new name and gone to other lands."

"I told her her new name," Cynthia said. "It gave her back her strength, and she's gone to places where her name is known. I could do as much for you."

Korë looked suspiciously from Cynthia to the young goddesses. Cynthia's eyes had grown used to the light, and she could see that a face once young and unblemished had grown sour; lines had crept across the forehead and down either side of the mouth, and she looked grim and terrible, as suited the Queen of the Dead. For a moment Cynthia feared she had lost.

"She speaks the truth, you know," Sophia said. "We have come to support

her offer, which is a valid one."

"Every creature has its own qualities," Aretē said, "and shows a greater or lesser degree of excellence. Some fall short; some excel. Komi was one who excelled; one of my own people."

"In the course of nature everything is born, and grows, and dies," Physis said. "Yet there have been moments when that wheel changed its course, and turned backward. You have it in your power to grant this gift."

"She changed my name, you know," Dis said quietly. His wife turned to glare at him. "She told me my new name — it's Pluto, as you remember — gave me new vigor, and a throng of new worshippers. For which reason my temple here shall now be called the Ploutonion. And I feel so much better now. You really might consider it, my dear."

There was a long moment of silence, while Cynthia had time to consider the plight of a middle-aged wife with a suddenly young husband, even in the deeps of the earth. She looked to one side, where the man still knelt beside her, gazing up into the face of the goddess; and now she knew who had hired him.

Finally Korē said, "Very well. I agree."

"You'll give him back?"

"Tell me my name; and return up the winding stair. Never look back until you reach the outside air; and if you are faithful, I will not hold him back from following you."

"Agreed. Persephonē, called Korē, far to the west in Italy, where men's hearts are still pure temples of virtue, and right conduct is praised, your name is Proserpina. Not much of a change, but enough." She made a reverence and turned her back. Before her the winding stair led upwards out of sight; at the level of the vaulted ceiling it was closed by an iron gate.

She climbed the stair. The gate swung open at her approach, and closed with a great clank behind her. Her friends were following her; she could hear soft whispers, soft footsteps. She could not count how many pairs of feet were following her.

They had gone only a few fathoms upward from the gate when they heard a great shout of anguish, a deep voice, full of torment. "When her tools fail her, she breaks them," whispered the voice of Physis. "It's very sad, but that

is the way she is."

A faint light was growing up ahead, warm and red like firelight but steady, not flickering. Cynthia stood again in the shallow cavern behind the Ploutonion, where guards stood with torches and a priestess of Demeter stood with hands clasped. But they were unmoving; the very torches did not flicker; it seemed that time had come to a stop. At the priestess's feet two bodies lay, a man's and a woman's.

The young goddesses came up and gathered around her. There were tears in the immortal eyes. "Are we back in the world now?" Cynthia asked.

"Yes."

"I may turn around?"

"Yes, but you won't like it."

Cynthia turned, fearing a changed Komi, scarred or witless with torments, but she would never let such things drive her off —

And there was no one there, only the shallow rock of the cavern and the unflickering torchlight.

"He wasn't there to begin with," Aretë said. "She lied to you."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"So that you would go on till the end, and she would not be able to say that you had failed in your bargain and deserved to be cheated by her. It is astonishing how some of our elder kin behave; they know what's good; they advise others to do better; but they do what's worst."

"I think he was not there at all," Sophia said. "He's in some other place beneath the earth. There are several."

"I know," Cynthia said. "I've been in some of them. If I have to go back to that old hole on Phaneraia and rescue him yet again, I'm going to tear the place up by the roots."

"More likely he's in Awornos," Physis said. "Do you know the place? The word is old, older than the language you speak now; it means 'birdless.' Avernus the Romans call it. It's near Neapolis, on the coast of Italy. You could take ship and go there."

"I'm out of money," Cynthia said. "I need to find work somewhere. I was

busy studying in Athens; I didn't have time to build up a practice." And suddenly, "Curse her for a liar and a cheat!" She took a step toward the back of the cavern, and now she could see the standing stone again. "We're right on the border, aren't we?"

"Yes. But you are alive and must go back to the world."

Without answering, Cynthia put her hands on the tall stone, where the carving said ABANDON HOPE. She pushed. It rocked a little. She pushed harder.

"Let me," Physis said, and joined her in pushing. The goddess had as much strength as she needed, and with one long thrust they uprooted the stone and sent it sliding down the stairs. They waited a long moment, listening to the grating sound of stone against stone; and then there was a great crash and an angry scream, faint in the depths below.

"So you've got some of your own back," Sophia said.

"I had anyway," Cynthia said. A bitter laughter was beginning to rise out of her throat, and she dug her nails into her palms to drive it back. "I kept her hiring from profaning the Sanctuary, and now he's dead she'll have to find another one."

"Oh, no," another voice said, one she knew. She turned back toward the torchlight. The priestess, the torchbearers, the bodies on the ground had not moved, but one standing before them raised her arms to clutch at her hair. "Is it true? My own daughter?"

"I'm afraid so," Cynthia said. "I'm sorry."

"Perhaps I should have known," Demeter said, and began to weep. Cynthia put her arms around her and they cried together for a while; the worn old face, tanned with many summers and wrinkled with as many autumns, dripped tears on Cynthia's shoulder and left it dry.

And all Cynthia could think of was a raucous parody-drama she had seen once, performed in a part of Alexandria she wasn't supposed to go to, a twisted tale of the two Goddesses that ended with Persephonē wailing, "Oh, woe is me! I get to spend three months with my husband, *and nine months with my mother!*"

"Listen, Lady," she said at last. "In the west, your name is Ceres. Use it in good health. Now I have to go." She walked away from the cavern; the

torchlight began to flicker; and suddenly she could feel her bruised knees aching and she was sitting up in the cave of the Ploutonion with the priestess of Demeter leaning over her, speaking words of praise in her ear.

Two days later the initiates were dismissed to go about their own affairs, and the regents of Eleusis sent Cynthia back to Athens in one of their own wagons, to spare her knees. Alexandros was standing in his doorway when she got back to the house.

"I observe you come back alone," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I haven't lost hope yet," she said, and indeed she had seen Elpis again before leaving Eleusis. "There's a place in Italy I have to find out about. For the time being, I have to earn a living. Does anyone in the neighborhood need a boil lanced, a tooth drawn, a baby delivered?"

"Any of those would be virtuous acts, enabling other people to be healthy," the philosopher said. "We can find out. Meanwhile, my housekeeper has gone off to live with her granddaughter and I have a chicken running around in my kitchen that I don't know how to cook. If you do, then we could have dinner, and tomorrow we'll find you some patients."

## 14. THE LORD OF THE EARTH

As if the heavens themselves mourned Alexandros's passing, the clouds had opened up over the old philosopher's funeral and poured. Cynthia had had to wait till the third day for the weather to dry up so that she could clean out the house. Now she sat on the doorstep, letting her body's aches blur the ongoing question of what she was to do next. The images of the bronze and silver coins sewn into her hem passed sluggishly before her closed eyelids: not nearly enough to get her to Neapolis, to search for Awornos among whose shades she might at last find Komi's spirit.

As for the practice of magic, she had laid that aside as it were on some bottom shelf in her mind, as she had packed old Palamedes's six books into the bottom of her chest and laid old clothing over them. She probably had them by heart now anyway. But all her experience had taught her how to answer the children's question: "Why aren't magicians all rich and powerful and living in palaces?" "Because, child, it is as hard to find a way to make a living with that skill as with any other." No, better to forget about magic, stick to medicine, with which she might occasionally earn an obol for curing a fever or a barley-cake for delivering a baby.

The sun was warm on her tired limbs. Slowly the knots in her back and shoulders began to loosen; slowly the warmth of the sunlight crept into her cold hands and feet. She was three parts asleep when a horrible scream ripped through the air.

And another, and a third, while Cynthia jerked awake as if a tub of cold water had been dumped over her head. It was the children, of course: three of them under the age of six next door, not counting the one in the cradle. They were playing Persians and Athenians again, fighting the Battle of Salamis all up and down the little street, enjoying the warm weather and their own rude good health and youthful energy.

"Yaaaah! Rise up, Athenians! Think of your country, think of your children and wives; now is the battle for everything!" The ghostly invocation trailed off in a long shuddering wail.

Cynthia let out a long sigh, mostly in pity for the children's mother who had to deal with them every day, plus the one in the cradle and the one in the

womb. And a quiet voice murmured out of her memory:

*"To drain the third part of another's strength for thine own use, make the sign aforesaid and say "Ramphis Ophobis Anubis."*

"Well," Cynthia said. "Well, just this once." She raised her left hand and made the sign, and spoke the words; and a great surge of strength flooded her limbs, and in the street the children stopped, and giggled, and sat down to a quiet game of rock-paper-scissors. And *that* brought back memories.

Without warning a great shape loomed up to block out the sun. "Cynthia! There you are!"

She blinked. "Demetrios?" But Demetrios had never been so tall, so broad.

But it was Demetrios, grown from a skinny dandelion of a youth into full manhood, golden-haired and -bearded, his face burnt by wind and sun, his blue eyes blazing — and, she noted with part of her mind, dressed very fine. "I've found you at last! I thank the gods!"

"Found me?"

"I've been looking for you forever," he said, "or at least since we left Alexandria. Only last month I found the captain who brought you to Athens, and I hired his ship to bring us here. After that it only needed buying a cup of wine for every loafer on the Piraeus. They tell me you've been living with the philosopher Alexandros, and now he's dead?"

"Yes."

"Peace to his ashes. Now you can come with me. Arkhias, help the lady pack."

And a strong young slave she had not noticed before said, "Sir," and to Cynthia, "At your service, lady."

"Everything's packed already," Cynthia said, and went and found her chest. Arkhias hoisted it to his shoulder, and they started down the hill.

"How is your father?" she asked, stepping carefully over a loose stone in the street.

"Not very well," Demetrios said soberly. "He can't walk any more. When he speaks, it's not poetry, as he used to do, but whatever's been said in his hearing that same day. You'll take a look at him, I trust. But the Ptolemy's doctors could do nothing. I'm taking him to the shrine of Asklepios in

Corinth, in hopes he may be healed there —" he broke off in mid-sentence, and for some minutes they walked in silence.

"And if not," Demetrios said at last, "that at least he can die in his own city. What about you? How did you come to be living with a philosopher?"

"You can stop talking as though I were his concubine," Cynthia said. "We lived in the same house, he was old and needed care. I kept his rooms, cooked his pottages, doctored him with such skill as I had, and at the last laid the obols on his eyes."

"A pious act," Demetrios said. "Did he leave you anything?"

"Oh, no; an heir turned up, a cousin from Piraeus, who took away everything of value. I just finished tossing out the worthless things for the beggars this morning."

"Good, then you can come to Corinth with us. Can't you?"

"No reason why not. It's on my way to Neapolis."

"Up we go," Demetrios said, and gave Cynthia his hand while she stepped aboard the gangplank. The captain stepped forward and bowed, and it took Cynthia three heartbeats to recognize him: the same man, the same ship, that had brought her to Athens several years back. She wondered whether Demetrios had hired him, or bought him out, and decided not to ask.

Palamedes lay on a litter on the deck, safely away from the path between the gangplank and the hold, with a slave-woman holding a fan over his face to keep off the sun. Cynthia brushed her aside and knelt to examine the old magician. His face was the color of tallow. His eyes were open, but did not appear to see her, but he said in a rattling whisper, "Cynthia, my dear, my dearest. . . ." *He repeats whatever's been said in his hearing.*

She took a breath, and let it out again; she knew the signs of approaching death. But what she would tell Demetrios —

"Yes," he said before she could speak. "The Ptolemy's doctors said the same. They said he would probably last till Corinth, if we made haste. After that, it's in the hands of the god. Are we ready to go, Captain? Very well; we'll get out of your way."

He led the way to the ship's sole and only cabin, and Cynthia's mind was illuminated with a sudden memory, as a lightning-flash lights a darkened

landscape for an instant: that cabin had held five from Alexandria to Joppa, rubbing elbows all the way, but they had all been women.

But Demetrios had caused a curtain to be hung across the width of the cabin, and that brought back another lightning-flash of memory: the curtain she had hung in the Roman ship to catch a murderer, while Komi waited outside on the deck; and something like a fist clenched hard above her heart.

They sighted Corinth in the middle of the fifth day. The water of the Saronic Gulf glittered in the sun, and the white buildings of Isthmia and the great Sanctuary of Isthmian Poseidon lay like pearls clustered on the shore. It was mid-afternoon, hot and still; the winds died as they entered the crescent-shaped Kenkhreai harbor, and the last few hundred fathoms were done by rowing. The near-naked sailors gleamed all over with sweat in the heavy air. The ship pulled in and made fast to the dock, and the passengers made their way to the road.

There were, astonishingly, ten in the party now: Demetrios and herself and Palamedes, and Arkhias, and four more strong slaves to carry the litter, and the woman to tend him, and another, marvelous to relate! bought by Demetrios on speculation before they had left Alexandria, to be a serving-maid to Cynthia if he should find her. (Cynthia, long used to combing her own hair and putting on her own clothes, had not the slightest idea what to do with the girl. She would have to teach her to grind powders and brew draughts.) Demetrios had come out of Alexandria covered with gold — more or less honestly, she understood, something about a work of engineering done in the harbor that had added talents of profit to the royal revenues.

"Cynthia, would you prefer to ride in the cart?" Demetrios said now, touching her arm as if he were afraid of breaking it. "It's only a few hours' walk, but the day is getting hotter."

"I'll be all right," she said. "I've walked longer roads than this."

The heat was becoming oppressive, and a haze was beginning to thicken in the air that earlier had been as clear as glass; it hung like a patient vulture over men and beasts, waiting for them to die. Men cursed in a variety of tongues; draft-beasts tossed their heads uneasily and a pack of little street dogs ran about, barking and snapping.

Except for the low hills inland, they might almost have been able to see the Gulf of Corinth, on the north side of the isthmus, from where they stood: it

was only a few hours' walk away. To their left the tall citadel, the Akrokorinth, rose high above the plain; to their right a deep-rutted road ran over the narrowest, flattest part of the isthmus, and men were setting wheeled carts under a ship in order to drag it overland to the Gulf of Corinth. The Corinthians had been talking for several centuries now about digging a canal to link the two gulfs, like the one at Mytilenē — perhaps Demetrios, with his new skills, would be the one to achieve it.

One of the roads out of Isthmia ran through the Sanctuary of Poseidon — in one end, out the other — and they took that road in order to do honor to the god on their way. Demetrios leading, Arkhias at his elbow, then the four men carrying the litter of Palamedes, with a canopy rigged to keep the heavy sun off his face; then Cynthia with the other women behind her, and the hired cart with the baggage. The procession halted in the middle of the temenos, while Demetrios and Cynthia went through a grove of pillars into the presence of the great chryselephantine statue of the god, twice as tall as a man.

Poseidon held a trident in his right hand, as master of the sea, and a water-serpent coiled around the tines and tried in vain to bite them. In his left hand, as Poseidon Hippios, master of horses, master of the earth and earthquakes, he held the reins of four plunging horses superbly cast in bronze. "Hail, Neptune," Cynthia said softly, and waited to see if the god would answer to his new name. But he was silent.

"What?" said the priest who had taken Demetrios's offering.

"He has a new name," Cynthia said. "In Roman lands he is worshipped with new vigor, and his name is Neptune."

"Really," said the priest. He was a man in middle age, mild, with the squint-eyed look of a scholar. "His old name is very old, older than the Hellenic; in an ancient tongue he was called 'the husband of the earth,' *posis-dama*. Yet I dare say that if a Roman came here with a pious heart, the god would listen to whatever name he called him by. Ah, thank you again, good sir. May the god be friendly to you."

"The Sanctuary of Demeter is way up the hill, halfway to the Akrokorinth," Demetrios said as they came out of the temenos. It was almost as hot outside as in, the air unmoving, thick and still: what the peasant folk called earthquake weather. "Sad, when man and wife choose to live so far apart. There must have been trouble between them, though I don't recall any hymn

or story that tells why."

"Perhaps they just tired of each other, after so many years," Cynthia said. "I have thought from time to time that perhaps being immortal isn't such a good thing as it's made out to be." A little fly buzzed up to investigate her face, and she fanned it away with her hand.

The Asklepeion was outside the city proper, as such shrines always were: healthy living conditions, and especially pure water, were an important part of the cure. From the steps leading up to the sanctuary they could look down on the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Corinth and across to the snowy peaks of Arkadia far away, or turning again, see the Akrokorinth rising steeply above the hills of the city, making them look like no more than gentle slopes. The sun's heat and the haze lay thick and heavy over them.

The priest who met them at the entrance looked grave as he examined Palamedes, but said, "Well, we'll see what may be done. He should have bathed first in the sea, and next in the basins here, but since he can't walk —" They brought him inside, and the priest poured a few drops of sea water over Palamedes's head, and then a dipperful of fresh water from the basin. The slaves carried his litter through the temple enclosure, where Demetrios offered honey cakes at the altar. They visited the temple where clay images of human body parts hung from all the walls: votive offerings from grateful patients. They could be bought from any of half-a-dozen merchants whose stalls lined the city wall.

Behind the temple was the hall called the abaton, where the patients lay; they put the litter down between the pallet of a man who twitched at intervals, his arm thrust over his face to keep the light from his eyes, and another man who did not move at all. "He will remain the night here," the priest said, "under our care and the god's. If fortune is favorable, he will receive a vision in a dream, telling him how he can be healed. You may return in the morning."

Arkhias found them rooms in a well-kept guesthouse, and after some acceptable food and excellent wine they went to their beds. Cynthia lay awake till the wheezing and muttering of Palamedes's attendant, on her pallet by the door, had settled into a steady and rhythmic snore. Then she rose out of bed and slipped into her clothes, fumbled for her sandals. There was her stole, hanging over the back of a chair —

"Lady," a voice whispered, "Where are you going?"

Cynthia squinted in the dim light. The maid Demetrios had given her had risen and was wrapping her own clothes around her. "Can you keep a secret? What was your name, again?"

"Rhodopë." the woman said, and grinned. She had one dog-tooth missing, and her freckled nose wrinkled. "I can keep some secrets, not all — only yours, lady."

"Good enough," Cynthia said. "I'm going to the Temple of Demeter. Perhaps you'd better come along."

Overhead, the inky bulk of the Akrokorinth blotted out a quarter of the stars. The Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephonë/Korë was made up of many buildings, but the pillars of the temple itself shone in the faint light, reaching halfway toward the stars. Inside, lamps burned steadily in the motionless air; even now, two hours after sunset, the heat was oppressive, and the whole city seemed to be holding its breath. A priestess sat at the foot of a little altar, but she paid no attention as Cynthia and Rhodopë went by. It was the sort of thing Cynthia had come to take for granted —

— perhaps unwisely. Deep in the shadows something moved. Cynthia put her hand on Rhodopë's shoulder and pushed firmly downward, and the maid fell to the ground and covered her face. "Hail, Ceres," Cynthia said softly. "How is it with you?"

The goddess had taken a form only a little taller than a mortal's, and mortal-like she shrugged. "My daughter and I are still working things out between us," she said, and Cynthia murmured sympathetically. "It's a long road.

"What brings you out tonight?" the goddess asked. "Is it this air of bad omen that lies over the city?"

"I came only to greet you, Lady," Cynthia said politely. "But I've felt the air too, that hangs heavily as a curse over the land, as far as the harbor's mouth. Has someone called upon you for a curse? Surely not upon the whole city?"

"Oh, no, it is no curse of mine." The goddess looked troubled. "Cynthia, it was a brave thing you did, saving that girl of Jupiter's from the vengeance of my sister his Queen. And a clever thing too, to guess what was needed when

no one could tell you."

Cynthia put her hand over her eyes. "Oh, thank you, Lady, let me take my cue. This is from some other god and you can't tell me about it. Will it pass soon, can you tell me that?"

"Oh, yes, very soon," Ceres said. "I wish I could avert it, for it will cause great sorrow, and I have become fond of this city and of you. I cannot even see whether you will survive it. If you do, take this advice: go as quickly as you can to Italy. You are waited for there." And she was gone, leaving only a fading patch of dusty light where she had stood.

Cynthia stood there for a moment, and drew in her breath. "Rhodopë, get up; we're finished here."

At daybreak they went back to the Asklepion. Morning rounds were going on, the priest-physicians going from patient to patient, hearing the dreams and visions they had seen of the divine Asklepios, son of Apollo, curing them or telling them how they might be cured. ". . . the god seemed to boil some kind of medicine over a little brazier. Then he pried open the lids of my blind eye with his thumb and fingers and poured it in, and now. . . ." Cynthia looked at the man closely as they went by. Certainly he looked as if both his eyes could see, as both together looked now at one priest, now the next.

They found Palamedes lying quietly on his litter, seemingly unchanged. Three priests stood by him, two in ordinary robes and one wearing a band threaded with gold over his breast and one shoulder. The two juniors began to chatter, "You must take him away, you must take him out of here, it is not lawful —" but the senior priest raised a hand to quiet them.

"Lord Demetrios, your father indeed received a vision of the god in the night," he said. "And his wits are restored, as you hoped for: but he is dying. He may not last the day. You must take him away at once. It is not lawful for him to profane the sanctuary by dying in it."

Demetrios stared at the man for a long shocked moment, and the tears burst forth from his eyes. While he stood weeping, Cynthia stepped forward. "We shall obey. You four, take up the litter. Palamedes, can you hear me?"

The old wizard opened his eyes. "Oh, yes. You're Cynthia. Now, where did I meet you?"

"In Margaron," said Cynthia. "Come, we'll have a little while to talk over

old times today; we must leave this place now. Ready? Up!" The men raised the litter. "Arkhias, see to your master. No, wait." She opened the pouch of red leather tucked into Demetrios's belt, and found a gold piece among the silver and bronze. This she gave to the priest. "Offer our thanks to the god," she said. "He has given Palamedes a chance to say farewell to his family. And we will have a votive offering made, as soon as we can decide what shape it should take." And to the others, "Let's go."

The litter went forth out of the sanctuary, the others trailing behind it, Arkhias leading Demetrios by one hand while he wiped his eyes with the other, and Cynthia thought, *Now, if I had stayed the night here, could I have talked to Asklepios myself and cut a better deal for Palamedes? And is this any part of the curse that Ceres spoke of?*

"You are right," Demetrios said, more or less his own man again, when they reached the outer wall. "The god has given us that much. Let's get back to the inn."

"No," Palamedes said, his voice surprisingly strong. "I want to go home."

Demetrios started to protest, then changed his mind. "Very well, Father; we'll go home." The litter set off again, and Demetrios fell into step behind the off-fore bearer, talking quietly to the old man. Cynthia and Arkhias tactfully fell behind a little, out of earshot.

"Is his old home still there?" Cynthia asked.

"Oh, yes, I believe it is, lady," Arkhias said. "But of course it belongs to somebody else now, I don't know who. I know if I were a householder and someone came to my door asking room for an old man to die in his old home, I wouldn't refuse him. For all I know, it could be a god; and even if it weren't, hospitality is sacred."

"We'll hope the present tenant is a pious man, then," Cynthia said, and tucked her skirt up a trifle as they began to ascend the slope into the town.

The air grew steadily hotter, more oppressive, as the sun rose; they could feel its beams heavy against their backs. They climbed to the broad shelf of the agora, lined with many temples, and crossed it and climbed again into the wide streets, and narrow ones, and great houses gave way to smaller ones.

The house was one of the small ones, but it had a little garden where low-growing thyme gave out a pleasant smell underfoot, and three old pear trees

leaned on the high wall as if for support. The householder was a shipbuilder, and after a long moment's look at the party of visitors he appeared to decide that they were either what they seemed or a visitation of wandering gods (and that besides, if he forbade them the house they could easily overpower him and walk in anyway), and let them in.

The house was even smaller inside than it had looked, and very dark, and everyone agreed it would be well to take the litter into the garden. The slaves put it down in the shadow of a large tree and, seeing Demetrios was paying no attention to them, sat down with their backs to the wall and went to sleep. Rhodopë and the other woman sat at the foot of the litter.

Demetrios looked toward the little building at the far end of the garden, where a curtain fluttered in the one small window: the gynaikeon, the women's quarters, and no business of his now, even though he had undoubtedly been born in it. After a moment he turned his back on it and sat down beside his father. "How long do we have?"

Cynthia stepped up to the litter and knelt down to look closely at Palamedes. His breathing was labored, but steady, and his eyes were clear. "I remember now," he said. "In Margaron, you were the physician's daughter. You came to the city walls, and you used the spell of the three *daimonia* to turn the Romans away. That was well done."

"Thank you," Cynthia said. "It gave us time to escape, at least."

"Do you still have my books of magic? You must keep them, and study them. You have the gift. You must practice my Art, and take care of my son. I love Demetrios, but he hasn't inherited the gift. He'd make a better engineer than a magician, if he could find anyone to train him."

"He has," Cynthia said. "He studied under Eratosthenes in Alexandria. He earned lavish fees from the Ptolemy; he can provide for himself wherever he goes. You need not fear for him."

"Good," Palamedes said, and closed his eyes again. Cynthia and Demetrios looked at each other across the litter, and were silent.

For an hour or more they sat there, while the dappled shade of the pear trees crept over Palamedes where he lay, and the air thickened like barley-gruel not quite at the boil. Cynthia mulled over the question of how much "taking care of Demetrios" would interfere with her search for Komi, and

searched her memory for tales of someone who had ignored the behest of a dying man and *not* suffered for it. She could think of none.

"Oh, that's wonderful," Palamedes said suddenly. He opened his eyes and actually turned his head toward Demetrios. "Goodbye, my son. I am going now. Weep a little for me, but not too much. I can see everything now: it will be very well for you, and you and Cynthia will give me grandchildren."

Cynthia found herself on her feet, her mouth open but unable to speak: no, now this was entirely too much –

And the ground under her feet began to tremble; there was a distant sound as of lions roaring, and the earth shook harder and harder, till she must step back and forth to keep her balance, as on a ship's deck in a storm, a Mainad's dance with Mother Earth.

The dance slowed and stopped, but the roaring went on, walls falling, stones tumbling, hills sliding a little further away from the Akrokorinth. The garden wall had fallen over onto the four slaves who had been sitting there. Demetrios lay sprawled across his father's breast, as if trying to shield him. From within the gynaikeon, someone screamed.

And her heart knew what had happened, what had been foretold, maybe even why, before her lips could shape a word. And she felt herself fill with rage as a cup is filled with wine.

She raised her left hand and said, "*Ramphis Ophobis Anubis,*" and felt strength flow into her, and she raised her right hand and said other words and saw the stones of the wall rise up into place again. The men underneath were unconscious, but alive: one had a broken shoulder, and she touched it and said certain other words and healed it.

Palamedes was dead. Demetrios had fainted, and would be some time rousing since Cynthia had drained most of his strength. The two slave-women were the same: they had clutched at each other in their terror and now lay curled up together like two sleeping cats. They would keep.

She turned toward the gynaikeon, and seemed to reach the door without taking a step, such was the power she still contained. She touched the door and it opened; inside, two young women and several children were gathered around an old woman who lay on the tiled floor, moaning. She had broken her hip. Cynthia said the words again and healed her.

Outside, the rumble of falling stones was subsiding, and she could hear cries and groans from every part of the city. But she was down to her own allotment of power again, and dared not drain her companions any further, nor those who were wounded. She ran into the house, where the owner lay on the floor calling on all the gods at once, and out into the street.

It was not (she would learn later) the worst earthquake Corinth had ever had, even in living memory. But walls and roofs lay tumbled in the streets everywhere, from where she stood down the slopes to the sparkling waters of the Gulf, and the Sanctuary of Poseidon that lay upon the shore like a cluster of fallen pearls. She raised her hand and said, "*Ramphis Ophobis Anubis.*"

It was like taking into herself a wave of the sea, like being possessed by it or rather like possessing it, for she contained it and commanded it. The power of immeasurable depths of water, heavy and salt, advancing upon the shore as inevitably as tomorrow's sunrise, flowed into her left hand and out again from her right, raising stone, clearing rubble, healing wounds. This was what it was like to be a god, to take hold of the reins of the sea, to hold a city in the palm of one's hand.

And she knew where the power had come from, of course, and after she had cast her spells across the city and made it whole, she turned her hand again toward the distant Sanctuary and pointed her finger.

— and she was there, stepping between the columns into the shadow of the temple, and blinked; for she was seeing two things at once. The great figure of Poseidon Hippios still stood in its place, but Neptune himself lay at the statue's foot, on a couch like a great white shell, cushioned with drifts of sea-foam, attended by nymphs with silver scales for skin and webs between their fingers.

"Now, why should you have done that?" the god said, in a soft voice that made the floor tremble under Cynthia's feet.

"Surely it's obvious?" she said. "For my friends and my fellow human beings. The riddle is: why should you have done what you did? To do me harm, perhaps, or this city, for having the favor of my Lady your wife?"

"Oh, that old bitch," he said, dismissing the thought of his wife with a wave of his hand. "No, I was cramped, that's all, and felt the need to stretch. You wait till you've spent a hundred myriads of years, watching Africa shoulder its way up into Europe, and the Midworld Sea close its gates and dry

up and break open and fill up again; see if you don't want to get up and stretch."

"I'm unlikely to see these things," Cynthia said, "unless they happen much more quickly than you describe. It will not have escaped your notice that I'm mortal."

"That can be dealt with," Neptune said, and crooked a finger at one of his nymphs, who stepped forward with something in her hands.

"I'm not inclined to harm you, girl, no matter what the old bitch may think," he said. "I like you. You've got guts. I like a man, or woman, to step up and fight for her own folk – even if it means earth and sea will be as calm as a lily pond for months to come. I have a gift for you."

The nymph held it out. A green flower, lying in a white scallop-shell dish: no, the green flesh of a melon-half, carved into flower shape. Or a jelly made of the deep green sea-water. And it smelled like the fresh sea air. It smelled delicious.

"Eat it, and be one of us," Neptune said. "Spend the next few centuries with me, maybe more, and be a goddess in your own right."

Ahhhhh. So this was why young Aretē had forbidden her to taste any of the food of the gods, why Mercury had served himself and her with separate cups and plates. It was simple: eat the green sea-flower, and gain immortality, and lose. . . .

But she might as well be polite about it. "No, my Lord, I thank you," she said. "I'll take it as a compliment; but I will remain with my own people for whom I've fought."

The god looked at her for a long moment, and she felt very cold. Then he shrugged. "Fair enough," he said. "In that case, the old bitch was right: get yourself to Italy as soon as you can. You'll find — well, let's say you'll find most of what you seek. You can go now." And Cynthia bowed politely, and went.

As if the heavens themselves mourned for Palamedes, the heavy air gathered itself up into thunderclouds over the old magician's funeral and poured. After Demetrios had done his duty to the dead, they had to wait till the third day for the weather to dry up and to find another ship that would take them to Italy, for war was in the air and the Punic captain thought it best

not to go where he might suddenly be taken for an enemy alien at best, if not a spy.

Cynthia had time to go to Elis and drop Arethousa's ring into the spring there, where the underground river (so they assured her) would carry it under the sea and back to Sicily. And Demetrios found time to hire a craftsman to make an offering for the Asklepeion: a silver lamp the size of his fingertip, with a flame of gold.

Eventually he found an Athenian ship for hire, bound for Neapolis in any case, and hung the curtain up in its cabin. He had sold the litter-bearers, no longer needing them, but Cynthia would sleep behind her curtain with two waiting-women in attendance.

"It's for the sake of your reputation," he told her. "Of course, you don't have to travel as my sister-in-law; you could always travel as my wife."

"I'll travel as what I am," she said tartly, "a respectable widow going to Awornos to make sacrifices on behalf of my late husband."

"That will do to start with," Demetrios agreed, and grinned, and leaned on his elbows upon the stern-rail, watching Corinth dwindle into the sea. Cynthia turned away to look forward, into the northwest where Italy would one day rise up from the horizon, where she would perform her own duty to the dead.

## 15. BLOOD WILL TELL

It had been years since Cynthia had seen Neapolis. As the ship pulled up to the dock in the Neapolitan harbor at Puteoli, and the sailors made it fast, it seemed at first that nothing had changed: the drift of little houses up the hillsides, the smell of sulphur and fish, the chatter of six forms of Latin and seven variants of the Koinē drowning out the cries of the gulls, the squat cone of Vesuvius smoking sullenly to the southwest.

But —

So many little fishing boats in harbor: it was a beautiful day, with just enough breeze to fill their sails well; why were they not out at sea? The war brewing between Rome and Carthage must be closer to open battle than she had realized.

The docks were full of people, milling like a nestful of ants stirred by a stick. A double line of Roman soldiers marched by, dressed in shining bronze armor all alike. The armorers had been busy.

The sailors hauled out the gangplank and seated its lower end on the deck. Cynthia shouldered the bag that held her books and a few odds and ends, and turned toward the gangplank, but Demetrios blocked her way.

"I would like to have an answer before we go ashore," he said.

"I can't give you an answer, I shall have to think."

"You've been thinking for fifteen days."

"If I give you an answer now it'll be No, is that what you want? I must go to Awornos first, make an offering for the shade of my husband, ask for guidance if I can, before I think about marrying again."

Demetrios sighed. "All right."

And Demetrios, she reflected as she picked up the bag again, still thought she was talking about her first husband, poor old Demodoros who had died in the bean-field. He knew nothing about Komi, and she could see no reason to tell him that if she accepted his offer he would become her third husband, not her second. No one else remembered Komi except his sister Enzaro, far away in Sicily, and —

And she stepped onto the dock, with Demetrios and the slaves behind her, and a voice shouted, two voices, a hundred, raised in a tremendous cheer. Her breath stopped for a moment, but the cheer was not for her; the people were pointing behind her, out into the harbor. She turned to look. Something was moving slowly into the harbor, a ship, no, three ships, a big Punic warship flanked by two little Roman triremes (copied or bought from Hellenes) that beside it looked scarcely bigger than the fishing boats. For a moment Cynthia wondered who had captured whom; but presently she saw that the man standing at the big ship's prow was a Roman, waving a red military cloak like a flag. Someone had accomplished marvelous things.

There was no room for the big Punic ship to dock; the man in its prow leaped to the deck of a trireme and made his way to the dock. The people surrounded him, cheering him, trying to touch him, and he spread out his hands, shaking his head "no" in the Roman fashion; by the gods, the man was blushing.

The press of the crowd swept Cynthia along till she could see the Roman officer clearly, and the world turned over. She knew the man.

The eagle's face she remembered had not softened, but the raven hair had touches of silver at the temples. Gaius Duilius Nepos, whose path had crossed hers off the Aiolian Islands. He had seen her with Komi. This could be awkward.

No way of backing off, the crowd was packed as tightly as olives in a jar. Duilius turned his head and saw her, and his face lit up. "Cynthia!" he cried. "Another omen of good fortune. What brings you to Italy? Wait, I must speak to this gentleman. *Don't go away.*"

He turned to talk to a man who must be the dockmaster, as their talk seemed to be all about where to put the captured ship. Glancing backward, Cynthia could see Demetrios and the slaves slowly making their way toward her.

A hand plucked at her sleeve. "Aren't you Cynthia, the witch of Syracuse?"

She turned. Oh, gods, it was that blue-eyed sailor who had been aboard Duilius's ship. Another who remembered Komi; crows take it, his whole crew might be around here somewhere. "Yes, I remember you. Are you still sailing for Lord Duilius?"

"Not at present; my uncle left me his fishing boat and I've been sailing her up and down these waters, doing pretty well too. But it's not safe to go out any more, now these Punic wolves are abroad, everywhere between here and Sicily. Can you help us?"

"How can I help? If the courses of wars could be changed by witches, the whole history of the world would have been different."

"I don't need you to change the course of the war," the sailor said. "Only to help me to hide my boat from those cursed raiders."

Cynthia shrugged. "They're bigger than you are; you'll see their masts above the horizon before they see yours. Have one man on lookout, ready to give the alarm."

"They haven't *got* a mast, they move by oars. I have to wait till a ship's stern-piece rises into sight, to tell whether she's Roman or Punic. By that time it's too late, their oars move them faster than the winds move me. Can't you cast some spell to warn me *before* those bloody pirates get above the horizon?"

Cynthia opened her mouth to say "No," but the word *bloody* had set something moving in her mind, like the first pebble that sets off a landslide.

*To tell of a certain man, the direction in which he lieth from thee, and how near, take a drop of his blood. . . .* It was one of the spells in one of the books, just at the moment she couldn't remember which.

*. . . and mix it into a gill of water with hyssop and brimstone and. . . .*

But now Duilius put the dockmaster aside with a courteous word and stepped up to her other side. "Hail, Cynthia. The last time I met you, you saved my life; may this meeting prove as good an omen. What brings you to Italy?"

"Hail, my lord. I've come to find a place called Awornos — you would say, Avernus — where, it's said, one can speak to the shades of the dead. Do you know where it lies?"

The Roman smiled. "I should, it's on my land. It's not far from here and I shall give myself the pleasure of taking you there as soon as I have time. The capture of this ship is a stroke of luck we can't afford to waste. Rome yields to none in her skill in war on land, but at sea we are no better than raw recruits, and must learn the drill quickly.

"At present I command the Roman armies in Sicily; I must return soon, but I wanted to see this ship safely delivered."

*. . . and say these words. . .*

They turned to admire the ship, now anchored in mid-harbor where nothing could run into it, with little rowing boats attending on it. Its decks were mottled with dark patches.

*. . . and put it into a bottle, and whenever the man aforesaid shall be within ten leagues from thee . . .*

"It's so big," Cynthia said. "I've seen them before, but not up close. How can it keep from falling apart?"

"Because of its shape," Demetrios said. "Its ratio of length to breadth is much lower, it's a trough, not a reed, and not so easily broken. It's slower than the old triremes, of course, but a ship like that isn't trying to outrun its enemies, it lumbers in and rams them. I still can't picture how those little Roman boats were able to take it, though I have some ideas."

*. . . the bottle shall glow like a little sun, upon that side of it that faceth toward the said man.*

Duilius turned toward him. "Oh, that's quickly told. We were transporting troops to Sicily in those little triremes. That ship pursued us too eagerly, and ran aground in shallow water. We boarded it and took it easily. You're a shipwright?"

"I studied shipbuilding in Alexandria," he said. "I studied everything. Eratosthenes was my teacher; he studies everything."

"This is my late husband's brother," Cynthia put in, "Demetrios son of Palamedes of Corinth."

Oh, gods, she had invented a different father's name for Komi, what had it been? Maybe Duilius wouldn't remember either. He said only, "Your husband's gone? I am sorry. May the earth lie light upon him," and turned back to Demetrios.

"Are you at liberty now? Would you accept a commission from the Senate and People of Rome?"

"I'm entirely at liberty, and I would consider a commission favorably," Demetrios said. "I came here to bring my brother's widow to Awornos; till

she's done that I have no plans."

Duilius stood considering him, and Cynthia held her breath, imagining the Roman comparing tall, blond Demetrios and little, dark Komi in his mind. But he said only, "May it prove fortunate for all of us. Come, you shall stay in my house, and we'll discuss it."

Demetrios collected his household with a glance and they made ready to follow Duilius. But the sailor tugged again at Cynthia's sleeve: "Lady, if the lord Duilius shows you favor, remember me."

"I don't know your name," she said, "but – "

"It's Antigonos."

"Antigonos, come see me at the house of lord Duilius tomorrow, or the day after, I think I may have an idea."

And, indeed, her head seemed ready to burst with the idea swelling inside it; she had conceived an idea and was now in labor with it, having no idea what kind of thing it might be. She looked at the ship again, its decks splashed with the blood of attackers and defenders.

*. . . But it will also tell thee of the aforesaid man's blood kin, though shining not so brightly.*

And Cynthia, her idea safely born and swaddled in her mind, gave a great sigh of relief and followed after Duilius.

By the time they reached the house, Demetrios and Duilius had agreed that Demetrios would supervise the careful disassembly of the Punic ship, preparatory to building a new Roman fleet that could match it.

"Demetrios, I want something else," Cynthia said. "When you take the ship apart, I want every drop of blood, every crumb of blood I guess I should say, from its decks. Even if you have to pry the splinters off the wood to get it. Bring it to me in well-sealed boxes, so that not a single fragment is lost."

"Very well," Demetrios said with a shrug. Duilius raised his brows, but he would never argue with the witch of Syracuse.

The house of Gaius Duilius was a young palace, with rooms winding around two sides of a small hill above the city proper. And this, the maid Rhodopë reported after gossiping with the house slaves, was only one of several houses Duilius owned, country villas and townhouses and a great

mansion in Rome itself. Cynthia had a pair of rooms on the western side, looking out over the city to the sea; at the harbor's edge she could see, or imagined she could see, the tiny dot that was the captured Punic ship.

Rhodopë brought the gist of the war news to Cynthia before she could learn it from Duilius: the Roman armies besieging Agrigentum on Sicily had taken it, and were now spreading out over the rest of the island. Cynthia could only hope her friends there, Enzaro and Xenokleia and her family, would be safe. But then, the Tyrant would be sure to bring his mother's household into a place of safety, even if she preferred to stay on her farm.

They joined Duilius for dinner, and he and Demetrios talked military and naval shop while Cynthia coddled her new-born idea.

Demetrios had sat up on the edge of the couch where he reclined at table, pushed his plate aside, and now seemed to be playing a strange game. His left elbow resting on the table, his wrist bent at a right angle, he raised his arm to the vertical and let it fall again so that his fingertips touched the tablecloth. "Got it," he said. "A portable gangplank, with a hinge *here* and a spike *here* for sticking into your opponents' deck; I'll have to work out the details. It'll make the ship top-heavy, I'll have to deal with that, but in the meantime, my lord, I suggest you have your soldiers train in crossing gangplanks, at a run, in full armor, without falling off. While they do that, I'll put a couple of the engineering team on the gangplank design while the rest work on the ship. With luck, they'll all be ready about the same time."

"And with the gods' favor, that will be soon enough," Duilius said.

"I may have something that will help too," Cynthia said. "I should be able to give you a report in a few days." And softly to Demetrios, in the Koinë, "I shall need that blood," and Demetrios said, "Tomorrow."

The next day the boxes started coming to Duilius's house and the slaves brought them up to Cynthia's rooms, along with many earthenware plates with a cheap white glaze. A bronzesmith provided long pins and three pairs of tweezers. There was no way of telling one man's blood from another's, and Cynthia spent the day picking each tiny crumb apart from every other, and that night she dreamed she was the girl in the fairy-tale, set by a cruel mother-in-law to sort a roomful of mixed grain into its separate kinds, grain by grain.

Antigonos came to the house at evening on the following day, and Cynthia saw him in her workroom. What the builder had intended for a lady's parlor,

suitable for pleasant conversation, had turned into a stillroom for authentic witches' brews. A row of braziers stood along one wall, supporting pots and kettles of copper and earthenware and bronze, and the air was filled with pungent fumes. The glassmakers of Puteoli had been raided for little bottles, perfume vials and the like, and they lay everywhere on tables, chairs, and protected areas of the floor.

"Antigonos," Cynthia greeted him, "give me a drop of your blood." And as the man took a step backwards, "Yes, it's for a spell, but none that will harm you. I've already tried it on myself and my maids and my brother-in-law." And Antigonos rolled his eyes heavenward and held out his hand, and Cynthia pierced his finger with a pin and shook one drop of blood into a vial. She added a measure of stuff from one of her pots and stoppered the vial securely. "Now we need some darkness," she said. "Come with me and you'll see a sight."

They stepped out onto the balcony outside Cynthia's bedchamber. It was already dark, and only the little lights of the city shone like scattered fireflies. Cynthia spoke the words of activation, and the side of the vial nearest Antigonos began to glow; it lit up his astonished face.

"Now then," Cynthia said. "No, stay on that side, but look at me." She covered the side nearest Antigonos with her hand, and the light dimmed, but he could still see her face by the light that shone out of the vial's far side.

"It glows in every direction," she explained, "because in every direction there are men who are your blood kin."

"Actually, since my uncle died there aren't —" Antigonos began, but Cynthia cut him short.

"Men of this city," she said, "your distant kin, are enough to kindle this much light. Now, suppose I have a drop of Punic blood in a vial? Whenever men of Panormos, or Lilybaion, or Carthage itself, come near, their kinsman's blood will glow in sympathy — and 'near' means several miles, further than you can see on shipboard.

"So I think, anyhow. I need to test it, Antigonos, at night and at sea, and there's no time like the present. Take me to your boat."

She wrapped up in her black stole and picked up a small chest. "These are the vials that haven't shone at all so far. Many of the others shone brightly,

some less so – my guess is that those were from Roman soldiers who bled, but survived to come home, and these from men who fell, but have surviving kinsmen in the city. And these here, that did nothing – maybe they are failures, or maybe they came from men whose kinsmen are all far away from here, ey? We'll find out."

"Where are we going?"

"Out of the harbor, as close to one of those Punic pirates as we dare. I trust they'll be out there. I have some favorable winds at my disposal."

She no longer had the flute of Palamedes, which had been lost somewhere in their travels, but she had a spell-song that made the wind rise up at their backs and belly out their sails. Antigonos shrugged and commended himself to the gods, who were clearly on his side that night. It was well before midnight that Cynthia stopped humming her song and pointed to the south. There was a hulking shape on the horizon, dark against the stars.

Cynthia opened her box, and smiled. Some of the vials indeed were still dark, but most of them glowed with the soft light that said, "My kinsmen lie somewhere yonder." She plucked out the ones that were still dark, and wrapped them into a cloth and tucked them into one corner of the chest.

They had gone a little distance from the Punic ship, out of earshot at least, when the surface of the water began to heave, as if a great school of fish were beneath it. There was a light in the depths that rose, and burst out of the water, and Antigonos moaned and covered his eyes.

Again there was the strange ambiguity Cynthia had seen before, sometimes, in the appearance of the god. He might have been man-sized, standing breast-deep in the water on the little boat's port side, or immensely huge and far away. A crown of pearls was on his head, or maybe it was only the water droplets that fell glistening from his hair and beard. He held in his right hand the trident that marked him as lord of the sea.

"Hail, Neptune," Cynthia said. "Is it well with you?"

"Ah, it could be worse," the god said, and smiled, and all the choppy little waves fell calm. "You are doing me a service, Cynthia, though once again you don't know it. Rejoice for me. You, and others, are bringing me a new bride."

"Let me wish you happiness, Lord," Cynthia said politely. "Do I know the

fortunate lady?"

"No, but you shall." Neptune smiled again. "It's approaching midsummer, a propitious time for weddings," and sank again beneath the sea.

Antigonos was trembling violently. She patted his shoulder till he regained some of his calm. "What are you, lady, that the god of the sea speaks to you like an old friend?"

"Only a mortal," she said, "one with unusual friends. Let's go."

When the boat was docked again, she pulled out one of the vials that had glowed at the nearness of the Punic ship and gave it to Antigonos. "If you go out by day, you'll need to look at this down in the hold, or under a black cloth. But this should tell you if men of Punic blood are nearby. One for you; the rest for the navy."

Sometimes the busiest days can be told in the fewest words. Under the eyes of Demetrios, the shipwrights of Puteoli took the Punic ship apart and measured all the pieces and made patterns for each piece and started making copies in great clusters: so many ribs, so long a keel, so many ells of timber for each ship. Men with chalklines paced out the length and breadth of the ships that were to be, and hulls began to take shape within the outlines like paint filling in an artist's sketch.

Demetrios went twice to Rome to report to the consul Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio, the commander of the fleet. New ships by the dozens were taking shape in rows of drydocks, and in the hills above Neapolis, on raised platforms with oarports, men practiced rowing to the chant of the coxswain, two and three to an oar. Armed men, seasoned marines and ordinary Roman soldiers, practiced running two abreast over a four-foot-wide spike-nosed gangplank without falling off. *Corvus*, the Romans called it, the raven.

Cynthia stayed in her workroom, adding a crumb of dried blood to a gill of water, mixing with hyssop and brimstone, saying the words. Twice Antigonos took her out again to test the new vials. Once they were nearly caught by a Punic ship whose lookout saw the glow from the vials, But Cynthia called up a fog under whose cover they escaped.

Sometimes she went down to the shipyards to watch the big ships — quinqueremes, the Romans called them, "fivers" — take shape. Each team had a master who knew what he was about and a crew of apprentices who

were learning by doing. But there were scores of men who sat by the side, patiently making thousands of treenails to be pegged into the growing hulls, or sharpening an endless procession of dulled plane-irons and adzes. As one ship slid from its slips into the water, ready for provisioning, men behind it dragged the keel-timbers into place for the next. In this way nearly one hundred ships were built in sixty days.

Some of the new ships were set to patrolling the Italian coast against pirate raids; others sailed to Messina for supplies. Most of them, before setting forth, were visited by a figure wrapped in a dark stole, who left a glass vial in the hands of captain or mate. Consul Scipio came to Puteoli to inspect the work, and Cynthia tried to get an interview with him, but his secretary told her he was a very busy man who might have time to talk to her after the war ended. She shrugged and went back to her workroom.

Again it was Rhodopë, some days before midsummer, who brought her the news that was all over the harbor and the city: Scipio had taken a fleet of seventeen ships and, while supposedly on his way to Sicily, had attacked the Punic city of Lipara, in the Aeolian Islands. Then a Punic fleet of twenty ships had taken the Roman ships and Scipio himself, whose fate was currently unknown.

Cynthia raised her hands and let them fall again. Quite possibly this would have happened even if she had been able to give Scipio one or more of her vials. "What happens now? Do they send for the other consul? I don't know his name, but they always have two, don't they?"

"Lady, the other consul is lord Duilius, and the tribune here has sent the fastest ship he has to Sicily, to tell him."

Cynthia struck her head with the heel of her hand. "I've had my head among the pots for too long. Come, let's go get some air."

Two days later Duilius was back in Neapolis, gathering every Roman ship that could be spared from shore patrol. He did not come home even to sleep, and like Scipio was surrounded by aides, heralds, and officers who would not make way for the likes of the witch of Syracuse. She managed to learn, not through Rhodopë but through Antigonos, that the fleet would set off at dawn the next day.

"Which is the flagship, on which Duilius himself will be sailing?" she asked him. "If you don't know, find out. I have to be on it."

"You've gone mad."

"Do it."

So it was that in the early hours before dawn, as the rowers began to make their way aboard ship, the first three made up five, with Antigonos and Cynthia in their midst. Deep in the hull, where boxes of hard-baked bread and jugs of water lay for the rowers' needs, they built a hiding place for her, cramped, but no smaller than the linen basket in which she had escaped from Alexandria. One of the rowers was a friend of Antigonos, who had promised the other two inexpressible disaster if they should tell the secret.

"May the gods be with you, lady," Antigonos whispered. "I feel as if I should come along, but –"

"No, your task is to get out in your boat, once this fleet departs," Cynthia said, "and watch the vial I gave you. If we are defeated, and the Punic fleet approaches, you must sail back to Neapolis and give the alarm."

"I will." Antigonos picked his way back between the oar-benches and climbed out of the ship as the rest of the rowers began to climb in.

Cynthia let several hours pass before she ventured out of her hiding place. She had time, even, to consider whether she was doing the right thing. Romans had killed her father and poor old Demodoros, whose face she could no longer remember.

She could remember Komi's face very well, however, whom Tanit and her Punic ships had slain. She rested her head on her knees and let the tears prickle her eyelids. She remembered Aretē too, who had said Komi was one of hers . . . and the Romans too, temples of virtue and honor she had called them. If it came to Romans versus Phoenicians, then, or to Rome against Carthage, she knew where she would stand.

And, judging that enough time had passed, she got up and made her way among the startled rowers and went to confront Gaius Duilius.

She found him on deck among his soldiers, looking up at the heavy iron spike of the raven, high overhead against the mast that held it. The Roman seemed neither surprised nor angry to see her there, but only shook his head Roman-fashion, the opposite of the Hellenic. She showed him her remaining vials, and he said only, "May the omen be favorable a third time. When we pause at evening, to take our bearings, I'll have them distributed among the

other ships."

The following day, as the fleet approached Sicily, Cynthia crouched in a little shelter on deck, watching the light flicker in her remaining vial. The farther they sailed south towards the Straits of Messina, the more the light seemed to concentrate toward the southwest. Finally she emerged from the darkness and told Duilius, "They appear to be over that way, not so much toward the Straits. What lies in that direction?"

Duilius's navigator answered for him, "There, where the Peloritan Mountains rise from the sea, that would be Cape Mylae. A good place to shelter a fleet, my lord, I suppose they could be there." And Duilius thought for a long moment, and gave the order to change course.

Slowly the Peloritans rose higher above the horizon; gradually the vial grew brighter, till she could see it glowing in the shade of her cupped hand. "They'll see us coming before we see them: the navigator said, "with these raven things as tall as masts." And Duilius said, "But we know where they are already." And they went on.

The mastless Punic warships popped up over the horizon without warning, scattered across the water like ducks on a pond, making for the Roman fleet. "Look at them," Duilius said. "They have not even bothered to keep in formation; they think we are easy targets. Pass the signal: no ship is to lower her raven until her target is well within range."

The leading Punic ships bore in among the Roman ships, each seeking a target to ram. Under the deck, the voice of the coxswain rose in a rhythmic chant, and Duilius's ship turned in place as half the rowers pulled forward and the other half backed, turned to face its attacker, not quite prow to prow. The Punic ship's painted eyes glared fiercely above its bronze-sheathed ram. Three Roman sailors held the pulley rope that controlled the raven, their eyes on the raised arm of Gaius Duilius. Closer the attacker came, closer and Duilius brought down his arm like a sword-stroke. The raven fell, just to starboard of the low prow, and sank into the portside deck of the Punic ship. Oars thrashed uselessly; confused shouts went up. The Roman soldiers formed a column of two and ran along the raven's plank into the enemy's midst. The first two held their shields before them; the following pairs held theirs to the sides, to guard against attack as they came on board. The Phoenicians began to scream. Gaius Duilius drew his sword and followed.

Cynthia, after a few moments, turned away.

All across the water, the ravens held Roman ships to Punic ships in a deadly embrace. Further away, Cynthia could see the remaining Punic ships moving in — and seeing the fate of their companions — and backing, putting round, turning to flee. The vial in her hands glowed like the sun with Punic blood, and she took it back to the shelter and hid there with it till all was over and the vial grew dim again as the wrecked ships sank and the spilled blood washed away into the sea. Then she came out again to find Duilius.

He stood, unhurt, with his hands before his face, making a prayer of thanks to Neptune and to the patron gods of Rome. She let him be. She threaded her way between awed Romans who paused from binding their wounds, hammering out dents in their bronze armor, to stare as she went by. From the prow she could see the water of the sea, calm again now, and the distant line of Cape Mylae, and no ship in sight but the Roman ships.

Then far to the west something rose from the water: Neptune again, tremendous in size, his crown of pearls gleaming, his robes glistening, wading knee-deep with his right hand outstretched, his face radiant with joy. Cynthia turned. There, where Italy and all Europe made no more than an imagined line against the horizon, marked by cloudbanks bright under the westering sun, another tremendous figure came to meet him. A woman's shape, long hair flowing, armed and armored, with a long spear in the crook of her arm. She met Neptune in the midst of the ships and gave him her hand. The light swelled unbearably, and Cynthia too covered her face with her hands and uttered prayers of good fortune, for she had seen the wedding of the Roman nation, that made her mistress of the sea.

As they returned to Neapolis the following day, Gaius Duilius drew her aside, out of earshot of his men. "I promised Demetrios," he said, "that if this trick of his worked I would see to it that he got Roman citizenship. The easiest way of doing that is for me to adopt him. I have four sons, all brilliant young men; now I shall have five."

"My respectful congratulations, my lord," Cynthia said. "He will bring you further honor."

"He said — forgive me if I speak plainly — that he hopes to marry you. Have you given him an answer?"

"Not yet. I still have to go to Awornos, and consult with the shades there."

"As I promised, I'll take you there myself, tomorrow or the next day. May you find answers to all your questions there, and an answer for Demetrios too. I would be happy to call you my daughter-in-law."

The fleet returned to Neapolis at dusk. The harbor of Puteoli flickered with the light of lamps and torches, and the people were thick on the docks waiting to welcome Duilius and his victorious fleet. They had brought a litter to take Duilius into the town, where the patricians were waiting to greet him. Soldiers and sailors poured down the gangplanks to mingle with the crowd, and Cynthia went ashore in their wake, her darkened vial in her bodice, wrapped in her black stole. But someone caught her arm.

"Are you Cynthia? Please come with me, my son is very sick." And as she blinked and stepped back, "You *are* Cynthia, aren't you? the witch of Syracuse?"

"I was," she said. "Now, I think I am the witch of Rome. Lead the way."

## 16. JOURNEY'S END

It was to be expected that Gaius Duilius Nepos, having determined to do a thing, would do it properly: whether fighting a battle, adopting a son, or sacrificing to the spirits of the dead. Cynthia had told him how Odysseus had sailed northward into the stream of Okeanos, to Persephonë's grove, where he had dug a pit and poured food and drink into it, and lastly the blood of a black ewe and ram, before the spirits of the dead would rise to taste the offerings and speak to him.

Duilius in turn had told her how Aeneas, guided by the Sybil, had made his way down into the caverns of Avernus. Some of the songs he knew were so old that they were not written in hexameters, and the antique Latin was hard for Cynthia to follow. One of them said Aeneas had sacrificed seven bullocks and seven ewes; another listed four bullocks, a black lamb, and a heifer. No Sybil dwelt in the birdless groves any longer, to advise them what offering to make.

"Let me have a little while alone," Cynthia told Duilius. "Perhaps the gods will tell me."

She went into her own room, shoed Rhodopë out, and shut the door. "Aretë," she said. "If you hear me, help me."

"Oh, of course," the goddess said, and Cynthia whirled around. The young goddess was standing there, bright as spring sunshine, crowned with the immortal flowers of asphodel, so welcome a sight that Cynthia forgot herself and embraced her. Her body was light, but far from frail; it seemed her bones were of adamant.

She held Cynthia at arms' length and looked her up and down. "You have been busy, haven't you?" she said, smiling. "Listen, about your sacrifice: you know and I know that what the high gods truly want is not sacrifice, not blood spilled and the thighbones wrapped in fat to burn on the altar, but a loving and merciful heart, such as Komi's was. But you might have trouble explaining that to the good Duilius; he is a formalist. So tell him —" she paused to think for a moment — "tell him, one black bullock, one white heifer, both unblemished, in honor of Night and Day. Bring them to the cavern's mouth, and sacrifice them, and follow the path downward. And we

shall be with you, though you may not see us." She smiled again, and vanished in a scatter of sunlight.

So now Duilius, who always did things properly, walked at the head of the procession with a fold of his toga pulled over his head. Behind him walked his young daughter Camilla, and the other freeborn youths and maidens, carrying the implements of the sacrifice, and men of Duilius's household leading the unblemished bullock, the spotless heifer, their horns gilded and their heads wreathed with flowers.

Demetrios was with them, walking gingerly in his new dignity as Duilius's adopted son. He had told Cynthia, "I shall not venture to speak to the shade of your husband; not unless he wants to speak to me — to sound me out, maybe, on how well I would serve as his replacement. But I will come; this concerns me."

Duilius led the procession around the shore of the dead lake, through the fumes of brimstone and the whistle of the wind in the grass. An ancient city cut into the hills above, now the home only of ghosts, looked down on them from windows like dead eyesockets. Ahead, the trees grew thicker, till they could no longer see the westering sun.

The cavern's mouth opened suddenly ahead of them, tall and wide, with branching tunnels opening up inside it, easy to get lost in. Duilius spoke prayers in antique Latin, raised the knife and cut the animals' throats, while the youths and maidens sang something Cynthia could not follow at all. The blood made a pool in a hollow in the ground, and overflowed and ran in a little trickle into the mouth of the cave. No ghost appeared to drink it, as Elpenor and Teiresias had done, the blood loosening their tongues that they might speak to Odysseus. It simply ran in a little stream, gurgling over the stones. Cynthia followed.

The little rivulet of blood ran into one of the tunnels, twisting and turning busily among the pebbles on the floor, seeming to know where it was going. It was soon too dark for her to see, but there were no more branches to confuse her and she continued steadily downward.

Aeneas had seen monsters, Duilius had told her, beast-headed men and man-headed beasts, harpies and gorgons and Discordia with her snaky hair bound with bloody ribbons. Cynthia saw nothing, only vague shapes that the darkness made within her own eyes, and she heard the song of the little

bloodstream and the whisper of her own hand along the wall of the tunnel.

And footsteps. She stopped, and the other feet stopped at once, not dying away like echoes. Her friends the young goddesses, whose names were those of abstract qualities, went neither before her nor behind her, but within her. She straightened her shoulders and went on.

When at last a faint light appeared far below and far ahead, she had to rub her eyes with her free hand before she could believe in it.

The light widened as she approached the tunnel mouth, and she found herself on the brink of a sheer drop into a huge cavern awash with red light, pale like blood trailing away into water. The little bloodstream at her feet trickled over the edge and fell, drop by glistening drop, into a wide underground river that ran from darkness on Cynthia's left into darkness on her right.

Before she could nerve herself to think of jumping, she saw that there was in fact another way down: a little path that wound like a vine-tendrill through the air, spiraling downward from right to left. It turned against the path of the sun, as fitted a road through the realms of the dead, and it brought to her mind all the old sayings about walking on the knife's edge, but in fact the path was an ell wide, maybe more, and if she could only make her will rule her feet, she could walk it.

*Between Komi and myself lies this path.* Komi, her husband of a few short months, the only man she had ever loved. Komi, who had risked his life to save his sister and her baby, and lost his life under Tanit's curse. He lived nowhere now except in her heart. In the years since his death, she had kept the breath in her body, kept one foot moving in front of the other, only by considering, *Who will remember Komi if I die?*

She closed her eyes and tried to bring to mind the image of Komi's face, the wide brow and narrow chin, the hazel eyes alight with intelligence and love. When all was quite clear in her mind she opened her eyes and set foot to the path. Thin as a shaving of wood, delicate as a child's forelock, it held firm beneath her and she followed it around and down.

Then the images began to take shape. At first she thought they were only drifts of steam rising from the garnet-red river below, which seemed to be very warm. They roiled and writhed and took on hands and faces, and she was able to discern what they were doing before she could recognize any of

them. Those on the left threatened, those on the right beckoned. Those swirling mist shapes, tinged with the red light from below: those were the flames of the old goddess of Phaneraia, the silken veils of Tanit, faceless between her outstretched fingers. There were Roman soldiers in tall-crested helmets, brandishing their swords of bitter bronze, and thugs and ruffians from the alleys of a dozen cities, clutching at her arm, clawing at her face: but they were phantoms and could not touch her. Stormclouds dripping rain, and the Siren in their midst; Isis in her linen wrappings, holding up something, a mirror maybe, and she averted her eyes. And the Punic shapechanger in his ratskin, and all the little boys who had tried to harry her on the docks at home: everything that had ever threatened her was on the attack, but they were illusions and could not touch her.

The shapes on her right hand were harder to pass by. The first that showed her a face was, of all people, old Demodoros, who had been kind to her in those few months when she had been a frightened maiden and then a sullen wife. He smiled at her, and tried to beckon her in, but seemed to lose heart and waved her away again. He began to fade, and other shapes moved forward: women great with child, women with infants in their arms, sick and injured people, all beckoning to her to come and put them right.

Cynthia, though awed by the vast blood-colored airy vault of the place, and nervous about where to set her feet, was not so dim as to miss what this was all about. On her left, threats and tumults, from which she was supposed to recoil, and so fall off the path. On her right, images of love and need, toward which she was supposed to be drawn, and so fall off the path. It was all meant to deceive.

So that next shape, with its great outstretched arms like sheltering wings, and the soft folds of its bosom like the breast of a brooding dove, and the void where its face should have been, blank as the pitiless head of Tanit, must be the mother of whom she had no memory. Well, that wasn't going to work. She felt no desire to fly into its embrace, nor to bend down and pick up the faceless small form at its feet. They had been dead together a long time, keeping one another company, as it might be; she would not try to separate them.

But some of the others had faces: old Xenokleia, her shining hair wound round her cow's-horn headdress and smiling like an afternoon of sunlight, and Enzaro, her baby at her breast, looking at her with Komi's eyes. Her heart

turned over, but she made her feet keep steady. To the best of her knowledge both women were still alive and well. These were phantoms, meant to frighten and deceive.

The only image that might have tempted her was Komi's, and the deceiver had not presented him yet; perhaps it was saving him for a final deception, or perhaps it could not wield him at all.

Assuming this place was a test, this gauntlet between hates and loves . . . what was being tested?

She was now three parts of the way down to the floor of the cavern, where the dark stream sparkled. There was something moving underneath, something that went on two feet like a man, but its head was strange.

She took the last step from the spiraling path to solid ground, and the thing turned to face her.

Cynthia had seen her like this before, in a vision, devouring her children, but the Goddess had aged. Her breasts drooped like half-empty waterskins, the skin of her belly lay in folds upon her thighs. Tanit's veil hid her face, but all her flesh hung upon her like a translucent mist, revealing all her bones but the skull. Within the cage of her ribs something moved. Half-hidden, half-revealed by a dark heart that beat slowly as a wave of the sea, Komi's face appeared. Komi, undying and unborn. Cynthia raised hands like claws and leaped to tear the cage apart.

They rolled over the warm sandy ground, one over another like two sluts on the Alexandrian docks fighting over an obol, like two cats fighting over a dead fish. Sharp talons raked Cynthia's back, and her own fingers groped through smoky jelly flesh to pry the ribs apart.

The creature heaved up suddenly onto its knees, breaking Cynthia's grip. She clutched again and got it by the throat within the veil, squeezed and twisted till something snapped. The head toppled from the neck; Cynthia let it fall, and groped again for the rib cage. Komi's face floated inside, white as a lily on a lake, its eyes closed. She gave a great twist and wrenched the ribs apart, but overbalanced herself in doing it and fell heavily to the ground.

She came back to herself in silence, lying on the sandy floor cooling under her cheek. Painfully she got to hands and knees and looked over the strewn bones, but she could see nothing of Komi. The scattered ribs lay empty.

Perhaps the last of him had died with the last of the Goddess; perhaps he had never been there at all.

She tucked one leg under her and sat down again, hard. She had fought, and won, and lost, and there was nothing more to be done, and she could not see or hear or feel her friends the Qualities anywhere.

The veiled head lay in a heap to one side, and after a while she reached out and tugged at the trailing end of the veil till the head rolled toward her, unwrapping itself as it came.

The face was her own, of course. That was only to be expected. Cynthia/Aretë/Elpis/Sophia had killed Tanit/Isis/Demeter/Cynthia, and now she was dead, and that was why her heart lay unmoving like a stone in her body. A pair of cold tears crept down her cheeks, like dew on a grey morning. She sat there for a long time.

The red light had faded, and the air was cooling: there was a feeling of space and emptiness around her that had not been before. She could not see the roof of the vault any more, nor the ramp she had descended to reach the sandy floor. It was as if all had opened out, and an empty sky hung overhead. There was a thin breeze blowing from her right, with a cool fragrance of leaves in it, and after a while she got to her feet and went that way.

The sandy path was the color of silver, but the stream that ran alongside it was dark, like ice under the stars; it did not seem to be of blood any more, and perhaps it never had been. There were trees around her, their trunks reaching high overhead, and as she walked among them birds began to sing in the branches, tentatively, tuning their throats in little runs and trills, as if the dawn were near.

She was coming into a great open space now, and four large stars hung like jewels in the vault overhead, but over the distant treetops the sky was growing pale. There was a soft sound, like wind through grass, and from behind her a white hare came leaping, its long ears tinged with rose. With a single bound it crossed the stream and vanished into the woods.

Cynthia followed as far as the water's edge, and stopped. The stream seemed neither very wide nor very deep, but it looked icy cold, and she did not know whether she could cross it.

"No, you can't. Not yet."

Cynthia raised her eyes. Komi was standing on the other side of the stream, smiling, and for a moment all the stars were drowned out in his light.

"Why can't I?" she asked, when she could speak again. "Am I not dead?"

"No. Well, yes, you are, and no, you're not." He shrugged, and spread his hands. "A fig for all the poets who said the dead could speak to the enlightenment of the living; they lied. I have so many things I want to tell you, and the words have not yet been made."

"A pity," she said. "I was hoping you would tell me what to do."

"What you'll do? That's simple. You'll go back to the world above, cure the sick, marry Demetrios, and have children. And your son Marcus will marry Enzaro's daughter Enzollahar, and our lines, joined at last, will take part in the history of Rome and all that will follow upon it." And seeing that she was weeping, "You've already done the hardest part of it, you know. You've torn me from your breast, and set me free, and you've slain the Goddess."

"Have I? Who is the Goddess?"

"You know her," Komi said. "She's part of you; she's part of every woman. And if she's allowed to have her will, she becomes the monster that eats her own children. She must be killed, so that she can be reborn, and then she can become a Goddess indeed."

"In the same way there's a god in every man – I said that once, didn't I? I didn't know what I was talking about. He's the tyrant who wants to see the power of his own arm, the seed of his own begetting spreading out over the land, blotting out all others. He's the bull Mithras slew at midnight in the dark cellar. He's a cruel bloody bastard, and he too must be killed and be reborn, before he can be a god."

"When the false gods go, the true gods can come: your friends the Virtues, and the Power that moves the sun and the stars. Cynthia, all our lives we have lived in shadow, but now the dawn is at hand. Look: the sun is about to rise."

And the dawnlight was indeed brightening, and the birdsong rose in a deafening chorus, and Cynthia raised her hands to shield her face from the sun's blaze. When she lowered them again she was kneeling at the cavern's mouth, with the chill breeze of morning blowing upon her. Gaius Duilius and his companions were singing in their antique Latin, of which she could catch only the word *Sol*, the sun; and Demetrios came to raise her up, his hands

strong under her forearms, and led her out of the cave to where she could see the sun rising, splendid over Rome.