TALES FROM N(N) BETWEEN

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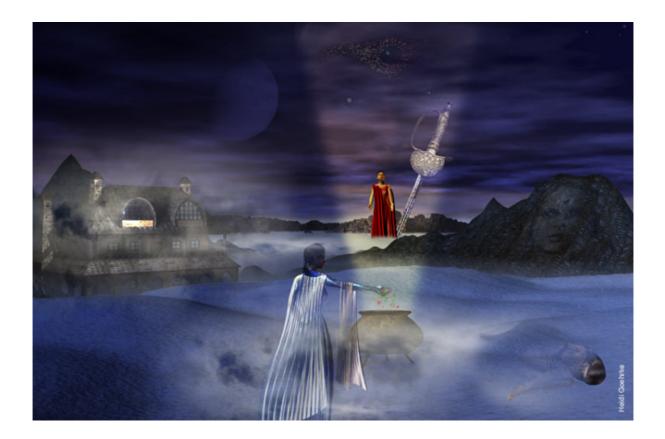
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Prologue

The sea – my cauldron; the biggest one ever made; and I am its keeper; like Medea, and yet unlike her, I watch and observe the play of life and death. My cauldron does not rejuvenate; or does it?. In it the broth of life; the primordial soup; the elixir of death. I know the secret of the philosopher's stone. I know that there is no secret. And this is what they say: Round about the cauldron go ... in my steel and weapons throw. More and more and more, until the sea answers with a tidal wave covering the land with water. And then it can all begin again. And again. And at my heels, leashed in like hounds, should anger, fear, revenge crouch for employment. Now let us sing No Nobis and Te Deum, for the warrior god has arrived to bless the weapons. Hail, mighty gods of the sword. Your children, and mine, made them. Bless them with your sacred breath. They were not made to attack, of course, just to bring fear to those who do not believe in your rules as they have been written down by your admirers. They were made to defend their beliefs and values.



My children. They do not speak my language anymore. And words, the words spoken at the very beginning; spoken and written down, these words are hollow now, and meaningless. They made new words. Words like steel. Leaves can no longer bear their messages. Leaves are too fragile. But then, they do not read my leaves, and if they do they will not understand. They silenced her long ago, the one who could have told them. Turned her into something only vaguely visible and audible in dreams no one can read. I am writing their steel words on steel weapons. They won't be washed up far-away caves and beaches, and they won't be read. They will rot at the bottom of the sea. And yet, who cares? As long as there are waves ...



The Discovery

Eyes open to a corona of golden light that had been and was now devoured by a spiral stretching out its black and blue arms from a colourless ceiling, drawing my existence, my completeness into its endless depths. Slowly moving within the spiral arms above or below my former world of outside perceptions and experiences, I realized that there was no horizon but only infinity – no beginning, no end, no material walls nor borders

my eyes could have rested upon. Even the black and blue arms merged and turned into a velvety night blue through the non-sensible density of which I floated.

Ice blue stars appeared in the expanding space like small glittering spotlights, twinkling in the rhythm of a non-existing heart, growing and then moving along my identity like slowly travelling flashes of a cold aquamarine light. I was star child – forever, and in an everlasting and eternally expanding universe. Moving towards and within infinity. Caught in symbolism, a growing metaphor. I sense my colours fading away ... colours of my former existence, then replaced by the colours of the star gate through which I am moving, into which I am moving ... deeper and deeper ... the beauty of a universe in creation, I being part of it. I being it. I am the universe creating myself out of nothing. But still I am, and yet I am. The contradiction of nothingness, the contradiction within. I am the prolific, creative inhabitant of the Void – capitalized and personified. I am density, I am star gate, the ongoing renaissance, re-born again and again out of the ashes of my thoughts. I am logos, plain and undressed, creating a myth to dress myself.

Distant star spots and galaxies reveal the past of my word, faded away. The once naked Fiat Lux – and BANG – Erat Lux and movement. My density burst, scattering my fragments in all directions. Creator of an everlasting event, growing and growing, and I, the former density containing multitudes and losing multitudes – the multiplex entirety searching for my single entities to become capable of defining myself within a seemingly timeless topography, which it is not. 'Can you hear me?' I am a creator of questions, not answers, but I am not alone. There is a universe next door. A sender of questions. Being asked by the voice of eternity, being guided to my place of origin, of eternal origin and creation. Inexplicable lightness while diving into the unknown depths of eternity, oblivion and myself, restoring my place within spacetime; restoring my former complexity and completeness. Fragments I am, a broken kaleidoscope the parts of which are spread over the black carpet of the Void.

The black void changed into a million shades of grey. I was, and I was not. Slowly floating above – or below – a yellowish landscape of drifting sands and moving rocks. Voices. In my mind. In my ears. Impossible to locate. Loud voices, whispering voices, singing voices. Sounds. The cling-clang sound of ice-cubes in a glass, the earthen clash of mugs, the sighing sound of brass in the wind. It was all around me. From nowhere. From everywhere. Swirling around like a spindle I tried to locate the sound image from nowhere. A strange line appeared in my mind. It was there with a suddenness that almost hurt.

And the spindle turned in the hands of Necessity.

I didn't understand.

And on each rim a siren stands, which is carried around with it and utters a note of constant pitch, and the eight notes together make up a single scale. And round about at equal distances sit three other figures, each on a throne, the daughters of Necessity. They sing to the sirens' music, of things past, of things present, of things to come.



Cling-clang. Cling-clang. Clash. Sigh. Cling-clang. Sigh. Clash. Clash. Cling-clang. Cling-clang. Cling-clang. Clash ...

'Do not approach. Stay away.'

It was in my mind.

... a note of constant pitch... in my mind.

'You are in Between.'

This is a dream. I know I am in the middle of a dream, and my subconscious wants to tell me something. But the key is lost, the key to my own symbolism. ...and the spindle turned in the hands of Necessity. I can't decode my own message.

The moving rocks opposite me began to tremble, and out of their stone structure grew a face, as if emerging from inside the rock; but no, it was more as if someone had painted it on the rock, and the painting became alive and shaped itself and looked for some space to grow. And it grew, a gigantic face, old and wrinkled. No eye-brows, black eyes like live coal, small lips like thin lines under a big hooked nose. A greyish face. Her hair, for it was a woman, moved. The face itself was motionless, but every single strand of her dark grey hair was in motion, and then it wasn't hair at all but snakes, hundreds of them, moving their winding bodies into various directions. Grey, thin, hissing snakes. Some of them moving towards me. Caught by some spell I couldn't turn my eyes away from the face. The thin lips moved and shaped words I couldn't hear. Her eyes looked at me, and then she smiled ...

Scene change. Inside. Voices. 'Fare thee well then.' 'Good night.' Followed by laughter. 'Good night? Oh yes, a very good night. A very long good night. Lasts till eternity. Good forever night.' Then silence, as if a cloud had moved into the room muffling every sound. No rustling of clothes, no footsteps, not the by now familiar cling-clang or the earthen sound of mugs. Just silence. Into this silence a low voice said, 'There is no light to fade, since there is no light. No shadows to cast, only the shadows of the night. But there are dreams to be dreamed. Closer and closer the webs will be spun, finer and finer the carpet of oblivion will be woven. We shall be back. There is no choice. We are caught. We are free.' The sound of distant thunder; closer and closer it came, followed by lightning. Heavy rain and hailstones were thrown against the windows of the Inn. 'What a beautiful performance of power,' the Innkeeper said, smiling at the Witch. 'I wonder what comes next.' The last words were accompanied by green flashes of light crossing the hall, like bundled beams out of nowhere. The sound of the thunderstorm died away, and into the silence which followed broke a scream. A deafening, terrible scream. 'My sisters,' the Witch whispered. 'They are dreaming. It's the scream of the mandrake. You know where they grow ...'

'How can the mandrake cry in their dreams, and we hear it?' asked the Huntress. 'This is not a human scream.'

'How can it not be heard as you heard it?'

'If you say so.'

'Although the hurly-burly's gone,

There's no battle lost or won.

We still live in the filthy air,

Where fair is foul and foul is fair.'

She laughed at her own joke. 'Allusions, dear fried, nothing but allusions. And metaphors, and symbols. That's what we live by. That's what nourishes us.' 'Words,' an almost inaudible voice said. 'Sing me, oh Muse, of my sad life, how I was betrayed.'

The speaker was not visible, but the Witch knew that she was there and turned towards the small voice. 'We all were,' she answered. 'By words, by deeds.' 'We were,' the Huntress whispered. 'Betrayed, humiliated, degraded, silenced.' Suddenly the Inn was clad in a golden light, and somewhere from afar the calming sound of a flute could be heard. A breeze rose out of the nothingness that was the desert beyond, and the Virgin, all dressed in white, imposed silence upon them. 'Listen to my song. It just came to me, when I thought of ... Well, it just came it me, and it was a long time ago. Too long ago to remain, but the song will remain .. only the song.

'Grow, grow, thou world below. Thou art not of the kind He thought thou wert, the fool. Thy realm is not so mean For all that I have seen. 'Twas him who broke the rule. Heigh-ho, sing heigh-ho, unto the Graces. Elysian Fields, the end of all mazes. Heigh-ho, the Graces, life grows in dead places.'

'Come over here and join me,' the Priestess said. She sat by the fire-place, smiling gently at the young woman. 'Making fun of yourself?' 'It's just a song. What else can you do here apart from being here? Listen, how the music is carried through the air. It will do so forever. It won't get lost. Nothing gets really lost, but lives on and on. Of course, we won't hear it anymore, but it won't be lost. And in our dreams we can dance to it. Forever.' 'This is forever.' 'No, this is only very, very long.'

'Bring wine, Innkeeper,' the Virgin called. 'I want to celebrate eternity.' The Law-giver and the Mother watched her. 'Celebrate eternity?' The small and almost inaudible voice asked. 'Why do you want to celebrate it?' 'Because I heard the bell toll.'

The Innkeeper smiled. 'You heard right. The bell tolled. Another decennium has passed unnoticed. There are stories to be told yet again. Stories of terror and fear, of anger and pain, of betrayal and oppression. Your stories. Your fears. Why else are you here but to tell them over and over again? Tell them to those who know and to those who are unwilling to listen.'

'Never forget,' said the Witch.

'Never forget,' answered a chorus of voices.

'Then let us start with the beginning.' A sudden flash of lightning, the roaring of thunder, arrows of fire, triggered by no-one ... and screams ... All the mind's a stage. Who is the author of this mind-play?

The Beginning

In the beginning was darkness, And darkness was with the beginning, And darkness was the beginning, And the same was in the beginning with darkness. All things came out of darkness; and without her Was not anything made that was made. In her was life; and the life was the light of birth. And the light shineth through darkness; and the darkness knows. And the darkness shineth through light; and everything is.

The lights were dimmed and the inhabitants of the Inn only visible as flickering silhouettes in the play of the fire, casting moving shadows. The only face illuminated was that of the Innkeeper. Neither young nor old, neither man nor woman, SHe looked into the semi-darkness with eyes reflecting eternity, like a spiral, going on and on infinitely. I fell through these eyes, and what I saw was ... the beginning of something. There were new-born galaxies in an impenetrable darkness – no, not darkness, more the transparency of non-existence. There were nebulae like multicoloured clouds, and I knew I was moving amongst stars and stardust. I was there, at the centre of everything. At the beginning. Any beginning. It did not matter. It only mattered that it was. Nothing else. SHe knew what I had seen, but SHe was not affected by my thoughts, since I was mortal but SHe was eternal, endless, beyond my life, beyond all the lives which meant to be me. Then SHe spoke, and the voice seemed to be everywhere. It echoed from all the corners of the room, from inside and outside, but mostly it was in my mind.

'My story is not anchored in time. It lies beyond perception, and yet it was and will be perceived. There is no difference. Eternity has its own rules. A time when there was no time. Not yet. It was before. Before everything. Before nothing. And out of the darkness of nothingness Night gave birth to me, so that I was born into the brightness of the dark. The shell broke, and out of density matter was born; Chaos taking shape, shaping itself out of Nothing. In the centre the non-shaped I. And I grew, and became form, and matter and woman and man. Finally I was.



I heard the roaring thunder of the sea, but when my eyes opened there was no sea. Thus, I closed my eyes again.

The thunder grew louder, and something around me burst. I was free. I opened my eyes. I stepped into the darkness of the world and was in the vast halls of silence of the void.

I grew. I grew in eternity. Night was my mother. Night was around me. Nothing was named yet or shaped. The elements were fighting for balance. There were no limits. Nothing but me. I glowed, but no-one could see me. No-one knew. Only Night. I changed my shape, because I did not know. There was no one there to recognize me. There was no one there to distinguish me from the shapeless void. There was but me, the child of the night. I was free like the space around me; the space within which I moved.

And then ... the lion roared and bull breathed fire and the ram bleated and the serpent hissed. The void was filled and burst; all shades of grey collapsed and colours like

merging clouds fertilized by the wind appeared and I saw the form and the form was I and I was the form and gave birth to the beginning.

The Beginning of the End

'o 'υμνος 1

Golden the morning sun lifted her head and the rays touched the harbour; Darker the hair of the girl on the cliff and so lovely her features. Emerald eyes seemed to glitter like gems that were touched by the sun's hands, Eyes searching now the horizon for signs of the boats coming home. Her thoughts then reached out for the man who adored her, young Dion, her lover; Dion, the friendly, the handsome; the one who had already built her A pedestal where he had placed her upon to adore and to praise her; Dion who told her each day that he loved her so deeply and also How sad his own life and his soul would become would she leave him and further How lonely he'd felt at the time ere he met her, that she had fulfilled all His longings, his hopes, and he never grew tired of praise and of saying What beauty she was, that her eyes did resemble the deep shade of green He knew from the sea, oh they sparkled like gems, a corona of brightness. Depicting her hair as the sun when she coloured the sky with her gold, Her body as gracious as reed moving gently when touched by a breeze, Her breasts tender buds, and Sibylla herself a sweet flower, so slender, A flower of spring time eternal imbued with spring's delicate colours, Not those of rich summer that made you feel autumn approaching too soon, And thus let you know that what lives has to age and to fade till it dies. Flower of spring time! But what would he say when her spring time was over? What would he say when the old Mistress Time did come closer to touch her? Drawing deep lines on her face and then taking the white of the snow To cover her hair? And the buds that had blossomed were going to wilt?

What would he say when the reed once so gracious all dried, and no longer Was able to bear but the slightest of all the slight breezes that touched it? Would he decide that he could adore youth but not age and would push her Off the high pedestal that he had built for her when she was young? Youth meant perfection but old age decay, a reminder of weakness. 'I love you, adore you, I want to be near you forever and ever!' Words he had said now re-echoed from cliffs in her mind and she wondered, Do I really love him? I like him, he's soft, sympathetic and tender; Oh, how I like touching his body so strong and so firm and so even. Love! Do I love him? I wonder what love really is. I don't know. Dion's a friend, I feel good when we both are together. He's pleasant. And oh, he's amusing and cheerful. The yarn that he spins makes me laugh. Is that what love does? Or is it but friendship that keeps us together? Doubts. She was so full of doubts. Now, would it suffice just to like, not to love? Or would there be longings, regrets, all the thoughts about what she had missed? If only she knew what love was, what it felt like and if she could feel it. One day she'd asked Dion, his answer was still in her mind, oh so strange ... It was like a poem and planted more doubts than there had been before.

'It is to be all sighs an tears and woes; It is to be all joy and happy feelings; It is rejoice and suff'ring, pain and loss; It is despair and hope and woeful longing; Darkness and sunlit meadows strive within you; All miracles of life reveal themselves In but a single twinkling of your eyes; And since you cannot grasp them all at once Your mind to madness turns. Yes, such is love. O love that breaks our hearts and drowns our souls, And none can understand who has not loved.'

Then I don't love him. I never had feelings like those he had talked of. If this is love, will there ever be one to arouse these strange feelings? Down to the harbour she went, where he kissed her and told her again How much he adored her. His kisses were salty and he like a creature From realms deep below, from the regions ne'er touched by the light of the sun. The deep of the sea, oh the thought of the sea made her shudder and tremble. The sea had devoured her mother in one stormy night she'd gone fishing; She never returned and her body was lost in the deep down below. So wide and so dangerous, keeping her secrets well hidden inside her, Until growing tired of them, she just spits them forth onto the shore. He talked about ships he had seen, and her thoughts were drawn back from the past. 'What ships?' she did ask, and he said they were big and looked strange, not like those

The folks 'long the coast built, entirely diff'rent in shape and in size. White were their sails. They traversed the rough sea with high speed and so noble, Oh, elegant ships, though he had not seen one of the crew 'cause of darkness. Strangers who had crossed the sea? 'You must go to the Temple,' she told him. 'Tell the High Priestess about it, your news is important to her.' 'This I will do,' he said, kissing again her lips salty already. She left the harbour and slowly walked up to the house in the village. They've crossed the sea, and they've come from a land far beyond the horizon. Feeling the narrowness of her small village now stronger than ever, She thought of these dreams in which she had been travelling the world on her own. She never would do so, she knew it, but dreams did not ask to be called. You can't lock them out. And these dreams of exploring the world struck her badly, Since she felt imprisoned and bored after each of these visions, in fetters. But travelling was dangerous, village life quiet and safe. Nothing changed. Everything here was predictable, had been for ages and ages. Looking for changes was looking for stars in a bright sunny sky. What do you wish then, Sibylla? The question arose in her mind. I wish I were loved not adored, and I wish I were able to love.

'o 'υμνος 2

Sibylla went down to the harbour next morning; the big ship had anchored. And Dion was right, oh so elegant was she, so noble and fair. The people on board looked so handsome and tall and their garments so lovely. Where might they have come from; and why had they come to this village so lonely? The villagers gathered together to welcome the strangers on shore. There were only four of them who left the ship and now entered the beach. Dion approached her but he was more caught by the ship than the people. 'O love, under sails you should see her, a beauty she is moving softly, And more like her they've got out there, I saw five of them riding the waves. I wish we could built ships like her! O how wonderful that would just be!' 'What for?' asked Sibylla. 'What use would they make? They're no fishing boats, Dion.

They're made for long journeys. Is that what you want; to go on a long journey?' Dion fell silent. He only admired the ship, not her purpose. She raised a desire, a longing that never before had occurred. Sibylla was young, but a sudden thought now crossed her mind and she knew The strangers' arrival had already started to alter their lives. Was it not what she longed for? Things changed, and it seemed that the changes Appeared in the shapes of the strangers and influenced life as it had been. And she was not sure any longer, and her curiosity weakened. Off to the Temple she strolled and she knew what her pushed her away. These people just did what she only could do in her unwelcome dreams, Exploring the world leaving safety for far off adventure and leaving A calm, peaceful home for an uncertain future, a dangerous life. And she could see more, for it all was so clearly reflected in Dion. What is it that makes someone longing for something that one does not need? She looked down the cliff and saw two of the strangers go back to their ship Leaving behind but a man and a woman. The ship then set sails. What was this about? Was it just to make sure that we've seen them arrive? Showing their presence and power? Showing that they ruled the sea? And those they have left on the shore; their ambassadors watching the people? She walked to the grove, and she noticed the woman was there with the Priestess. The High Priestess took her upstairs, thus she must be a priestess as well. Her black hair like silk, and her eyes grey like clouds on a wild stormy day. Now they were calm but Sibylla imagined their rage and their anger. The grove was all quiet and peaceful as ever. No wind blew, no breeze,

The rays of the sun, where they only were able to permeate through, Bathed tiny spots in a gold coloured light and the leaves glowed like bronze. If this was the Mother's dark side, then there was even beauty in darkness. But something was wrong, she felt watched, and she opened her eyes; 'twas the stranger.

His smile was as soft as his voice when he said he was sorry to her.
'Sweet lady,' he said, 'please believe me, I surely don't want to disturb you,
But I saw you dreaming and could not help staring at one sweet as you.
A beautiful dreamer lies here in the shades of the most sacred trees.'
His words touched a chord, and his smile was too sweet to let anger arise.
Caught by the beams of his eyes that were deep as the sea and so blue,
Caught by a face that resembled the Goddess' companion on paintings –
Pure and so clear, and his fair curly hair reinforced his true beauty.
He beamed from inside as if being the sun with an aura of light.
O yes, she was caught and she could neither move nor respond, thus she stared,
Stared at his beauty, although from inside a voice seemed to cry out,
'Run, run away; this means pain and disaster, no good can come of it!'
But something was stronger, some unaware passion that gnawed deep inside her,
So that, when he asked her to go for a walk she did willingly follow.

'Why come you to warn me?' the High Priestess asked, when the woman had ended.

'He's one of my kind,' said the black-hairéd woman. 'and i know him well; Too well, to be honest, for he is a hunter, he's after the young ones, His sport is the chase, and the prey does not count, thus he throws it away. He draws satisfaction out of every beauty he sees, and he follows, But once overthrown, there is nothing that can stimulate him a-new.' 'And what can I do?' The High Priestess knew that it was true and felt sad. 'Nothing can stop him, you cannot lock in all young people, and then, 'twould be an additional stimulus that would enrich the whole chase. There's always one victim, and that he has already chosen, I know. I'm sorry, High Priestess, I'm terribly sorry. I'll do what I can, But all I can do is to talk to the victim he's chosen, although I'm sure it won't help since he's charming and catching and then, what is worse, He's deeply convinced that his right is divine and that no one can take it.' 'As all of you are?' the High Priestess got angry. 'Is this divine right? Break into a village and show your presence and your power, and then Arouse needs in people that they had not heard of before you appeared? Don't tell me you were not aware of it, you are but part of the game, A part of their world picture which will take over. And we shall be lost.' The strange woman sighed. 'You are right,' she said then, 'to a certain extent. I know all about it, but I am not part of the game that they play. I'm part of their world, since they took me, they took what was left of my past. Now I am a part of both worlds and my destiny's not in my hands, But I am here to warn you. You're closer to me than they ever will be. Not only the victim's in danger but also your culture, your values. What he does to children is what they will do to your people, your homes. They've done it to others, they'll do it again, but High Priestess, believe me, I am not your enemy. It is not me who you should have to fear.' The High Priestess' face was all clouded with sadness. 'I wish I could trust you. If only I knew what's your part in this tragedy that they are playing.' The woman moved slowly towards her, and taking her hands very gently, The High Priestess saw, and not only did see but at once understood. 'But why?' she cried out. 'I implore you! Why can you not help the poor victim?' 'Because I'm a victim myself to their system of humiliation; Not to the hunter, but he's just a symbol to show where it leads to. We tried to unite, but they're stronger. We had to give up and stay single. Their law is oppression, and we, we have waited too long to react.' 'Then all that we have to expect is oppression and downfall, and worse, We are weakened already, since you'd be the ones to remain till the end.' The grey eyes looked sad, they were full of interior tears, never shed. 'There's even more, dear, because they will act as if none of us ever Had had any power; they're re-writing history and we don't take part. Prepare yourself now for the worst, since your temple and power is clearly What he wants to have for himself. In this temple all faculties lie That touch people's souls; for he wants to control and abuse what controls Our deepest desires, so that he can hold in his hands all emotion.'

'By means of interpreting everything falsely and due to his needs?' 'By means of interpreting everything right in the way that does suit him.' They both felt the shadow approaching, a dark cloud now veiled the bright room. The village was no longer safe, but then nothing was safe anymore. We've been too careless, the High Priestess thought, I've neglected my duties. I've failed to interpret the shadows of evil, the obvious omen, Enjoyed living peacefully, while I should have been aware that this life Is fragile and precious and now we will all have to pay for my failure. I should have remembered, I should have remembered, who else if not I? The voice of the Mother, or Woman, slipped into her mind. - $Mv\varepsilon\mu\sigma\sigma\nu\eta$, $\tau i \theta\varepsilon\lambda\varepsilon\iota\varsigma$; she asked, and 'I wish I'd remembered, ' she sadly replied.



'o 'υμνος 3

The pine grove soon ended, a vast plain of olive trees now formed a woodland; Savage it was and the trees were as old as the world and their trunks Wind-shaped, bizarre they formed bodies and faces and hands all misshapen; One of them even resembled a lyre, and that was the one The beautiful stranger now chose to sit down in its shade and relax. 'Under the trees of peace there will I rest my head all grown so tired. Do not the witches use branches of olive trees when they stir their potions? Does not the olive give peace to their magic and make it a good one?' Sibylla but shrugged. 'I don't know any magic. I am not a witch. We're rope-makers, fishing folk, few of us make it to priestesses only. But olive trees are trees of peace, every child born along here does know it. O peaceful this very place is, and not many do come here for walks.' She saw his smile and then out of his bag he took gently a lyre. She saw his fingers then stroking the instrument just like a woman. Sibylla was touched deep inside her, for never before in her life Had anyone played as he did, since it was as if he was the lyre, Tuning himself and expressing his own deep emotions with pleasure. So perfect a metamorphosis and then, when he started to sing Sibylla felt lost, oh she knew she was lost now forever and ever. She thought of Polymnia, thought of her voice that was clear as a bell, Clear as the silver bell owned by the Goddess herself, clear and pure, But never a male voice had been of such sweetness and softness and beauty. And then voice and music gave birth to a harmony not from this world. The spherical music; the sound all the start do produce in rotation, The sound we were born with and which is inside us, be we cannot hear, And he brought it down to the earth now, so that she could listen to it, And suddenly she saw herself in the centre of all revolution. The Goddess appeared in her mind with the spindle of life and of death, And future and present and past did she sing while the spindle did turn. The stranger who now was all lyre and voice touched the thread of her soul, He led her through times and the vortex of life did absorb her completely, The vortex of life with the voice of the beautiful stranger who sang ...

> We journey through the vortices of time And spin along th'eternal slopes of life; Are travellers and hunters without prey Awaiting something which we can't define;

Sadness embraces our lonely paths We beg for love but nothing's gained but lust; Thus we take lust for love and then fall still With empty dreams but our greed fulfilled

And then the tune changed, and although she did not understand all the words She knew what the song was about, and she knew that he sang it for her.

> *Like a goddess, my love, your image appears;* Your body, your soul, o how have I longed for What I never knew! And missed you though I did not know That you really existed. Trav'lling on silver wings Eros, raising my love, And one, only one can fulfill *My* longings now shrouded in shadows. *Your features so perfect and pure Like the silvery moon in a clear winter night; Your eyes like the sea flowing endless and green;* Your sweet lips like velvet and rosy like blossoms; Your hair like the gold of the sun in morning When flame-fingered hands softly redden the sea. O most tender bud, your image was part of my mind, Your body like silk appeared in my dreams, I caressed you and kissed you, and I was fulfilled; I believed, oh and how I believed. And now that I see you, I feel you, I smell you, O all my senses are open for you, now I know A dream, a mere dream born in shadows. *O let reality touch me right here and right now.*

When he touched her face, when his hands stroked her hair, when their lips softly met, She looked at his face, and the eyes seemed to merge, then she knew it was love. Slowly his hands then discovered her body, and memory failed. Then under the olive tree they lay in silence, relaxed and all calm. He kissed her again, and for more than an hour they lay there together. A slight thought of Dion appeared, but she pushed it aside, no, not now. This man had opened the gates of delight and had shown her true pleasure. Together their souls and their bodies had entered the garden of joy. *O let reality touch me right here and right now.*.

Days had passed by, and one morning Sibylla then met the strange woman. She was all alone on the beach, and they talked about life in the village, When all of a sudden she spoke about him who Sibylla love dearly. A hunter he was, said the woman and she, young Sibylla, his prey. She said that she'd give him a couple of days, and then he'd grow tired. A toy, but not more, she would be as for him, just a beautiful toy. Sibylla turned deaf, did not listen. He loved her, she loved him. No more. They would stay together forever, since this he had promised last night. 'An artist with words he is. Sweet like pure honey they drop from his lips. Lies, my dear child, they are sweet but they're lies. He will leave you quite soon. You're not the first one, and you won't be, of course, the last to seduce.' She stretched out her arms, but Sibylla withdrew. She's but jealous, she thought. That's what she is. 'Till the end of our lives,' he had told her so often. 'He's one of the endless, Sibylla.' Her voice was so soft and so sad. And he's a seducer, a charming seducer, but love does not count.' 'He's not, and he loves me, and I do love him, and he promised. He promised!' Her shouts beat the woman, though she was not angry but seemed more concerned. 'I'm sorry for you, girl, you're so much in love that you can't see the truth. I wish I could help you, since oft love inhibits to see through the veil. Whenever you need me, my mind and my heart will be open for you.' She's jealous, she's jealous! Because she can't have him. I know it. Yes, he does not want her, and now she intrigues, so that no one should have him. One of the endless? O she had to talk to him, she had to ask him. She loved him, went through all emotions which Dion had said they showed love. She went to their olive tree where he already was waiting for her, But ere one of them had but uttered a word they made love, they were happy. And all was forgotten, there was only stroking, caressing, and kissing,

The final explosion that made the girl burst into millions and millions; A myriad of fair Sibyllas now floating through worlds all unknown, And when all the particles that were Sibylla at last reunited, She knew and was fully aware that she'd changed and could ne'er be the same. So sweet and so soft were his words when he told her that he had to leave her. 't would only be for a short time, and he soon would return to his love. She burst into tears, and she told him that she had been warned by the woman, But he held her tight, calmed her down with his honeyed and so well-set speech. 'She's wrong,' he repeated, 'she's wrong. I'll be back. I do promise, my love. My love, will you wait for me?' She started crying again and she asked, 'Are you of the endless? And if so, how is there a chance for our love? I'm aging, each day growing older, my beauty is fading away, While you'll live forever, your beauty won't die and your features won't alter.' Her eyes were all tears, through the veil of her tears she did wait for an answer. 'One wish I can grant you that will be fulfilled, love,' but she did not listen. She changed into sadness. She knew it was over, her heart full of pain. $\Sigma i\beta \nu \lambda \lambda \alpha$, $\tau i \theta \epsilon \lambda \epsilon \iota \zeta$; the question now grew in her mind and the answer, Already given, repeated again and again in her mind. Her mouth formed the word 'immortality.' Then she sank into his arms.

'o 'υμνος 4

'No!' but too late, and the woman stood breathless behind them, so pale. Sibylla just smiled when she looked up to her, and her face like a grimace. The man slowly rose and made one step towards her, his eyes showing anger. 'Do not interfere, sister, this is my life, so you better live yours.' 'But what have you done, brother? Why did you make her immortal, say why? She's doomed now, was that your intention? Seduce her and later than turn her Into the loneliest person who lives in the world? Did you plan it?' 'I will not be lonely,' Sibylla was proud. 'Since I shall be with him.' 'You won't, dear. I've told you that he is a hunter and you were his prey. And soon there will be a new chase, since you gave him all you could give him. And your immortality, you did not know, but he so damned well did; Immortal you are, dear Sibylla, you'll live till the end of all times, but nevertheless you will age, you will fade, and your voice will remain. He should have warned you; it's not immortality you should have asked for, But for youth eternal, you see? Now the wish once fulfilled can't be altered. Why haven't you told her? Or was it all part of your foul little game?' Sibylla looked frightened from one to the other, the man's eyes were angry, But those of the woman showed sadness, and even a slight touch of pain. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't make it undone. You are doomed to your fate.' Addressing the man, her voice hardened, her eyes moved like clouds in the sky. 'Responsibility you've still not learned, and you never will learn. You live your passions, you follow desires, and it does not matter How many victims you will leave behind you. I've seen some of them. Being your slaves now and telling your truth living chaste and still hope That you will return to restore their poor lives. I did lessen their pain. But oh, they still suffer. And you never loved any human at all. You always loved beauty, but beauty's devoured by age, and what reason Is left then to love, when this beauty has faded away with the times? I'm sorry for you, child, you are much too young that you could understand, And he does not care if he plays with your feelings as long as he gets what he wants. If you think it hurts what I tell you, then wait until age starts to gnaw. I've offered you help, and you know how to find me. If not, fare thee well.' She disappeared into darkness, the air all around them was mute. 'Love, don't believe her, she just wants to tear us apart. O I know. I will return, and we both will be happy together, my love. You're endless like me now, my dear, will you wait until I shall return?' 'I will, yes, I will!' and he left her and she was alone with her doubts. Her doubts and her pain and her love and her being immortal, alive. 'It is to be all sighs and tears and woes.' She did not know what to do, there was none she could ask for advice. Not Dion nor anyone else she did know. She felt lost and alone. Sibylla walked aimlessly through the old grove and then down to the beach, Along the rough shore where the black mountain rose, the black Mountain of Death,

The mountain of destiny, mountain of eternal silence near which

No creature did live, and where animals never would go seeking shade. No birds in the sky, in the sand was no lizard, no fish in the water. They all sensed the breath of pure death and would never approach the black mountain.

But humans, they did. She had heard of some people who lived in the caves, The caves the wild waters had shaped long ago, oh the dark Caves of Gloom. The woman she saw. She was standing right there on the beach, and her body Was facing the mountain, so pale did she look and her eyes, grey like clouds, Like storm clouds that now seemed to swallow the sunlight, in which lay the shore. Darkness had spread her wings and she entirely merged in this darkness. She talked to the mountain, Sibylla could hear every word she did say. 'Sister,' she said, 'oh so long and so far have I travelled, so often I tried to make undone what he had imposed upon children. But he grew stronger while we have grown weaker, the law that we were Taken from us, and the new law is theirs and includes all the cruelty They do to women and children. And since we are no more united Our power is gone. O dear sister, if you only knew how to help, Help this poor child, or at least let me know what to do. I am lost.' A weakness befell poor Sibylla so sudden; the woman spoke true. She cared. It was him who had lied, had betrayed her, had used her for fun. Yes, he had enjoyed this wild chase and had satisfied all his desires, And when there had nothing been left to increase satisfaction, got bored. His prey and his toy. She sank down, could not stand any longer nor bear it. And her immortality? O but she felt time's long fingernails scratching Over her young face and leaving deep scars showing age and decay. She won't be untouched and there would be no Mother of Death who could free her. The mountain of destiny changed and morphed into a face so gigantic, An old female face full of wrinkles, as old as the rocks of the mountain. Ugly but beautiful, wearing a strange kind of calmness and peace. Her hair it was moving until it was clear that it was all of snakes. And out of the rock grew the whip of revenge, and Sibylla now knew her. Knew her, but what alteration! Sibylla was horrified by it. The beautiful Mother of Death had turned into an old beastly creature. Her once so fine features repulsive; but what had the strange woman said?

They are not united? What happened, dear Mother? What happened to -us? The eyes burned like fire and glowed in the darkness. Sibylla was hit By one of her beams and was petrified, no longer able to move. The mountain mouth opened, the voice deep and hollow. 'Too late, dear, too late. They've changed the law, sister, we are divided and bare of our power. If he had killed her – that would have been diff'rent. But he gave her life. He cannot be punished by me, since my whip executes only slayers. All I can do is to offer a home in the caves at my feet. Sister, but you be aware, he'll be back, he will make her his slave.' She finally spoke to Sibylla who still could not move and she said, 'Dear child, I regret that I cannot do more but I'm subject to laws, Laws that are old as the world, and they bind me, for my laws they are. Thus, there's no revenge nor can we make undone what he did cast upon you. All I can do is to offer a home in the dark Caves of Gloom. They make a good home for a person who wants to withdraw from the world, For someone who does not fear darkness nor death nor my outer appearance. I offer you warmth in the autumn and shade in the summer. Protection. That's all I can do; there's no need to decide it right now. Take your time.' Sibylla could not even thank her. The dark Caves of Gloom – now her home? The village, the Temple, and Dion now shadows and past, only memories. She could not go back to her old life. O woe to me! Doomed , doomed to live! The mountain face vanished. Sibylla was now alone with the woman. And now she came closer and sat down beside her. She spoke not a word. Sibylla then spoke. 'Will he make me his mouth that I speak all his words?' The woman but smiled. 'He would like to, he'll talk about love and then later Will tell you that if you let speak him this will be the most perfect love.' 'There is no love left,' said Sibylla. 'Betrayal. He did not love me. My youth he did love and my beauty, like Dion. My father does love me Because I resemble my mother, and her he loved dearly. I know. But no one does love me because I'm Sibylla.' And tears filled her eyes. The woman now held her and stroked her quite gently. 'I do,' she then said. 'And so does my sister. The High Priestess loves you. I wish I could help you. We can't stop you ageing, but there is one thing we are able to give you. A gift from the Mother.' 'O tell me!' The woman took softly her hands.

'Will you instead be the mouth of the Mother?' Sibylla did think. She smiled then and said, 'It could be my revenge. When they come I'll mislead them. I shall write my messages all on dry leaves, so that they've to find out Which leaves are right ones to see their own truths, and quite many'll go wrong. Yes, I will live here, will suffer, will age here and shrink and one day Someone will come and I'll show him the deeds that his kind did to us.' $\Sigma i\beta \upsilon \lambda \lambda \alpha$, $\tau i \ \theta \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \iota \varsigma$; the answer was only one word. 'twas '*Revenge*.'

'o 'υμνος 5

NAM SIBYLLAM IPSE OCULIS MEIS VIDI IN CAVERNA SCRIBERE, ET CUM ILLI PUELLAE DICERUNT: $\Sigma i \beta \upsilon \lambda \lambda \alpha, \tau i \theta \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \iota \varsigma$: RESPONDABAT ILLA: $\dot{\alpha} \pi \sigma \theta \alpha \upsilon \varepsilon i \upsilon \theta \dot{\varepsilon} \lambda \omega$.



Closing In

"Cut him with your blade; Thresh him with your wing; Fry him with your fire; Grind him with your mill Saw him in your fields."

Led by the rhythm of the drum, the girls repeated the chant over and over again. Elected by the Council of Priestesses, they would support the Queen and the High Priestess of the Fields in performing the Royal Sacrifice.

They were waiting.

Waiting for the Goddess to appear.

Twelve girls standing in a circle, hand in hand, singing, eyes closed, while the girl in the centre, beating the drum, spoke the ancient words calling the Goddess.

'Blessed Queen of the Heavens, who first ploughed the field;

Celestial Nymph who at the beginning of time danced the waters, and did couple together males and female;

Sacred Virgin who did provide the plants for healing;

Dark Mother of the Night who reminds us of our fears and hopes;

Who watches the growth in the entrails of the Earth;

Goddess of All Aspects, Lady of Life in Death and Death in Life;

Who illuminates all the dwellings on earth by your feminine light;

Who nourishes the seeds of the world;

Who gives light according to your wanderings.

By whatsoever name you could be called upon, One and All, All and One,

I pray you to bless the Earth, grant peace and rest to life, and accept our sacrifice. We welcome you in our circle.'

The voices of the girls grew louder, the rhythm of the drum faster and harder; their bodies moved with the rhythm, with the voices; their hands linked like an indestructible chain. They were one. One Kore, one year, one Goddess.

'Cut him with your blade.'

After the rites they would receive their sacred names. Until that moment they would be called by no other name but Kore, since Kore was the seed laid in the furrows of the thrice-ploughed soil. And there it would sleep, blessed by the blood of the sacrificed Sacred King.

The close of the old king's reign marked the novices' awakening. They would be allowed to take part in the seasonal festivals – lighting the bonfires, sacrificing rams, celebrating sowing and harvest.

They were the chosen ones, each of them representing a month of the year, and the King was the year. When the year died, the king died.

No longer, thought the girl who represented the month of death, wearing a crown of elderberries and poppies, the fruit and flowers of sleep, dream and death. No longer. The law has changed ...

'Thresh him with your wing.'

I send nature to sleep, I cover the plants with snow; the soil freezes under my icy breath. I am the child divine. My mother is the High Priestess, my father is the King. The marriage of the Goddess and the Year. I am the child of the hieros gamos. And I am Kore; no more, no less. I know. I know my destiny. There is nothing to choose. Kore I am now, and some will still call me by this name, when another name will have been given to me. My name will remind of destruction, but I won't destroy. They'll call me fearsome, but I will not to be feared.

She remembered the dream. Fallen into a deep abyss there had been only darkness. She had been frightened not knowing where she was, but a soft, comforting voice had taken her fears away. 'Don't be afraid, seed of the earth. Although nature seems to be dead in winter, and the land seems to be barren, there is growth underneath the surface. Things ripen inside the womb of the mother to sprout when the cold is at the close, and the sun's warming rays touch the soil. You are the seed, and you will grow. Yours will be the secrets of life and death. But beware! Beware of the new king! With him danger has arrived. Named already at his birth, he was and is the Angry One. Trying to avoid the inevitable destiny of a Sacred King, he'll reach out for your secrets. Harm will come from him.'

'Fry him with your fire.'

Harm will come from him. Yes, thought Kore of the Thirteenth Month. I felt the danger when I first saw him. His eyes are like water, unsteady, drifting away, dissolving. She had seen blue eyes before, and she had liked them. Eyes like the blue sky or the deep sea, bright and shining, clear. But the future king's eyes looked almost transparent, and cold. His hair was red, and his skin was somewhat pale but tended to redden when he was enraged. They called him angry. Wasn't it even his name? And had not a seer called him wounded in the thigh? He shouldn't be king at all. He did not even look like a king. People had already started making fun of him. 'He shouldn't get up,' someone had said. 'He should be a sitting king. As long as he remains seated he looks the part. When he gets up he looks like a duck.' That was because his legs were too short for his body. He walked like a duck. King Duck. The Angry Duck. I shouldn't make fun of him. He is the enemy. Why have they let him become king? They shouldn't have accepted him in the first place. It's too late now. He's clever. He outwitted all the others, and he is strong. He accomplished the marriage tasks, and no one can stop him now. Tomorrow he'll swear the oath of trust and honour, an oath which should bind him to the law. But oaths have been broken before. Kore of the Thirteenth Month saw neither trust nor honour in the old king's successor, and felt sorry for the Queen who had to marry him.

'Grind him with your mill.'

What's happening to me? I am in trance, I know, and my mind shouldn't be clear as it is. I float with the rhythm, go along with the words, but my body moves independent from my mind. I feel the drum, I don't hear it. My mother will suffer. She'll suffer most. She's so gentle. The laws she gave in the name of the Goddess are good laws, and the land prospers. Her mysteries are nourishment, her love is the all-embracing love of the fertile soil. He's going to change it. Nothing we can do. Only the people can. The priestesses can't, but the people ... he wouldn't be the first king to be banished. It still would be too late. The deed would have been done. The drum grew faster.

'Saw him in your fields.'

The drum stopped.

The chant ceased.

Through her closed eyes, Kore of the Thirteenth Month saw that from the earth emerged a face, neither young nor old but untouched by time. Little by little the entire body appeared in soft brightness. Her hazel coloured hair, flowing in soft waves down from her head to her hips, framed her face. She was dressed in finest linen yielding diverse colours, somewhere white and shining, somewhere yellow like the saffron crocus; somewhere rosy-red, somewhere flaming. The cloak she wore was of the deepest black, absorbing the light and the colours of the world. It was wrapped round her from under her left arm to her right shoulder like a shield, part of it falling down to the skirt of her garment. Through the foldings of her cloak stars glimpsed, and the girl more imagined than actually saw the harvest moon, golden like honey. In her right hand she held a basket full of all the fruit of the fields and orchards, while in her left hand she carried an earthen bowl containing barley cakes, the scent of which filled the air.

'I am come. I am she that is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the initial progeny of worlds, lady of the powers divine, queen of all the lands below, the principle of all that dwell in the wide plains of Elysium, manifested alone and under one form. At my will the planets of the sky, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the silences of darkness are disposed. I am Eleusis, the Advent, annually giving birth to the Divine Child regenerating the world as time moves on. I am the Wise One of the Sea; I am Virgin and Mother, Nymph and Crone.'

The sacred night, marking the opening of the new agricultural year. But the year was still dying. Like the king. Like the world. The seeds were laid into the earth. They look dead, but death is an illusion. What seems to be dead is asleep, and will be regenerated. Like the king. Like the year. Like the earth. Purified by fire the king will enter a new cycle as will the world. Nothing dies forever. The king's sacrifice would heal the earth, fertilize it, make it grow. Seasonal death. The king was a healer; his only title was Iasius. His duty was to make the land prosper, to nourish his people. Under his kingship there should be growth. The Queen, the Goddess, ruled forever, but the consort was transient like the life around him.

The sacred night.

The old king was dead. The end of the year had come.

'I swear to protect this kingdom, to let it prosper, to secure it and defend it, to follow its laws and keep peace; to respect and honour the queen whose knight and consort I am. Let this kingdom flower under the protection of he Goddess who gave laws to the earth.'

The new king knelt down before the queen, who touched the crown of his head, looking down to him.

'I, Queen Arnicia, priestess of the Goddess, keeper of the hearth fire, Mistress of Bow and Arrow, hear your oath; and I swear to support you as long as you keep it. The oath-breaker, however, shall be punished as the law demands, by banishment. Pain and destruction shall be your companions, and you shall die by the hands of your own blood. Keeping your oath means keeping the kingdom alive. So say I, Queen Arnicia.' The year had begun.



"These are the rites which can neither be broken or penetrated nor told."

High Priestess Meter awoke, when the first rays of the new sun entered her room. She called for a novice who came with water from the spring. It was ice-cold and refreshing. She would have enjoyed it more had she been able to bathe in the clear cold stream, but there would still be couples around celebrating the night. She did not want to disturb them, and then, she liked to bathe in solitude. The novice helped her with her robe. Unlike the night before, she wore the robe of a high priestess today. When the novice had brought her a goblet of barley drink, she sat down on her wooden chair, waiting for the Queen. A woman born to be a queen. It had come so natural to her. She was loved by the people and admired by the young priestesses. Brought up in the woodlands of the mountains, she stuck to her people's tradition. 'Like the mountain goddess,' people said, and they were right. A true orgiastic nymph, she ran with the deer, celebrated the wild festivals, and was found covered in mud like everybody else. And like the mountain nymphs she had her arms tattooed. Her mother had not insisted on tattooing her face, so that she wore a net when running wild. Last night had been her night. After the king's death she had chased the new king, forced him to the ground and celebrated the woodland marriage. Like the other women in her company, she had been intoxicated by mushrooms; not the small, tender dung mushrooms which only induce harmless and most enjoyable hallucinations, but the strong ones, which often lead the women into senseless rioting. They explode with erotic energy. The food of the goddesses. High Priestess Meter had taken mushrooms earlier in her life, and had run with the wild women, so that she knew that for a few hours of ecstasy they had to pay the price of a few hours of complete inertia. She wondered if the Queen would come at all. She might still be in the woods or in some mountain cave, or she might be in her chamber sleeping off the exhaustion of the night. To ask for a meeting early in the morning had not been the wisest thing to do but on the other hand the Queen was reliable, and this was important.

The King. The king who shouldn't be king. He should never have been accepted. There had been rumours. He prayed to the god and his daughter; a daughter who was born by no woman – so they said. His own brain-child. Just to make sure that women were not needed, that wisdom and power were male, and that the line of succession was patrilineal. They wanted to take over, and they had chosen him to deal with this kingdom. He had cheated his way into their realm, cheated his way into kingship. If only they could prove it. When he had won the footrace everyone was surprised. How could this stout, short legged man with the reddish face leave behind him the best runners among the candidates? However, he had accomplished the tasks, and nothing could be done anymore, unless they could prove the treachery.

She knew about the dream. Her daughter had told her. And it only reinforced what they all knew already. The land was poisoned by patriarchy. The scorpion's venom. They were on their way to take over, and they would succeed. They were strong, they used violence as a means of politics, and they wanted power at all costs. If this meant to destroy the land they would do so. They would rule a desert as long as they could rule. The kingdom wasn't safe anymore, and neither were the mysteries.

'He's a rotten bastard, and he will break his oath sooner or later.' The Queen looked tired, but her anger was stronger than her exhaustion. She wore no longer the garment of a wild woman, but was dressed in the royal robe.

'What happened?'

'He was disgusted by our rites. That happened. "How can you openly ... in the woods?" he asked me. "And how can your High Priestess and your own husband ...?" He doesn't know what he's talking about, Meter. How can anyone who doesn't understand and respect our rites rule the kingdom? And then, they've already started to falsify history. They keep telling lies about us.'

'I know,' High Priestess Meter said. 'Unfortunately we can't stop them. So he spoiled your night.'

'He did. I wish I had chased him to death. That would have been the best solution.' 'There are others like him, Arnicia, others who believe in these warrior gods.' 'Men who give birth to children? Let them do it, then. Tell the women not to go to

bed with them anymore. Tell them if their great god can have a daughter jumping out of his head they should try and do the same.'

The queen looked up. 'Yes, I am angry, and my anger comes from the deepest root. I know we can't prove his foul play. I know that we can't make it all undone, although I wish we could. And yes, I could strangle him with my own hands. So what's more? You can't hide it from me, Meter. I can see it in your eyes. I know you too well. I wish we still followed the old law. Every kingdom can endure a king for thirteen lunations. And so can every queen. But a hundred? It makes me wish for a war far away where he can go and die. What have we done, Meter?'

The High Priestess sighed. 'Neither of us could have avoided it. And I saw others among the contestants who were like him. And we both know what they are after.' 'Come now, tell me.'

'He asked to participate in the mysteries.'

'I thought he would. You see, I am calm. I knew it from the beginning. Did he tell you that as a king he had to know it all? Well, he doesn't lose time, this one. What did you say?'

'I told him as politely as possible that he is a profane man, and that neither a profane nor a man's eye are allowed to see the mysteries, which are initiation rites for women. Which is true. He pretended acceptance.'

'Pretended.'

'Of course. You could see the greed in his eyes. He wants to know. They want to know. Controlling the fields is controlling the world. Once they've got that far, we will be silenced. Their gods will destroy the goddess, their priests will lay waste our sanctuaries. It's the day I really fear, Arnicia. And it will come.'

The queen rose. 'I know. They're growing stronger, and if they can't cheat it out of us they'll beat it out of us. Look at their gods, and you know what the future of women will be like. Silenced, barred from assemblies, mere vessels, furrows, wombs. I want my daughters to be free, not slaves to any man; and I want my sons to be free. They have their own mysteries and initiation rites. They are sacred to them, and I've never felt the urge to spy on them. So why don't they accept our rites? No, don't answer, Meter, it was a rhetorical question.'

'All we can do a t the moment is to protect the mysteries. Sooner or later the king will break his oath.'

'Which will break his neck.' The queen smiled, but the smile only lasted a few seconds. 'Yes, they'll punish him for that. They will. But unfortunately, there will be others.'

'There will be. Our world is coming to an end, Arnicia. Not even our own law can protect us anymore, if they deny the rights of a mother.' She got up. 'You'd better go now. I have to prepare myself for the rites, and you should get some sleep before they begin.'

The two women held hands for a while, and the queen left.

High Priestess Meter closed her eyes and called the name of the Goddess. She stretched herself, knowing that her fatigue would slowly give way to the excitement

of the opening rites. She carefully arranged her curls to put on the wreath of leaves and autumn flowers, fastened the fibula to hold the right shoulder-part of her upper tunic and made sure that the foldings fell in soft regular waves. High Priestess Meter left her room to pick up the hiera.

Walking across the lawn to the olive grove, she felt the humidity of the night. The air tasted salty so close to the sea, a taste she had always loved. She loved the sea, and could not imagine a life away from the waves the primordial mother had walked and danced. In the beginning there was the sea, and She of All Aspects danced the waters. Life. Water was life. She heard the murmuring of the small brook running through the bowels of the earth, the most sacred sanctuary protected by the ancient plane tree. It ran through an area which contained the entire circle of life and death. Having reached the grove, she felt the same shudder and the same amazement as always when she looked at the Hiera Sanctuary. It had always felt unreal, as if not belonging to neither time nor space. It was ancient, erected long before the priestesses of the goddess settled here, and the architects of this unique building were not known. Neither the wind nor the sea had done any harm to it over the centuries. A place protecting itself? The white ring of stones glittered in the early morning sun; a circle carefully laid out, each stone touching the next one. No gaps between them. Gaps would let in what should not be there. Stones, cobbles washed by the everlasting power of the sea. And in the centre of the circle the column. Black marble. A black, hollow, flat-roofed triangular column in a circle of white stones. It was real. Not a vision as it so often seemed to appear to her. Under the red light of the winter sun the column shone like velvet. Unknown its builders, unknown those who had lived here. Lives, short, in transition, were inhaled by time, and then their souls exhaled as spirits. The air is full of whispers as if those who dwelled here long ago do guard their temple, and – counting hours, years and eras as they watch - remain unseen, yet she felt her presence. It was getting stronger when she finally entered the ring of stones. But there were no whispers at all, or if so whispers of the life force. The hollow column was an energy catcher, through which the universal life force entered. The breath of the goddess. The hiera received the energy and passed it on to the celebrants. From the altar it would spread to cover them all, the living and the dead.

High Priestess Meter opened the door. The scythe, the winnowing basket and the hand-mill lay on a stone table in the very centre of the column. Looking at the tools in the semi-darkness she saw a white light emerging from them. One by one she had to

take them up and carry them along the ancient path to the altar in absolute silence. They were but tools, not precious jewels or metals, although these tools were more precious than any jewel ever found. Stones and metals cannot fill an empty stomach. The scythe to reap, the winnowing basket to thresh, the hand-mill to grind. Then the flour that has stored the riches of the soil is combined with water, the source of all life, and together they meet with the fire. The true wealth of the earth. Life. These should be the royal insignia. No sword, no crown was worthier than these tools of life. As the hiera sanctuary marked the centre of the olive grove, the altar marked the centre of the Sacred Grove of Thirteen Trees. Shaped like a millstone, it was now decorated with flower garlands, ears of corn, and freshly baked bread sprinkled with herbs. The novices had been busy all night baking and preparing the food for the day. Many of the celebrants would arrive in the course of the afternoon, and although most of them brought food for the first day, it would have been against all hospitality not to welcome them with a meal.

The celebration of the hiera was the first ritual of the day, and it belonged entirely to the priestesses. No outsiders were permitted. The High Priestess chanted the incantation, and beams of light emanated from the hiera. Currents of eternity. Connections. The circle of the year brings forth life. And life lives on, does not cease, changes into new life. The scythe to reap. The winnowing basket to thresh. The handmill to grind. Renewal.



After three days of sacrifices, feasts, performances and dances, the Kores and their teacher priestesses were separated from the celebrants to spend the following day fasting. Spring water was all they were allowed to drink, and then at nightfall they made their offerings to the Goddess. Each girl had to give away something that belonged to her childhood, had to part with a piece of herself. Thus, dolls, carved wooden toys of all kinds, pottery were given to the fire. Leaving childhood had to do with sacrifices, High Priestess Meter thought. They'll be nymphs tomorrow, no longer maidens. They'll know. Tomorrow they'll know. And when the girls had withdrawn to their beds in the dormitory, she began her long and lonesome watch. The dream frightened her, the dream of the one who shouldn't be king, and she saw him breaking the law; and dreaming she knew she was in a dream, and dreaming she knew that he shared it. She couldn't wake up. Caught in a dream. Fragments of dreams ... fragments ... a man and a woman ... king and queen. In her hand an apple, red, green, yellow ... the fruit of the evening, of death and rebirth. Renewal. Oblivion. 'There is always an end before the beginning.' He laughs a horrible laughter, mean and selfrighteous. He leaves. ... fragments ... of caves, gates, walking shadows, waste lands, the sea. The depths of the sea. The depths of death. This is where you have to go. You took it with the crown. ... laughter ... wild and angry ... I am king, he shouts. I shall remain king ... fragments ... banishment. He is alone. On the sea-shore. The king a beggar. And from the sea, riding on a dolphin's back, the Sacred Child approaches to close the circle. The sting-ray spear runs right through the beggar's heart ... the sun rises slowly and red from the depths of the sea. High Priestess Meter suddenly felt the chill of the early morning.

She heard the beating of the drums from far down below – from their own underworld, the Earth's womb. And with drums head Mystagogue Leucippe approached, a tall woman all dressed in white, the black hair shining like raven's feathers. Without a word she stretched out her arms to receive the bowl of salted water. Then she led the procession, followed by the High Priestess, the Queen, the Kores, and finally the teaching priestesses. The path from the altar stone to the entrance of the passage was covered with laurel, and quietly they walked through an opening in the rock into a cave only lit by a few torches. The cave was bare apart from a stone table on which simple white garments were spread out. The Kores were clad in white linen, their heads covered with veils.

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You are the seeds laid into the Earth.

Deeper and deeper they went along the path through a semi-darkness brightened only sparsely by the torches along the walls. The sound of the subterranean river grew louder until Meter could finally hear the powerful voice of the waterfall. The water fed a lake of a blackness so intense that it almost seemed to glow in the dim cave. No grass, no living plants, nothing alive but them and the living waters. High Priestess Meter knelt down and let the water run through her fingers. Clear, pure, clean. The substance of life. The Kores undressed and bathed in the lake. They moved on naked.

You have to die before you can be born again. You have to be buried before you can sprout.

The drums grew louder. A monotonous rhythm. Dum – dum – dum – dum – tranceinflicting. Deep. Chthonic. Heartbeat of the earth. In the womb. It was warm in the womb. A fire was lit in the centre of the room they now approached. It burned in a flat, earthen bowl. The priestess sitting in front of it was beating the rhythm of time in the darkness.

'There are rumours, Meter.'

'What rumours? Did you speak to the king?'

'He says I'm a whore, and so are you and all the rest of us. He's planning something. I should have killed him. He is dangerous. Too dangerous.'

'Killed him? To confirm everything they think of us? He's got followers, Arnicia. If we start shedding blood we'll play right into their hands. They're only waiting for something like that.'

'Of course it's too late now. We should have killed him straight away. I failed my people, Meter. Chasing him to death would have been the best solution.'

'I had a vision when I was on watch.'

'Of him? You saw him in a vision?'

'His future. He'll die an old man killed by the Sacred Child.'

'There is more than one future, Meter. I don't believe in these visions.'

'I don't know, Arnicia. I don't know anymore. I only know that violence is not the answer to our problem.'

'What is the answer, then? Wait and see? They're taking over, Meter, and I am not standing by watching it happen. And neither will you. Remember, we shared a vision, a different vision. You can't hide things from me.'

'I am tired. They are stronger than we are. They believe in violence, Arnicia. Their gods are violent. They want us down, and they will succeed.'

'And you? Are you prepared to give up everything? To throw it right into their faces? There are people who trust you – you and what you stand for. Do you really want to betray them?'

'Too many changes.'

'Oh, rubbish, Meter. And you are right. You are tired, too tired even to listen to yourself. They can be defeated.'

'Not for very long. I am not going to hand over easily. You know that I would give my life for the people who trust me.'

'I know, and it may come to that. Do you think he will disturb the rites?'

'He won't dare. People believe in these rites. He wouldn't attack us openly.

Something sneaky would be more like him. We have to be careful.'

'If he tries something I'll kill him. And no one will stop me. You shall be free from slavery?'

'I know, I lied to them.'

'He has not even come to bury his predecessor. This cannot be forgiven. Even if he does not share our faith – he shouldn't go that far to insult the dead. He was accepted as a son.'

'It isn't a question of faith, Leucippe. This is a question of power. Have you not heard that some of his closest men want to marry priestesses?'

'I have, and I am disgusted. I have heard them talking about women. I know where they come from. Maybe the queen is right, and we should kill him. He wouldn't hesitate.'

'That's why I do. Don't you see it? They want us to play their game. They don't know any other. Don't sink down to their level, old friend. We've come a long way together, and we always kept our ideals high. Keep pure your highest idea; follow your dreams and visions, for mine is the sacred door which opens the land of clarity. Should we not stick to it?' 'Then they will kill us, and you know it.'

'Then let them kill us. If they try we'll fight. I will defend the people who trust in me,

but I will not attack. If I have to die, well, so be it. I will not live under their rule.'

'So it's either victory or death.'

'His brother wants to marry my daughter.'

'That would be the next step. The easy solution.'

'The king is dead. We have to bury him.'

'Don't let us bury our hopes with him. Not now.'

Images of barren fields. Pain, anger, fear. The waves opening like a bottomless abyss. The underworld itself – no, not their own underworld – the one of the others. The dark and gloomy underworld, where the tortured souls cry for forgiveness they would never get. Condemned forever in their Tartarus, their darkness. And darkness for them means evil. Not the beautiful darkness, not the darkness in which the seeds are laid to sprout and to grow. And then, with the light, they will mature. The darkness of the womb, the darkness of comfort, of growth. They did not understand. A black chariot, drawn by black horses. Then nothing – a veil of nothingness she could not see through; and then the chariot sped away. The wild charioteer urged the horses and shook the dark-dyed reins on mane and neck. Through deep lakes he drove, through sulphurous pools boiling in reeking chasms. Urging on his steeds and brandishing a – what was it? A sceptre? An ear of corn? – in his arm, he hurled it to the bottom of the pool. The smitten earth opened a way, and down the deep abyss the chariot plunged. A shadow moved above her, and she felt the chill of the vision.

'Are you dreaming, mother?'

'Maybe dreaming, yes.'

'It is because of him, isn't it?'

Him. She did not even say 'king'. The king who should not be king. Him.

'I suppose so. Him and those like him. Looking at them I can feel the end of the world.'

The girl seated herself next to her, looking into the sea.

'I fear him, but somehow I admire him. I mean his courage to become king well knowing that he is not wanted. He's strong, mother, really strong.'

'Admire him? Is evil an attraction, child? Does he fascinate you? Be careful, love, be very careful. His world is not ours, and I hope it will never become ours. Have you

seen their women? They are like furniture. Birth giving furniture and housekeepers. Do you admire him for that? Him and his like? He's not alone, and it does not take much courage.'

'He's strange, and his strangeness fascinates me. Don't think I like him, mother. He does not even look like a king. He's rude and insulting. I know he doesn't respect women, not even the queen; and it is the queen who rules, not the king. He doesn't want to see that, so he ignores it. Am I not right? He wants power, he'll do whatever it takes to get power. I know all that, mother. Maybe he fascinates me, because I can't really grasp him. I don't know. I don't understand him. I don't know what he's thinking, how his mind works. Is he the future? Is that what it will be like, when we are gone? Power? Only power and gaining riches, and nothing else? And that what existed before forgotten, worthless? Is that what you fear?'

'That's what I fear. I don't fear him, not him personally. I could easily handle him. I fear what he stands for. And I fear for everyone here; for every woman, every child, and every man. They are warriors and pray to their warrior gods. The goddess is but a furrow to lay in their seeds, and women are made for one purpose only. I wouldn't want to live in their world. Believe me, I'd rather die.'

'And this world will come?'

'It will.'

'But then there is no hope.'

'Maybe there isn't. I don't know. But I am tired, and when you are tired you just want to let go. No, we shouldn't give up, not as long as we can fight. Giving up would be betrayal. This is our home, and I will fight for it until the end. But you shouldn't be here talking all pain and destruction. You should celebrate with your friends, love. This is your last day as Kore.'

'I'll go and celebrate. Today I am Kore, happy and playful, growing and stretching towards the light – tomorrow I'll be Persephone, and they shall fear me. Everything will change. But, mother, you shouldn't be here either. It is not healthy for the High Priestess brooding during the highest festival of the year. It's a new year, mother. May it bring love, and peace and joy. May it bring happiness. May it take away our fears.' 'Let it begin now.'

She watched the girl leave, and then she looked out to the sea. The shadow was still there. It wouldn't vanish. We've brought our own executioner into our house.

Gossip.

'He didn't even join the festival.'

'But he sent spies. Soldiers dressed up as fishermen. Everyone knows.'

'Maybe everyone should know.'

'Then he should have sent them as soldiers. It wouldn't have made any difference. Everyone can join the festivities.'

'He isn't very much liked, this new king. The women say he looks like a spoiled and angry child, and he doesn't show any respect whatsoever.'

'He said that women were too stupid to rule, that they were made to serve men.'

'That's what he wants, isn't it? Slaves. And I bet it doesn't matter what sex. He's been looking at the boys too.'

'He's got his men talking to our men.'

'And? Do they listen?'

'They do, and they tell the women, and they start making jokes about him. No one takes him seriously.'

'But we should. He's dangerous. And he's not alone. There are lots of them. And there are kingdoms where women are not allowed to learn anything. They're held stupid.'

'Wombs on legs.'

'They even kill girls right after birth. They want boys.'

'How can they get boys without having girls? Self-fertilization?'

Laughter.

'They've got a goddess who jumped right out of her father's skull.'

'That's a good one. I bet his brain burst, and that's why they are all so ignorant.'

The day was still beautiful, and the fields were reddened with poppies. Immersed in thoughts, Kore of the Thirteenth Month walked across the fields to her favourite place. Poppies are the flowers of this festival, and they seem to belong to her. And not only to her – to all the Kores who were to be awakened. Scarlet – the colour of resurrection. White, black, red – the colours of the goddess. Poppies put you to sleep, let you retire for your transformation. She gently touched the soft petals. I die every day when I go to sleep. And then I wake up again, transformed. And now Kore is going to die. She can feel the transformation. I am going to be a woman, a nymph like the second stage of the goddess. Something inside me will be awakened. And after

death it will be all the same. It's always the same pattern. Sleep and resurrection, the breath of the universe. And after sleep you are never the same, after death you are never the same. Transformed. Metamorphosis. Nothing is ever the same. I sleep and I wake up into a new world. My new self wakes up into a new world. I am ripening, growing, decaying, dying, laid into the earth to grow again.

They must have approached from behind the rocks. She didn't hear them, and when they caught her it was too late. She could only cry out for help. 'A rape! A rape!' And then there was only darkness.

The chariot. She knew. The wild charioteer who took whatever he wanted. The charioteer of power.

The girls had tried to help, when they had heard her crying out, but they had arrived too late. 'She was in the field over there, gathering poppies for the namegiving, and then we heard her cry out, and we all went after her, but she was gone. We really tried. And then we went into the woods, but nothing. We came too late.' Too late.

'And if I had to repeat myself a thousand times, Meter, I should have killed him straight away. It was him, there is no doubt. And I know exactly what he is after. Get the High Priestess's daughter, and you'll get the knowledge of the land, and with the knowledge of the land you'll have all the power you need. Easy enough.' Easy enough? High Priestess Meter looked at the queen. 'I should have known, Arnicia. I saw it in a vision, only that I did not make the connection. I could have prevented it.' She told the queen about the premonition.

'It's idle talk about what could have been done or should have been done, Meter. We have to find her. If she stays in his power for too long she'll be lost for us.' Meter nodded. 'You are right. She's fascinated by him, by the power he emanates. Power fascinates her. She loathes the way he treats women, but she admires his desire for power, and the power itself.'

The queen smiled. 'She's been like this ever since, old friend. Have you really not noticed? You of all should know that her name was not accidentally chosen. She is the one they will fear. Not women, Meter. Women will not fear her, because she is part of every woman. Men will fear her, as men will fear women for a power they will never be capable of understanding. I thought you knew.'

'I've known it, Arnicia. Oh, how I've known it. Known and feared, old friend. It's like knowing how close the end of our world is. With her the sign was given. I did not want to know.'

'Who does? Who wants to know about the end? But it's not all over now. Or do you want to give up because of a sign? And do we know why men shall fear her? We have to find her. You are right. The longer she stays with him the greater the chance for her to fall for the power he might promise. She does not see the man. She sees what lies beyond him. It's dangerous, Meter. Very dangerous. And yet, she might be the only one strong enough to keep our beliefs alive when all else will be lost.'

High Priestess Meter knew that the queen was right. Kore of the Thirteenth Month was strong and fearsome, but not yet introduced to power. She admired what she did not know to handle. Not the man but power. And if he promised her power she would take it and drop him. She reminded her more of the queen than of herself. The High Priestess remembered well the day when the young priestess Arnicia had said, 'What do we need men for? Procreation, that's all. We need their semen, but otherwise?' She had changed over the years, but she made clear who ruled. The wild woman. The mountain woman. The woman who would be free forever.

The knowledge of the land.

'Stop tilling the fields,' was all High Priestess Meter said.

The Queen simply nodded.

The delegation were men. Not men from the village but the men the King had brought with him. The villagers knew what had happened and remained silent. They would not support a king who tried to rape their daughters and steal their secrets – the secrets of the Temple, the secrets of the Goddess. They would not interfere either. There was nothing to interfere with yet, not for them.

'The people are starving, High Priestess. We need food.'

High Priestess Meter stared at them. 'Tell your king that there is plenty of food in our silos, but not for those who raped one of our daughters. With doing so he destroyed the crops. Now go and do what you've done before. Eat acorn, gather nuts. The golden age of abundance has come to an end. Now live on bark and roots. You took away one we loved. Do you really think this will go unpunished? Do you really think you can do what you want? He took on the kingship knowing the rules. He broke

them – one by one. Does he expect us to bend down before his law? As long as my daughter is in his power there will be no food. Go and tell him.'

She knew that he would not give in. His pride would hinder him, his pride to be a man.

Another delegation.

'This is the answer of the king. Share the secrets of the land with him, and your daughter shall be with you again. If you refuse she shall stay with him as his concubine. And there is always a way to get what he wants.'

She looked at them in silence, and then turned away from them. There is no answer, she thought. There is nothing to be said.'

'There are riots, Meter.'

'Then let there be riots.'

'Against the king. They accuse him of letting the people starve only to get his will.' 'Has he answered to the riots yet?'

'He closed the palace doors. I tried to find out where he is hiding her. I know the palace better than any other woman alive, but she is not there. Not inside these walls.' Meter sighed. Of course not. He would no dare hiding her where the Queen could find her, the Queen who knew the palace better than he himself.

'What did you expect, Arnicia? That he would hide her right under your nose? Don't be ridiculous. Why are you wearing your web again? Are you hunting?'

The queen broke into laughter. 'Hunting, indeed. You don't know too much about the mountain women, do you? You don't know our own rites and ceremonies. I don't blame you. We don't share them freely anymore. You would say they are wild and frantic and horrible, you Keeper of the Peace. But that's what I am. A wild woman. When my search was unsuccessful I went into the mountains to the place where we gather for the hunt. I visited the shrine, and I spoke to Her Who Sees, the sorceress who knows all the names of the Goddess, those which she had, those which she has, and those which she shall have. We evoked the names of the Goddess. We called her by every single name.'

'Arnicia, no one knows every single name of the Goddess.'

'The one who sees does. And as she did so it was as if they were all written down. I could see them, follow the writing. And then she spoke to us. She said, "They have come. With fire, sword, and war they have come. They are tearing apart what has

been me for so long. They've given me names, more names than I can bear alone, for I am me, and only me. I am young and old at the same time. Child and woman at the same time. They don't understand. They need names to call me. Oh, but call me they will, and it will always be me. The seed will mature in a different way. She is your seed, but she will be theirs too. You can't mend what has been broken. You have to work the parts. Unity has come to an end. Hear then my names, by which I shall be called – I who was before the seeds of the world were laid into the furrow of Nothingness. Hear and see my names!""

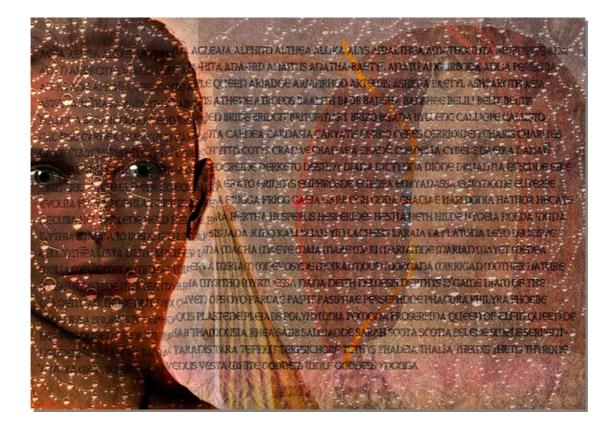
The queen's voice turned into a chant, and the longer she spoke the more entrancing her words became. Once again she had evoked the enchantment of the Goddess. It was as if from far away they could hear the sea – a soft whisper first, but then like roaring thunder when the waves broke against the cliffs. And they saw the names as if carved in stone, and a soft voice spoke in their heads spoke every single name written on the tablet.

AEGA AEGEA AGNES AINE ALBINA AGLEAIA ALPHITO ALTHEA ALUKA ALYS AMALTHEA AMATHOUNTA AMPITRITE ANA ANAN ANDROMEDA AGNAGKE ANA-HITA ANA-HID ANAITUS ANATHA-BAETYL ANATU ANGURBODA ANNA PERENNA ANNIS ANU APHAEA APHRODITE APPLE QUEEN ARIADNE ARIANRHOD ARTEMIS ASHIMA BAETYL ASHTAROTH ASIA ASTERIA ASTRAEA ASTARTE ATARGATIS ATHENE ATROPOS BAALITH BADB BANBHA BANSHEE BELILI BELIT BELTIS BELLONA BERA BLODEUWEDD BRANWEN BRIDE BRIDGIT BRITORMART BRIZO BUANA BYLLENE CALLIOPE CALLISTO CALYPSO CARDEA CARIDWEN CARMENTA CARNEA CARNASIA CARYATIS CERDO CERES CERRIDWEN CHARIS CHARITES CIRCE CLIO CLOTHO CLOTHRU CORE COTYTTO COTYS CRANAE CRANAEA CRANË CORDELIA CYBELE DAEIRA DANAË DANAIS DANU DAWN DEMETER DEO DEOGREINE DERKETO DESTINY DIANA DICTYNNA DIONE DRUANTIA ECHIDNE EIRE ERIN ERIU ELATE ELPHME EO EOS EPONA ERATO ERINNYS EUPHROSNE EUROPA EURYANASSA EURYNOME EUTERPE EVOUIA FLORA FODHLA FORTUNA FREYA FRIGGA FRIGG GAEIA GARB OGH GODA GRACIAE HARMONIA HATHOR HECATE HECUBA HEL HELLENE HELD HELICE HERA HERTHA HESPERUS HESPERIDES HESTIA HETH HILDE HYGEIA HOLDA IDUNA ILYTHIA INANNA IO IRENE IRIS ISHTAR ISIS JANA JUNO KALI KUAN YIN LACHESIS LARAIA LAT LATONA LETO LEUCIPPE LEUCOTHEA LIBYA LILITH LUCIFER LUNA MACHA MAEVE MAIA MARE MARI MARIAMNE MARIAN MAYET MEDEA MELIA MELPOMENE MICHAL MINERVA MIRIAM MNEVOSYNE MOIRAI MOON MORGANA MIRRIGAN MOTHER NATURE MUSE MYRRHINE MYRTEA MYRRHA MYRTHO MYRTOESSA NANA NEITH NEMESIS NEPTHYS

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N'GAME NIAM OF THE GOLDEN HAIR NIOBE NUT NYX OLIVEN OPS OYO PARCAE PASHT PASIPHAE PERSEPHONE PHAEDRA PHILYRA PHOEBE PHOENISSA PHORCIS PHOSPHOROUS PLASTENE PLEIADS POLYHYMNIA POMONA PROSERPINA QUEEN OF ELFIN QUEEN OF HEAVEN QUEEN OF NIGHT RAHAB THAMNUSIA RHEA SADB SALMAONE SARAH SCOTA SCOTIA SELENE SMELE SERPENT-GODDESS SOPHIA SOW TAMAR TARANIS TARA TEFNUT TERPSICHORE TETHYS THALEIA THALIA THEMIS THETIS THYRONE TITANIA URA URANIA VATES VENUS VESTA WHITE GODDESS WOLF GODDESS YNGONA and there she stood; not the goddess but Kore, and no longer Kore but Persephone. One of her names, one of the many names she would be known by.

'I love you, mother, and I love you, Queen Arnicia. I shall always love you, but my destiny is no longer with you. I am part of you, and will be forever, but times are moving away from us – from the world we have known for so long. Our world and their world are getting closer, much closer than will be good. We cannot keep them out. We cannot hide behind walls. They'll break through, and then they'll kill what is behind these walls. Theirs is a physical power. They are weak where we are strong, and strong where we are weak. That's why we won't understand each other. They'll fear me, since I hold wisdom they'll never access. One day they'll think they've overcome us, and that will be self-deception. I hold all the mysteries and all knowledge. They only have strength. But their strength will destroy us. Nothing will remain, and the name of the goddess will be many names, and I shall be many names, for they cannot grasp me. They need parts. They don't understand wholeness. They fear women, and thus they subjugate them. They are dangerous, but there is one way for our values to survive. I am that way. Without me there will be only them. Their rules, their values, their history. I am the keeper of our values, of our history, of us. I shall be stronger than they'll ever be. You don't want to believe, but you know it already. Trust me. I won't betray you. You know I won't. I don't ask you to give in; I only ask you to compromise. For my sake, for our sake. All goddesses are one goddess, and all women are one woman.'



'She *is* after power, Meter. Can't you see it?'

'But she is right. If we fight them until the end, we'll be lost forever. Lost and forgotten. Nothing will remain, now even the memory of our existence. The same will happen if we give in. We have to compromise. We need to, Arnicia. Let her be after power; let her take what she is after. What counts is that she serves us, that she is our only chance. There is no other. There is nothing we can do. Our time is at an end.' 'Only because we let it happen, Meter. Remember your vision. He won't succeed. He'll be killed by the child.'

'What child I wonder.'

'There is but one.'

'Not any more.'

'Not any more? What is it with you, old friend? I know that she is your daughter. And you know that I love her. I know you want to protect her. But do you have to give up your beliefs to do so? Right, compromise, play their game. She does so already. She has taken her name already. And she is playing in the name of the Goddess. Through me.'

'And if it was the goddess? Kore would never have taken her name without consent. You know that. She's rooted in our beliefs. She knows the rules, she follows the rules. And she did not rape herself.'

'But what she asks, goddess or no goddess, what she asks us to do is to hand over our secrets.'

'She asks us to share.'

'With those who want to destroy us? What kind of sharing is that? No, I don't agree with you, Meter. Unfortunately, there is nothing better I can think of apart from killing him.'

He smiled when he entered the visitor's temple. A smile showing his victory – or so he thought. But then Meter's expressionless face seemed to disturb him. No pain, no signs of weeping. She did not give anything away. He met the High Priestess, a strong woman who knew who she was. She could see his insecurity. Meet someone stronger than yourself, and you'll bend down? She thought. Should it be that easy? Don't deceive yourself, Meter. He hasn't gained the position he is in by crumbling down in front of anyone. Yes, he is strong. Yes, she could see power emanating from his misshapen body. Short-legged, long-bodied, and red-faced. And powerful. Easy to understand. And he knew it. He knew it enough to use it. But then, here he met with someone who could read him. And then, Meter thought, he does not know what to do with me. I am not like their women. He sees power in me, and that is why, to a certain degree, he respects me. But what is more, he fears me. Under this mask of a smile I can see fear – right next to the power. He can read men easily, but he has never learned to read a woman, because in his life they don't exist. Like slaves. They are there, but they don't really exist.

The smile had vanished and given way to curiosity. For the first time he had entered the temple – something the people were talking about. It should have been the first thing for him to do, paying respect to the goddess who allowed him to become king. 'You asked me to come, High Priestess. Here I am. People are discontent. They want food. You are the one who has to provide them with food.'

'You make a mistake here, King. Not I am the one, you are. For this is the only duty of the king – to nourish his people. Don't you know the rules under which you

became what you are? What did you think kingship was all about? Power? Expansion? You've chosen the wrong kingdom, then. Don't you know who I am?' 'You are a woman, High Priestess, and as a woman you have no rights whatsoever. Not where I rule.'

'You rule? But you don't rule, little king. The Queen does. Did you not listen when you took the oath? And as for me – this kingdom belongs to the goddess I represent. In her name I make the laws of this kingdom. No king ever made a law. I did. And these laws cannot be corrupted – by no one, neither by betrayal nor by force.' 'But I am the one who has got your daughter. She is in my power and shall do exactly as I ask her. You can get her back, High Priestess, but only if you hand over to us the secrets of the land and the power to grow crops.'

'So your delegates told me. But there won't be any negotiations unless my daughter is released. You want to play with power – good. Let's play with power. My daughter is but one person. In relation to the growth and welfare of the kingdom she does not count much, does she? But one person will be weeping for her and suffer. I'll answer your ultimatum, king. Release her, let me talk to her, and then, only then will I be prepared to negotiate.'

'Your victory won't last long, High Priestess. We'll win – if not now then later. But win we will. And as for your daughter – she does not actually refuse living in the palace.' The smile was back, the arrogant little smile. Don't give yourself away, Meter. Don't let him but catch a glimpse of your feelings.

'Then let me hear her saying it.'

'I'll think about it.'

'Don't make it too long, king, the people are not very happy, and for them the king is the one to feed them. He is the year and the crop. If the crop fails the king fails. If the crop dies the king dies. Never forget.'

'You really let the people starve?'

'No, you do.'

Riots.

'They accuse him, Meter, they accuse him of not abiding the laws given by an older authority than his own. I heard them talking. The old women. It's always good to listen to the old women. They know. They know the people, and they know the soul of the kingdom. 'His only right is that to heal, not to destroy,' they say. And '...he's the body of the country not its ruler. If he cannot fulfil his duties he is to be banned.' That's what they say, Meter. It looks as if we are winning.'

'For a little while, Arnicia, only for a little while. We cannot avoid the inevitable forever, but it won't be during our lifetimes. And then those who follow us will have to pick up the pieces.'

'We can only do our bit of history, Meter. The world moves on, and we don't know where it's going to move to. Our fight is not the fight of our successors. We'll have to answer for what we are doing now – and their rise was nothing we could have prevented.'

'You are right. So they are talking banishment already. He cannot risk that. He hasn't got the people on his side. He cannot go and tell them that we are the ones responsible for the shortage. They won't believe him.'

'They won't believe him because they know the truth. These people believe in the old laws. They incorporate them as well as we do. He has to give in.' 'For the moment.'

'Was it you or the goddess who spoke through he queen?'

'What difference does it make, mother? I am the goddess. In what I do and in what I personify I am the goddess, the woman, the virgin, the nymph. And you know it, mother. Was it not you who gave the laws to this kingdom? Was it not you who told me who I was and who I would be? I did not speak to the queen, mother. I did not enter her mind, but at the same time I did. The goddess knows.'

'Knows what? That the time has come to change the laws? That the time has come to abandon what we are and what we stand for? That the time has come to give up and hand it all over to them?'

'That the time has come to share.'

'No. We share already. We share all we've got with those who are in need. As we always did. There was no time when we did not share. You are not talking about sharing, you are talking about handing over our culture. That I cannot accept.' 'Not even if our secrets will remain with me and someone else you'll choose?' 'There will be no difference. We were never looking for power. We never went to occupy or destroy other people's homes and countries. And I am not willing to share our secrets with those whose aim it is to rule. Have you already forgotten what you were taught?'

'Mother, I don't want to give away our secrets. Don't you see what will happen if we don't agree to a compromise? They'll take it by force. And they'll win, because they are driven by power. All I want is to avoid the destruction of our people. You don't need to hand over our secrets. You don't need to betray our people. If I am free to move between the worlds I'll look after them. And the king shall fear me. Is this not who I am; the one they shall fear?'

'I am not sure if it is not me who fears you most. Arnicia said that you were after power, and she knows you well, sometimes I think she knows you better than I do. Daughter, be honest now, and answer me one question. On the answer to this question will depend what I am going to do. But if you lie to me or even try to hide part of the truth I shall not compromise, and I shall fight. I shall fight even you if I have to. Was she right? Is it power you are after? Is that what you want?'

'I can't answer with a simple yes or no, mother. Don't make me. No, please, don't go away. Let me explain what I mean. I don't want their power. I don't want the power to rule. All I want is stopping them from destroying us. I want power over them, over him, and I know I've got it. I can direct him. I can even lead him to his own destruction. Queen Arnicia knows it, and she was the one who wanted him killed before he even became king. What's the difference between what I want and what she wants? Killing him now would unleash an avalanche of violence. Leading him towards his own destruction would secure our own safety. If you call that being after power – yes, I am after power.'

'What am I going to do, Persephone? With the secret of the land he will gain power; without it ...'

'Without it he will gain too, even more so. And then they'll get the secrets anyway. There will be no place to hide for us. We'll die. All our people will either die or submit to their rules. Power comes in many ways, mother. Be careful that you don't use their ways – you are very close. Can't you see it?'

'Better than you know. What do you suggest then?'

'Let's play a little game. Arnicia will like it. And it will end in his destruction. You've seen it already, haven't you? Was he not killed by the sacred child in your vision? Was he not a beggar, all alone?'

'Be careful with visions, Persephone. They only present one line of the future. The future depends on our actions.'

'Mother, when does a king become a beggar? Only if he does not abide the laws of the country. Only if he's banished. And then he shall die by the power he himself created. Is that not true?'

'Is that your aim? Direct him towards banishment?'

'That's what I want. More than one king was driven out of a kingdom he did not show respect. And he doesn't show respect. But it is not up to us to banish him. The people have to do it, and the people will. All you need to do is to choose well the one to initiate.'

'Then it can only be a priest who respects the rites and the sacredness of life.' 'So be it.'

'We have to make sure that you can move between the worlds.'

'I don't think that this should be a problem. If he refuses to guarantee this right then there will be no secrets of the land. The people will starve, they will riot, and he will see banishment anyway. There is only one reason for me not to choose this option. Innocent people will die, and the survivors might even riot against you who owns the secrets.'

'You are right. I've known it all the time. We don't have much of a choice here, and then – is it not just prolonging our destiny?'

'How do you know? To make this conclusion is not up to us, or anybody who lives now. We do what we have to do here and now. There will be others, when we'll be dead and gone. Will you go this path with me, mother? And will you convince the queen that we don't have a choice in this matter?'

'She'll understand, although she is a fighter and would prefer to die in a battle. She'll understand. She loves her country, and she loves her people.'

The priest smiled. 'I knew you would approach one of us, High Priestess Meter. I am honoured that it should be me.'

'The king approached you already?'

'He did. He wants to know what we are doing during our sacred and secret rites.' 'And how did you reply? You are not the High Priest.'

'Oh, I replied as everybody else would have done. I told him that if I'd told him they weren't sacred and secret any longer. He tried the High Priest then, but he got the same answer. We don't give away our secrets either, High Priestess. But why me?'

'I could not ask the High Priest. That would have been too obvious. I had to choose carefully. I needed someone who loves and cares for the land. You do, don't you? You are the son of a swineherd.'

'I am. And that makes me worthy in your eyes, High Priestess?'

'It does indeed, Triptolemos.'

'Worthy to be initiated in the secrets only priestesses know?'

'Yes. You have to trust the soil so that it will trust you.'

'I see. And you trust me?'

'I do. And so will the king. He has to, Triptolemos. If he does not trust you we'll be lost.'

'But there is only one way to make him trust me.'

'I know. He needs to believe that you give away our secrets. Have you ever been to one of their oracles, Triptolemos? No, I don't think you have. They speak in riddles. They never give you a straight-forward answer.'

'Well, so I've heard. And I've heard that the reason is that they don't know. You want me to hide the secret in a secret?'

'Will you be able to do it?'

'With your help I will. But he has to choose me, hasn't he? He won't accept anyone you recommended. He hates you.'

'I knew I chose the right one. Go, and find others you can trust. Young priests like you. He knows that I will only accept priests to be initiated. It would raise suspicion if I let any profane eyes see what is hidden. And then you should make yourselves known to him, slowly and carefully. Drop a hint now an again about the secrets we are not willing to share with you. But be careful. He is not stupid. You have to be subtle. Do you think you could do it?'

'Easily. I am not the only swineherd amongst us, and there are sons of goatherds and fishing folk too, sons of people who are not afraid of hard work and dirt. They'll make a fine company, High Priestess.'

'Good. It makes it easier for us. If he does not pick you – he'll have a choice. I thank you, Triptolemos. I'll have a word with your High Priest. He has to know everything.' 'High Priestess?'

'Yes.?'

'Why are we separated? We do what we do, and you do what you do. We only meet when we celebrate.'

'And when need dictates as it does now. Don't you know?'

"We follow the rules of the same mother, are children of the same mother, so why...?" "Because we are different. Because we are two aspects of the mother. We have different needs and desires. Would you like to discuss openly in front of women your innermost secrets? They might concern a woman. Does not the mother show you your own way to celebrate her and her creation?"

'Then she is both, but we are not. We talk to her male aspect, and you talk to her female aspect?'

'And sometimes, Triptolemos, sometimes we find within ourselves the memory of the other.'

'Yes, yes, I understand. That is why we celebrate together. We mustn't forget that we are of the same origin. I can see it now.'

'He thinks he's got us there,' the queen smiled. 'He really is convinced that he's got power over us.'

'That was the idea. By thinking so he's digging his own grave.'

'He told me that he now wants a son to be king after him.'

'Yes, I thought he might want that.'

'What is that smile on your face for, Meter?'

'He is where he is supposed to be.'

'You are talking about your vision.'

'My vision. Yes, my vision is very clear now. Not our sacred child will kill him -his

will. What he now wants most shall be his end.'

'And my beginning,' Persephone said quietly.

'But only for a little while, my daughter, only for a little while.'

'No, mother. They will win one day, there's no doubt, but they'll never win entirely, not as long as they fear me. And they shall fear me. And I predict that even when they will have overtaken everything they'll still fear me – woman.'

Memories

Here at your end we meet again, my love. I thought you would have understood. You of all should have understood. She must have told you. But then he had been your teacher too, the one who stole their secrets, the one who changed the law. No, one of them, who changed the ancient law. And the sun had won over the moon, and man had won over woman, and her teachings were less worth than his teachings. My lover. You shouldn't have listened to him, you should have remembered what the mother told you. Why did you follow me? These secrets are not for men, and they are not for those who were not initiated in the sacred mysteries of her who ruled first, her who gave the laws to us. Now you are lost, dying in madness. Mania, they call it, because your music was created by your enthusiasm, which they call sacred. Sacred madness. Your soul is weeping, and all your grief is carried into the lyre you hold in your hands. Unwillingly, you follow the path of the moon not the sun as you thought. Don't you know that he is treacherous? Don't you know that he betrayed your mother teacher? Don't you know that he claimed the music for himself, and poetry, and all the arts the wise women taught over the centuries? But you believed him, because he was a man. Men will believe men, because they fear women. She told me so, the one who rules the pattern of the labyrinth. She knows. She was betrayed once, but she drew strength out of her betrayal. And now she rules the world beyond your understanding. I loved you, Ophruoeis. You were the only one who doubted the right of Diomedes. You were his friend, that's true, but as a friend you doubted him. I understood your magic; I felt it whenever you laid hands on the lyre. I did not always understand your words, and I doubt you understood yourself. But when you let your music speak it was so clear – everything was clear and simple and beautiful. You shouldn't have followed me. What made you do it, love? Did he send you to spy on us? But then he would have chosen someone else, someone with more insight in our mysteries. He could have done it himself. He knows the rules. He wouldn't be dying a slow and painful death. That's how the venom works. Slowly and painfully are you dying now. I told you not to interfere with the rites. I told you that after being reborn I would return to you and be with you. Why didn't you listen? Was it the other man you saw? Did you not realize your own master? Oh yes, my love, it was him. He never wanted us to be together. He wanted you for himself. He wanted your entire

dedication. That's why he came to me in disguise, calling himself The Best. He must have thought I was stupid and wouldn't see through his farce. He must have forgotten who my teachers were. He must have forgotten that I was in the highest state of awareness. He told you I was dying, didn't he? He filled you with stories of the underworld and the shadows and that I was going to become a shadow in the lightless halls of the tortured souls. I know he did. That was why you followed me, when the serpent's venom entered your body. Full of his stories, full of his words. A master of words he is indeed. They taught him well, and I wish they had not. What are you trying to say? You wanted to save me? You wanted to get me back? Did he tell you she would keep me prisoner in the underworld? My silly lover. Were you really that blind? They called you a wise man. And you had shown wisdom before. Did you not travel in the land, where the Serpent Lady still rules in some parts? You must have known that I was one of her priestesses. Yes, I am alive. You are not dead yet. We are still in the world of the living. Alas, for you this life is going to end soon. Let me see what you saw. You don't need to talk. I can see your images without your words. And I want you to know the truth. I loved you, Ophruoeis, and I love you still. You can take this with you. That I, whom he called the savage face, because I did not match his image of a woman, because I was still free and not under his yoke, that I cared for you and loved you. You enchanted me with your music, the only true language, the only language that does not lie, and I, whom they call Wide Justice, wanted to share my life with you. If you only had let me do so.

And here we meet again, at the very end of your life, and I will accompany you and lead you along the path of oblivion. Will you understand now? Or do you see me as a dream, a shadow? This I am not. The only shadows were in your mind, my love, when you were poisoned with the venom for the first time. Why did you not leave it then? Why did you try what your body was not able to take? You would have realized that you had not lost me.

I did not know that you were following me. I could have sent you back. I did not see what you saw. Had he cast a spell on your mind to show you pictures which did not exist? And when the venom entered your body, what did you see then following me? What did the venom do to you? Did you not know that from an early age on we were given an antidote? I thought your mother teacher had told you that. But now you've got your own mysteries – taken from all sources. And they will praise you for that, for something you have not even done; for something that is not even yours. He'll see to it. He'll make them forget about me.

It is long since I was a girl; I travelled under the earth Before I became a learned one. I have travelled, I have made a circle, I have danced in a hundred chambers, I have solved a hundred riddles. Learned ones, Prophesy ye of Ophruoeis? Or is it not me you celebrate?

I shall take your hand now and lead you through my story, and my mind shall then listen to yours. I want you to die with the truth. I don't want you to go not knowing that you have been loved all the time. And I want you to know how false he was and is, and that it is his will to destroy me and the likes of me. And then you will be right. Mere shadows we shall be for those who'll come after us. But you have to know. He used you too, pretending he wanted to help you. So listen then. Let your mind rest and listen.

You never asked me who I was. You just took me as the girl you saw. You once said you admired my beauty. You made songs about it. But was I just beauty to you? I was born to be a priestess, a priestess of the serpent lady. I ran with the wild women, and from early childhood on I was given the venom of prophesy. I cannot recall what happened when I took it for the first time, but I remember the visions I had later. Visions of past and future. It always is a bit like dying, but suddenly everything becomes so clear and so ... alive ... more alive than ever. The venom – like those mushrooms you know – clears your vision, it makes you focus on one thing only. I remember when the voice of the universe became so loud and so clear that it almost hurt. Then images emerge out of the clarity of your vision. Images of the world beyond the world, and then you know. And when you speak your mind fills your words with rhythm like music, and it is verse you talk not simple speech. Your dreams are full of stories, and sometimes these stories merge and create the story of everything. You can see the connections between all life forms. You see who you

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really are. You see the structure of the world. And yet, it is not all beauty. To know everything means that you cannot turn away. There is nowhere else to go. It embraces you entirely, and you have to face life in its entirety, every single part of it. That's why it's dangerous. That's why we warned you, my lover. You should have listened to our warnings. We were born into it. All our education ws directed towards the one aim, to become the priestesses of the Serpent Lady; to walk under her moon; to venture into her darkness. And you came and only saw my beauty. You thought it was all a game, the singing and dancing; the wild games we played with the madwomen. No games they were. You travelled a lot. You should have known. Have you not seen others like us on your travels? You met the Great Queen, the priestess of the Triple-Faced One. Did you not learn anything? You travelled to Egypt, and did not learn anything about the Great Serpent? Did he unteach you? Did he tell you to forget? But it's there. It's inside me. You never realized. Maybe you do now, but now it is too late. You may dream of our reunion, and they will tell of our reunion in years to come, but it will be all lies. He reinvented history again and again. Yes, he spoke to me. He came in disguise, but it is easy to see through his masks. He does not hide himself very well, because he loves himself too much. He came to claim you. I told him that he cannot claim what I do not own. I told him that you were free to do whatever you wished. I do not own any living being. All I own is myself. And if your love had been for him, what right had I to keep you? He didn't understand. He wants to own people. He takes them, and when there is no more they can give him, he throws them away. He will suffer for it. I have seen it. But he will not suffer enough. He will forget again and begin a new game, a new hunt. Then I had to go. Don't you know that the mysteries claim that we have to pass through the labyrinth? You saw a snake, didn't you? You thought it bit me? It came to call me that the time had come for the passage. He blurred your vision, and you saw me fall. But upright I went to the only place where no one should follow me. He told you I was dead. But he thought you would go with him now. You didn't. Instead you followed me, and did the silliest thing you could have done. I know it was out of love. I know he had disturbed your mind. But the serpents guard the entrance. I told you so. I told you that no one except the serpent priestesses are allowed to enter the passage. The snakes bite everyone who enters. Only that we are immunized. You were not. I do not know what you saw, but I heard your music, and it almost broke my heart. If I had only known ... but it was too late for you already. And I? I did what I had to do. As soon as I entered the passage

the serpent git me; from this very point onwards I could no longer help you. I was caught in my own visions. That was why I went. You never honoured my position. A priestess, my love, young but a priestess of the Serpent Lady. And I had duties. The venom entered my body, and I followed the path through the passage to let my visions run free; to know the future, to see connections. And She was there to listen to my words. And I became part of her, and she was part of me. I remember you being there, not by your shape but by your music. But my vision of your reality was clouded. And only when I left the labyrinth again I found you sitting there outside, pale and empty. I spoke to you, but you only stared at me not knowing who I was. He tricked you, and I couldn't make undone the damage to your mind. Your hands automatically stroked the lyre, and the air was full of sadness. Even the rocks and the trees seemed to weep, and then I understood. You thought I was dead. Only then I became aware that the serpent at the entrance had attacked you too. But you were still alive. You should have been dead with all the venom inside you. The only explanation is that you followed me right away. She could not have had much venom left. And so you survived to tell the story of your visions. Visions, my love, not reality. You saw what your disturbed mind wanted to believe, that I was dead and had gone into the land of the shadows. Did you sing this to them? The story of the man who lost his love to death? The story of the man who followed her into the realm of the shadows? You followed a vision, and you told a dream, for here I am at the end of your journey. Once again we are united, and it will be my face you shall take with you on your last travels. What did you see? Don't talk, my love, just let the pictures emerge from your memory. You saw me fall bitten by the snake ...



... she's dead. The ugly beast killed her. My love, you cannot be dead. How can I live without you? How can the sun ever rise again with you being dead? I can't let it happen. You gods of the underworld, you can't let it happen. Bring her back to me. I have to follow her, I have to find her. If I can't get her back, what does life mean to me? The passage – there it is. How dark and gloomy it stares into my face. But it is the only way to go. There is no other path, nothing but this dark and dreary passage. What's that? Something stung me. Something wants to hold me back, but I have to go. There's no way out. I have to go. My heart beats so fast. Fear. I am full of fear. I know. I don't want to enter this ... this world. I don't want to. I have to. I love her. I love her more than my own life. My lyre. My lyre won't leave me. It went with me through so many dangers. Together we went to Aea, to Egypt ... we crossed the sea and walked in the desert. In caves we shared loneliness. My lyre shall tell my fears and my longings. The path is so dark, and darkness makes my drowsy. I can hear the river. Its song is dark, not friendly like the rivers in the world above. A gloomy song for a gloomy land. Sing, sweet lyre, sing, and tell them that I am seeking her. My love, my Eurydice, my Agriope, by whatever name you are known. I want you back. Please give her back to me. Will my journey end here, where Charon reigns and Three-Headed Cerberus? Sweet music, enchant them, fill these dark halls with

sweetness, sad sweetness. So sad you are powerful, music, powerful enough to make them weep, and weep they shall. Mourn they shall. With me. They shall feel my pain and my longing. I shall not suffer alone. The monster stares at me. Three heads, the salivating mouths – poisonous slaver. Tears in the yellow eyes of the night. And he, the ferryman of the souls, his grim face softened by the weeping tale of my music. He does not speak but with a small gesture invites me to enter the bark. Play, music, don't stop playing. When you stop the enchantment will break. Play on. I see the ghosts and hear the screams of the tortured souls. Play, Ophruoeis, let your fingers stroke the lyre. They weep. The dead souls weep for my love. The screams cease, and there is music in the dark and gloomy halls of the Lord and Lady of the Shades. I see them now, pale and beautiful, Rulers of Darkness. I do not dare to leave my instrument. They look at me, and finally the lady speaks and asks me what I wanted from her. I was not allowed to be here, the world of the living was above. I tell them about my love and what befell her. I tell them that I did not come to catch a glimpse of the shades or the halls of death. I tell them I did not come to steal or bind the guardian but to reclaim my love who died too young. I tell them that it needed all my strength to venture down here, but that I could do nothing but come. I feel the fear of the world, the silence, although music is floating through these realms of darkness, music unremembered by the dead whose presence I can feel. The spirits weep as I unfold me tale, and then the Lady herself looks at me and nods in silence. She does not say a word, but I can hear her voice in my mind telling me to leave now and follow the path without looking back. Looking back means losing everything. They are gone, and I am alone on the path that leads towards the light. I walk and sometimes stop to listen if someone is following me. What if they betrayed me? What if they just wanted to get rid of the living man? There is no way for me to return again once I have reached the land of the living. How can I be sure? I feel panic rising. My heartbeat is wild. My love, are you really there? Are you following? If not my life is worth nothing. I see the first glimpse of light. I have to know. I can't leave these dark realms without her. I can't. She has to be with me. More and more light brightens the darkness. My eyes can see the path already that leads to the world of the living. I can't wait any longer. I have to be sure. I have to. Driven by an overpowering impulse I turn round. I see her face. And then nothing. She has vanished. And the world grows dim ...

... I found you there, your mind in shatters, telling me that I was dead, and that you lost me twice, and that there was no way to return to the darkness. You left, restless

roaming the mountains following your master's passion for boys. Whatever you had learned ws forgotten. You should have been one of us. That was the only reason they taught *you*, a man. Maybe they should have known better by then. They did not see the influence he was getting over you until it was too late. He stole your heart, my love. He had power over you, and you thought you were free. If you really had been free you would have known me for what I was, but you wanted the girl, not the priestess. Realizing that I was the priestess killed you. You could not follow me without being a priest yourself. He knew it. That's why he made it happen. And yet I've loved you. You crossed the borders and failed.

Fare-well now, dear Ophruoeis. Your last vision might lead you where you went once before, only this time there will be no return. Your last vision. Your last journey. And I shall hold your hand until you shall be gone forever.

Revenge

Dancing the eternal dance of the universe to the music of the spheres we are slowly moving towards the centre of oblivion where we shall rest and worry no more. For today the hunt is over, the stag ours, and now we thank the spirit of the stag for providing us with food. They bring the bones to me, and the skull. I take them and lay them out in front of me. Seats of life, they will grow new flesh, and a new stag will be born. That is how we follow the cycle of life and the cycle of death. My hands gliding over the skull I sing. Of death I sing and of life, of the beauty of the morning I sing, of the sacredness of the night. Of water I sing, running water, and of pine cones, of the flow of the seasons. To the spirit of the stag I sing, and to the great spirit of all animals. We are one. We are the same. Huntress and hunted. Interchangeable. Huntress today, hunted tomorrow.

My maidens watch me, guard me. They should have transformed into animals, but this art has been lost over the times. Now we are but women, hunting women; but once we were more, much more than that. Running with the deer, we became deer. And running with women, they became women. We were so much closer in those times. No distance at all but the distance of death. And that was overcome by rituals we celebrated together – women and animals. Pines and cypresses still speak aloud at night, and the wind sings a lullaby, the storms shouts out anger. We still drink from the same stream and bathe in the same pool. We still have not forgotten to call upon our basic nature. We still have not forgotten to call upon the dancing force which keeps us going on and on within the cycle of life and death.

I sing over the bones, and then the maidens who should have transformed into animals gather around me. They are wearing animal costumes and face masks to remember the old days. The memory still exists. They could not take away the memory. The memory of the Great Hunt. The memory of being free and wild and woman. They take the bones and fasten them to the branches of the trees, thus sending home the soul of the stag who owned them. Go home to your spirit world. We honour your bones, we honour your life as we honour your death. We sing to the Lady of the Wild Beasts, Huntress and Protectress, She of the Animals, Mistress of the Rough Mountains, Free Woman. I carry her name as a title, and I am proud. We are the virgin. We are not owned by any man. We are free.

The light in the grove is changing, the sun travelling westwards, closer to the end of the day. There is blood on my hands, on my clothes, on my face. The blood of the stag we killed today. Having given his soul back to his spiritual home we will bathe and cleanse ourselves, wash away the blood. And then, at night back in the village there will be a feast, and the hinds will choose their stags for the night. A night of love-making. The end of the hunt, the end of the chase. No yokes, no fetters. We are free women.

From my place under the pine trees I can see the limestone arch leading towards the pool. No human ever laid hand to this. The grove's sole architect was nature, and nature alone. Walking through the arch the first sound you notice is the sound of the spring that nourishes the pool, a wide pool, its waters girdled with a grassy sward. This sanctuary was chosen a long time ago, and its existence passed on from generation to generation of huntresses. Here we were taught the rites and secrets of the chase. Here we clean ourselves after the hunt. The hunt is sacred, since the animal is sacred. Food is sacred to us, and so is its source. Do not kill more than you needs, and don't kill if there is no need at all. I always thought it was an easy rule to follow in its simplicity; but I was wrong. There are those who kill for sport, those who do not honour the spirit of the deer the chase. Their cries can be heard in the mountains now, and their laughter, when they have slaughtered their prey. I have learned to apologize

to the spirits for taking life. They laugh at the spirits. They laugh at us who used to run with the wild beasts in the forest. And they will rule one day, when our days will be over. However, they have obeyed the rule that this place is a sanctuary, that this place is sacred. They do not come here to besmirch it with their presence. And if they ever did they would be punished. There is a law; and ancient law written by those who were here first. It says that no man is allowed to lay eyes on the sanctuary and disturb those who follow the rites of the hunt. If they, however, do so they call be punished in the way they punish the deer they hunt. No one has ever tried it yet, but for how much longer? The laws have changed. With the new rulers who came from across the sea new laws have come; laws which place us amongst their slaves. And you cannot commit a crime against a slave, since a slave does not have any rights. But I who carry her name with pride will follow the laws given by her. A slight breeze now makes the pine trees shiver, and I can hear the music of the wind and the branches. Slowly I walk through the arch.

He was content. It had been a good day. The sun stood now midway at its zenith and he, the hunter, looked over a mountainside, the woodland coverts of which were stained with many a kill of various game. Successful. What a successful day. He call his comrades who were still roaming the lonely woods. 'Come now, friends, today has brought success enough. Our javelins are still dripping with blood. Let's call it a day, and tomorrow at dawn let's go again for more fine sport. But now let's go and rest and feast upon our prey.'

'Well said, dear friend,' one of his fellow hunters spoke. 'Call back the pack and feed them well. They've done good work today.' They rested in the shade of a tree, while some of them went for fresh water from the stream. When they returned they brought not only water but news.

'Do you know where we are, friends? It's the old sanctuary of which our mothers told us. The one where the wild women bathe. The ones who dress up like animals and run around and do hunting.'

'Leave them alone,' one of the older men said. 'It is a sacred place, and men are not allowed.'

'What are you talking about, old man? Men are not allowed? There is no place in the whole world where men are not allowed.'

His speech was honoured with laughter and applause, but the old man insisted on not investigating the grove.

'Have your mothers not told you that the wild women curse every man who tries to set foot into the sacred grove? Have they not told you that there exists an ancient law which puts death penalty upon a man who is caught in there?'

'And who is going to punish us to death, then my friend?' the leader of the company asked mildly. 'A bunch of bathing beauties, wild or tame? Are you afraid of women?' 'It's not the women I fear,' the older man replied, 'but the law was made by the goddess we pray to when we go out hunting. Have we not to abide her law? Don't we sacrifice to her before we got out? Or is it just a game for you?'

When he mentioned the goddess, some of the younger men withdrew. Scaring a few women was one thing, but playing games with the goddess was different. But the young leader laughed. 'Law of the goddess? She's got more important things to do than make a law for some young girls. Your mothers tell you these stories to keep you away from them. Wild women. Is that what they are called? Are they wild to look at, or are they wild when you take them? How many of them are there in that grove?' 'About fifty of them are here to protect the sanctuary,' the older man said. 'Fifty? Are they young? Good looking? Well built. I might risk a look. Who wants to

come with me?'

But his friends remained silent.

'Come on, lads, you are hunters. You are men. Are you scared of a few women?' 'No, we are not, and you know that quite well,' one of the younger ones said. 'Not scared of women, but I would never meddle with the gods and goddesses. They made the laws, and they will punish you for breaking them. And their punishment is harder than any mortal man can think of. I will not go, and you'd better stay here too.' 'Not even a look? A look won't do any harm. After a long day's hunt what is more relaxing than looking at beautiful young bodies? Do they not say that the priestess looks like the goddess herself?'

'They say,' and it was again the older man who spoke, 'they say that she is of divine origin, that she is relate to the goddess. And thus, my dear young friend, she might punish you like the goddess. If I were you I wouldn't go and risk my life for just a bit of naked flesh.'

'A bit of naked flesh? You must be really old now that you abstain the beauties of a female body. And what can they do to me if I only try to catch a glimpse? They won't kill me for that. Not for just looking.'

'They will,' the old man said. 'Such is the law. And now do what you think is right, but I shall not go.'

'Nor I.'

'Nor I.'

None of this companions wanted to follow him, but driven by curiosity he went alone. Cowards, he thought. Call themselves men. That is the law. My law is being young. My law is to explore. Wasn't my grandfather a great king and law-giver? He wouldn't have killed anyone just for looking at a woman's body. It's woman law, and I don't follow woman law. I am a man. And the more they tell me not to go the more I want to. There is nothing wrong with watching them.

The grove lay quiet, when he entered it through the small passage way that led to the sanctuary. There were bones in the trees. He had heard about these things before. Some people did that. They offered the bones to the spirits, or something like it. He wasn't sure. It might as well be a sacrifice. They were all long bones. Maybe only they were of importance. And the skull. Well, if that was the way they concluded a hunt that was their problem, not his. But where were they? Where was the famous pool? He saw the arch and knew that the cave must lie behind it. He could not enter through the arch, however. They would spot him the instant he went through it. There must be another way to get in, he thought. There is never only one way. Carefully, trying to avoid making a noise, he walked along the trees trying to figure out which way the cave went. He found himself lucky. There was more than one entrance. Hidden behind tall cedars he found a narrow gap through which he slipped. Careful, he thought. Just in case the rumours are true and the goddess strikes. He wasn't scared. Why should he be scared – scared by a few women bathing? What man could possibly be scared of women? His family had made sure long ago that the power was taken out of women's hands. They had ruled here. He knew that. Everybody did. But they didn't rule now. Their power was gone. Succession was patrilineal. From father to son. He could hear them now. He could hear their laughter. He smiled. About fifty of them, the old companion had said. Fifty naked women bathing in the pool. Young, he had said. Just the idea of fifty naked women ... slowly he moved towards the laughter, ensuring that he never left the shade. He could now see that he would not be

able to hide once he had approached the pool. No trees, no bushes, just grass; not even rocks or boulders. He could see them now. They were young. Most of them were very young. Their naked bodies glittering moist in the sunlight that entered through an opening in the roof of the cave. He could not help but stare. And where was the goddess now? Where was she? Punishment! He almost burst out laughing. Where was the punishment now? Pleased with himself he went forward. He wished t see as much as he could to tell his cowards of companions his story in details. A stone under his sandal became a traitor, and all of a sudden the laughter ceased. Fifty faces were turned towards him. And there she stood. He knew it. Although she was not dressed he knew that this one was the High Priestess. He wanted to apologize, but there was but one word she said, and that was 'Run!'



And run he did. Why had she let him go? She did not look like someone frightened by a single man. Why run? And then he understood. It was a chase, a hunt, and he was the prey. He was the stag they were hunting now. He had to run for his life. If only he could reach his companions. If only he could reach his pack! But it was too far away, and although he was a swift runner he felt the women close at his heels. Run, he

shouted at himself. Get help. They were fast, faster than he was. He never would have thought that a woman could outrun him, the great hunter. They were close now, too close. He decided to stop. He could not run any further. He would explain. He would tell them that it was an accident, that he had not intended to watch them. He turned round. 'Please ...,' he began, but the moment he looked into her face he knew she would not show mercy. He saw the javelins ...

Dancing the eternal dance of the universe to the music of the spheres we are slowly moving towards the centre of oblivion where we shall rest and worry no more. They bring the bones to me, and the skull.

Trying to Reunite

Whan the ye of Night hath y-fallen on alle londes,
The Goddesse rideth through th'swevens of everichon.
Hir fair brighte body at night us maketh beholde
Our dredes and lust from the derk we thoughte y-lorn.
Hir sooth worthy rede anon cometh into our hertes
But sely our hedes that wollen herken at all.
Y-slepen they have and we wenden they were y-storve,
Till the Goddesse erst let us meten of hem atte last,
That we, namo lewed, can seeken eek by nightertale
Where is the way out of the drought and the paine of soul.

O night, mother of mysteries and depths, Oldest of the most ancient ones, Mother of secrets, of sleep, and of dream; You stars who with the bright pale moon Succeed the heat of day; and you Triple-faced Hecate, knowing my deepest secrets And desires, my innermost soul. She awoke when the sunlight peeped though the branches of the sacred oak tree. Fallen asleep after the ritual, the tree had given her shelter throughout the night, and although night had covered her with her sable shadow, she had kept her warm at the same time, as if she had spread her wings to protect the body of the young woman seeking refuge in her shade. Night. The earliest, the oldest shape of the goddess. Out of night everything else had sprung to life. Everything.

The ritual had been dedicated to the night. The protective night. Night in the shadow of which Sleep walked, and Dream; Night in the tender arms of which no fear is known, only relieve; Night in the curing oblivion of which strength is renewed and power; and Night in the realm of which all inner quests come to an end somewhere in eternity.

The ritual had opened a door, and she had known that going through this door she would be reunited with her sisters, with herself. And then she had found the cauldron. 'It's yours now.' She still heard the voice whispering in her mind.

'It's yours, because this is you.'

She still wasn't sure what it meant, but having touched it for the first time she had felt the strange sensation of having finally found a long forgotten part of herself. It had been hidden behind the opaque veil of the waterfall ...

The door opened and revealed a forest in spring time, the trees all blossoming, and there was this odour in the air she loved most, the odour of soil after the rain, when the earth breathes. She could not move but stood and stared in amazement at the strange forest. For strange it was with trees normally not sharing the same soil, though here they did. Thirteen different species she counted. When she turned round she realized that this road was not only a road to lead her deeper into the forest but also into darkness. She could smell the trees, the soil, the little flowers in the undergrowth, but there was no light to make the sources of the smells visible. She had left the light to be drawn into the depths of darkness. She turned round trying to catch a glimpse of the place she had just left, but darkness had swallowed even the beginning of the road. She closed her eyes. Somehow it seemed to be easier to follow the darkness with her eyes closed. Open they would only search for the light. If you can't use a sense turn it off and use the remaining ones. They will lead you. Blind she walked along the invisible path and felt safe. Naturally, her feet followed the meandering path, and

naturally they knew every turn it made. Deeper and deeper she entered the forest, and although it was cold in the realm of darkness, she felt warm inside.

Where are you leading me, Goddess? Is it your darkness you want to see me? Is it death? The door was open, so I stepped in. Have I to die before I can return? But there was no answer. The young priestess followed the course the Goddess had set for her. And when her thoughts finally ceased to question her way she felt the silence covering the invisible forest. There were odours arousing images, even sound images in her mind, but there was no sound around her. No rustling leaves, no wind sighing in the trees, no birds singing, no bees humming. Silence. Don't the shadows talk? Are there only thoughts which I can't understand? The world of the living talks in her sleep, but the world of the dead remains silent. Bodiless and silent. Moving on she absorbed the silence. Moving in silence and darkness and beauty.

Through her closed eyelids permeated a single beam of light, and the distant sound of running water found its way through the silence. Slowly she opened her eyes, and into the darkness of the night-wood a light shone from a clearing which lay ahead. As she went on into the growing light she smilingly noticed that the trees along the path were yews and birches, and that the sound she had heard had been the faint echo of a waterfall. She did not move but took in this incredible beauty of the scene. From a mountain entirely covered with the living green of lichen, moss, small bushes and shrubs, the clear and pure water fell into three basins, the first and biggest of which was surrounded by willows, their twigs reaching out for the water. The young priestess leaned against one of the trees, closed her eyes and deeply breathed in the air of the undisturbed world. She embraced the tree and could not lose the impression that , when she did so, the twigs laden with catkins, embraced her too. Between the trees beds of many-coloured flowers were spread out like cushions, and the sun in the clear blue sky intensified the bright colours of the petals.

She undressed herself before she dived into the cold water to wash away the outer world she had come from. Is this where I belong to? It feels familiar. Where are the others? Or are they here already? Sun, Sky, Water, Darkness, Flower, Tree, Soil? Are you the ones I've been looking for? Am I the one I've been looking for? Mother, did you bring me here, so that I can purify myself? She walked through the cascade and found herself in a dry cavern. The sunlight, broken by a myriad of drops of water, painted images in rainbow colours on the walls. Like being inside a crystal. In the middle of the cavern she found the cauldron. Made of copper, it showed signs which

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resembled letters, but none of them was known to her. She felt the significance of the inscription, although the actual words did not matter much. She could feel the meaning, and she knew that the cauldron had been waiting for her.

'It's yours,' a voice said from beyond all worlds.

'It's yours, because this is you.'

'Me?' Someone in her mind seemed to smile.

'It is your way, and it is your future. And it shall stay with you until we meet again at the end of all journeys. It shall stay with you until we re-unite.'

The priestess touched the cauldron, and the door opened ...



She had found herself sitting in the shade of the oak-tree, in her hand the cauldron. It wasn't a dream, then, but a real journey.

I died, and I came back. I went into the dark silence of the beginning and moved towards creation. I am a true priestess now, and the Goddess accepted my life. And suddenly she understood. I am the cauldron, and I am the cavern. I am darkness, and I am light. Looking up into the branches she felt the warmth of the sun on her face, and she smiled. But when her eyes met the fleece, a sudden wave of anxiety struck her. She looked around driven by an uncertain fear that someone was approaching her. The grove lay calm and quiet, only touched by the sun. But something was wrong, felt wrong, and it came from the black shiny fleece hanging on the branch; for many years it had been there, and it belonged to this place. There shouldn't be anything wrong. There shouldn't.

She remembered the day when the stranger had arrived with the sacred black ram. The stranger who had fallen in love with her sister. The refugee who had come to the court with the story of his escape, led by the ram. He had not know where to turn to. He had escaped the fate of being a surrogate king, to die for the king who had forgotten the meaning of true kingship.

His sister had did on the journey. She felt sorry for him. She knew about loss. Her mother was dead.

On the following morning the ram was sacrificed, and a few weeks later, after having completed the marriage tasks, the refugee was married to the king's eldest daughter. On the wedding day the black fleece was brought to the sacred oak tree to hand there as a token.

Phrixus was dead, and the fleece was his legacy. Before he died he had spoken to the girl. 'This fleece shall remain the token of my love – to my wife, to your father, and to you. It shall remain here, in this country to which the ram led me.' Why did it make her shiver? What's wrong with you? Is it my own anxiety, or is it yours? Can you tell me? She climbed the tree, while the guardian of the grove watched her. The guardian – tall, strong, his face and limbs painted like a serpent, a serpent-warrior in the service of the Goddess. She looked at him and smiled. The Guardian with the Hundred Eyes, people called him; the Guardian who never sleeps. Perhaps people needed superstitions and myths. Of course, he slept. And he had two eyes like everybody else. But he was one of many. He smiled back. She touched the fleece, her hands gliding over the soft surface. 'What do you want to tell me, fleece of the black ram? Let me see what you see; let me hear what you hear.' Water. She was on the water. On a boat. Around her the sea, waves hitting the hull. The wind sighing in the sails, creaking planks above her, the shouting of commands. On board fifty men from the country of Phrixus. The fleece told her the truth. It showed her the leader, the captain, and it told her that they came to conquer. She knew what she had to do. She had to avoid a war, but there was always another way. They call me cunning, she thought, and I shall prove them right.

Medea climbed down the tree and went home to talk.

My appointed fate I must endure as best I can, Knowing the power of Necessity is irresistible.

She knew it would be difficult to convince the king. She was his daughter, and had inherited his temper. A loving father and a just and kind sovereign, he was known for his irascible explosions when he felt betrayed or unjustly treated. She had expected resistance, and she had been right. He wanted war, and he wanted to summon the council instantly. She had found him in his study, analysing the harvest of the early summer. A good harvest. There would be plenty of food for everybody over the cold period. He listened to her in silence, but when she had finished the was about to explode.

'How dare they? And pretending their deed being honourable! Betraying not only us but their own people. Now, we'll be prepared. These fifty heroes won't see their homes again.' He got up and made for the door. He did not even mention the plan Medea had put forward.

'Didn't you listen?' she asked. And since seemed to ignore her she shouted. 'Wait! In the name of the Goddess!' She knew it would make him angry, but she also knew that it would stop him. He turned round, seething with rage. 'You dare to stop me in the name of the Goddess?'

'I am your priestess!' she interrupted his outburst. 'In this very moment I am only your priestess, not your daughter. And your priestess wants you to listen.' Being of the same temper she had difficulties controlling herself but tried.

'Then listen to me, priestess,' the king went on. 'This decision has to be made by warriors, not by your kind. You informed me of the danger, and now it is my duty to defend this country as it is your duty to pray to the Goddess to support us. Prepare the war ritual, and get out of my way!'

It was too much. She couldn't control herself.

'You tell me what my duty is, king? Now, then let me tell you what yours is not! It is not your duty sending people into a war they cannot win. It is not your duty following your pride and making decisions against all common sense. Your duty, king, is to make people's lives worth living, not worth dying. If you let them march you're nothing by a butcher. Right, there are but fifty of them now, but what if you kill them? There will be thousands of them to revenge them! Thousands! Do you have thousands, king? Do you?'

'I have enough to fight them, priestess, enough to prove that they won't meet cowards who hide behind children. And if our destiny is death, we shall die in honour.' Again, he made for the door. He had nothing more to add.

'Die in honour?' The priestess laughed at him. 'Handing over our homes to them in honour? Laying waste the land in honour? Offering women and children to be violated in honour? Is that what you want? Slaves in honour? What kind of king are you? I'm trying to listen to a king, but all I can hear is pride. Here I am offering a solution which won't take a single life but mine if it comes to the worst, and you are talking about creating a massacre and call it honour!'

'You've lost your mind! ...'

'Stop it! Both of you!' They were both taken by surprise. Non of them had noticed Chalciope entering the study.

'The whole palace can your you screaming and shouting like fish-wives. What's going on that can make you lose your dignity? Father? Sister?'

'None of your business, daughter. This is between the priestess and the king.' Chalciope looked into their hardened faces and shook her head.

'If you had said it were between father and daughter I would have gone to leave you to it. But between priestess and king? You are king because my husband died. Am I not queen? Have I no say anymore in the dealings of the country? Has this country now become what you hated most?'

Her tranquillity helped to calm down their anger, and Medea explained. Chalciope listened carefully, and when her sister had finished she looked upon both with sad eyes.

'So they excuse this war expedition with my dead husband's deed. If I were younger I would gladly do what Medea offers. Father, she is right, though I don't like the plan. I don't want to lose you, sister, but I appreciate what you are willing to do for our home. Father, you know that she is right. You know it better than anybody else. You don't want her to do it. That's all.'

The old man sighed. 'She is going to sacrifice herself. I don't accept it.' Medea was calm now, and in a quiet voice she asked, 'But you accept sacrificing your people? I volunteer. Many of them won't.' He finally gave in.

'Do you really know what you are doing, my daughter?'

'Who ever really knows, father? But my duty as a priestess is clear. You would have done the same in my place.'

'And if your plan doesn't work?'

'Then you can go to war.'

Quid non mortalis pectora cogis auri sacra fames?

The town celebrated the god who ruled the sea. King Pelias had spent most of the day on his boat fishing, a pleasure he had seldom enough time to enjoy. But on his very day it belonged to the king's duties. The sea had been calm and gentle all day, and the fish had been biting well after yesterday's storm. Pelias had used a fishing rod as tradition demanded. Setting sails to bring home his catching, he thought how lucky he had been after seizing the throne from his half-brother. Pelias had always been the more ambitious one, but his should have been the unfortunate fate of the second son. Thus, when the throne had rightfully fallen into Aeson's hands, he had watched the other rule with pain. Waiting for his chance many years, he had jumped at it when his brother's weakness had become obvious. A king shouldn't trust anybody, not even his closest relatives, well, definitely not his closest relatives.

The gods had been kind to him, and his wealth had grown. True, there had been crop failures during the last two years, and people had started complaining; but had the oracle, after having received a great bribe not said that this was due to the spirit of the renegade Phrixus, who had escaped the sacrifice? Died in exile, he had not been buried properly, and now his lost soul haunted the fields. And the fleece of the ram, the golden fleece, had gone with him. Golden. Of course, it had been black, as any fleece of any ram sacrificed between end and beginning of the cycle, but *golden fleece* sounded like a treasure, and Pelias needed more than one vote to carry out his plan of a great expedition to the east. There were treasures and fertile soil and more power. He only needed an excuse. And what could be a better excuse than people's superstitions? Even the council believed his tale supported by the oracle. I'll get what I want, he thought. I wanted the throne. It is mine. They don't love me, but I don't care for their love. They show me respect. The fear me. That's enough.

That's plenty. Most of them have even forgotten that I was not the rightful heir. I am still alive and free. And I am king. I made sure of it. His right hand on the tiller, he steered the boat whose sails had caught the wind, to bring her safe into the harbour. Passing the pharos, he could see the fishermen preparing their boats for the celebrations tonight. Colourful garlands were already tied to the rails and around the masts; torches were stuck to the top masts, sterns, and prows. Some pulpits resembled gigantic flower-pots. Dolphin shaped gargoyles had been set up along the moorings. And when the sun set the harbour would turn into a celebration of light. Pelias was happy about the west wind. With its help he could bring the boat in under sails, proving that he was as good a sailor as a king. Without a breeze or with the wind blowing from the wrong direction, he would have to wait for the oarsmen to pull her in or take the oars himself. Luck. Yes, he had been lucky. When the oracle had warned him that he would be killed by a descendant of the destroyer king who had ruled this kingdom long ago, he had made sure that none of his descendants stayed alive. He had spared but his half-brother for their mother's sake. Pelias did not believe in the prophecies of oracles, knowing quite well that they were open to bribery, but he had secured his kingdom and he did not take a risk if he could avoid it. If there existed descendants of this line they would come forward one day. Aeson was his prisoner in the palace, well-guarded and deprived of his inheritance. Luckily, he had no children, so that Pelias had not to decide what to do with them. The only child born by his wife Polymele had been still-born, and the prophecy was nothing but an empty phrase.

A couple of weeks ago, however, the oracle had spoken again. Only one sentence the priestess had uttered.

'Beware a one-sandaled man.'

Either a beggar or a warrior, he thought

The wind was fortunate, still blowing from the west, and King Pelias brought the boat in under sails. He left the royal jetty and went over to the altar to watch the priests preparing the sacrifice. A beggar I could cope with ...

He sat down on a huge black-painted anchor the port had set up there as a monument to symbolize their power as a seafaring nation. He watched people passing by, boats coming in and the fishermen bringing their catching to the priests. Behind him he heard the laughter of some young men, but he did not turn round to see who they were. Too much he enjoyed sitting on the anchor observing the hustle and bustle along the pier. 'You still look like a dung hill, old boy,' he heard a voice saying. 'Stupid of you to carry that hag. She was taking you for a ride, man!' He laughed at his own joke, and the others joined in.

'She was old,' another voice replied. 'And I'm sure she was a goddess.'

'Goddess of the dung hills? Oh, come on! Is it bullshit like this they teach you up in the mountains? Goddesses waiting for friendly travellers to carry them across the rivers? It must have been very lonely up there.'

Again laughter. 'Our singer here can make a song out of it. The Song of Iason who carries the goddess of the hags on his back while trudging through a muddy river like a three-legged mule.'

'She was heavy. She didn't look it, but she was. And she smelled.'

The one they called Iason joined in their laughter.

'Yes, and now you smell too. Get your clothes changed, goat-herd, and take a bath. How will you get close to a lady smelling like that? And do you think it's fashionable running about with only one sandal?'

The king turned round. He saw the one the others had called Iason showing his bare left foot to his friends.

'I like it. You should try it, Phanus. I'm sure the ladies will go for it tonight.' 'A smelly foot?'

Then they realized being watched. There was an old man sitting on the anchor. Grey hair, wrinkles, a nose like a beak. His entire appearance spoke of power.

'What are you staring at us, sir?' the one-sandaled youth asked. 'Do you find my dress unfit for the day's celebration?'

'He's the victim of his helpfulness,' the one called Phanus explained.

'It's all right now, Phanus. The whole port should know it by now.' And to the old man he said, 'Sorry, sir, if you found our behaviour disturbing, but we had a hard journey, and we're just enjoying ourselves.'

'By losing your sandal?'

'It was not my intention to lose it. It just happened.'

'I do not want sound inquisitive, young man, but you who are you, and what is your father's name?'

'The one who brought me up and educated me called me Iason, but by birth I am Diomedes, son of Aeson.'

'Then what would you do, Diomedes, son of Aeson, if an oracle announced that one of your fellow-citizens were destined to kill you?'

'Depends, sir. If I knew who it was, and if he were young enough I'd send him on a journey and make him marry into another kingdom. If not, then I suppose harder measures would need to be thought of. But whom have I the honour of addressing?' 'I am King Pelias, your uncle.'

'I thought you were. So you are the one who killed my father and made me live amongst the goats? It would be easy, uncle, to kill you right here. You'd make a nice sacrifice. No, don't fear, I'm not going to do it. Your punishment shall be knowing that I am alive. Yes, I survived your massacre. Still-born, they told you. Did you really think that nobody knew what you were up to right from the day my father took the throne? Know then, King Pelias, that I, Diomedes son of Aeson, claim the throne usurped by you.'

He doesn't know that Aeson lives. Good. Let him think he is dead.

Since Diomedes was not alone but surrounded by his princely friends, who had all heard his claim, Pelias could not deny his birthright. And what was more, this youth was the one he had been looking for. No match at all for his, Pelias', intelligence but clever enough to be of use. Beware of a one-sandaled man? Oh no, the oracle had been wrong. Meet him happily, make him your tool. That was the true message. To Diomedes he said, 'Yours shall be the throne. But before I hand it over to you, I require of you to free our country from a curse.'

'What curse, uncle? Tell me more about it, and I'll tell you if I can accept your conditions.'

Pelias led Diomedes and his friends to the palace where he offered the youth a bath and new clothes. Then he told them the story of Phrixus' ghost. 'When he died in exile,' he ended his tale, 'he was denied a proper burial, and our land will never prosper unless his bones are brought home in a ship together with the golden ram's fleece.' The golden ram's fleece. He was proud of his story, and he saw that Diomedes believed his words. 'The fleece hands now from a tree in a sacred grove, and is guarded night and day by an unsleeping dragon. Accomplish this pious feat, and I will gladly resign. I am too old now for this burden. Will you take on this mission?'

'I will, uncle. I'll bring back Phrixus' bones, and I'll bring the golden ram's fleece.'

'Then go and celebrate the day. And tomorrow we'll send messengers to those you'll have chosen for your crew.'

After the celebration he was alone with his uncle, who then revealed the true motive of the expedition.

'You bribed the oracle?'

'Of course I did, nephew. Everyone does. That's how we rule, and don't tell me you believe in this superstitious humbug! Two years without rain caused the crop failure as every simpleton should know. How can the soil be fertile if the rain holds off?' 'But the golden ram's fleece, uncle? This is no invention of yours. Everybody knows about it.' Diomedes stared at the king.

'Oh, do they now? I wonder who educated you, boy. Have they forgotten to teach you our annual rites? What colour is the ram sacrificed in a royal rain-making rite? And what colour is the mask the surrogate king wears?'

'Black, of course.'

'Black, exactly. And what is the ritual for in which the king is sacrificed?' 'Stop patronizing me, uncle. I'm not a child anymore, and I could still kill you to revenge my father, and the whole country would be pleased with me. Be careful, and don't treat me like an idiot. You spread the rumour of the fleece being golden to prepare your expedition. Is that what you want to tell me?'

The old man burst out into a short hoarse laughter.

'The rumour spread itself, boy. I had not to go anywhere. They were quicker than I could ever have been. It was quite a story, when Phrixus escaped with the ram. It did not need my influence to turn it into gold. And now it's golden in most people's minds. It suits me. It suits me indeed. To me, Aeson's son, to me the golden fleece has a much deeper meaning. Aeëtes' kingdom is golden. There are treasures, boy, real treasures. Whoever controls Aea controls the amber. There is true wealth in and beyond the Inner Sea. And what is more, controlling Aea the Shining One, Aea the Perfect Shape, means controlling the passage to the east. Aeëtes makes sure that no strangers come too close to his shores, and he knows why. I am too old to lead an expedition, and the council won't support a war against Aeëtes at this time. We don't know how strong he really is, and we don't know his allies. You have to be your own spy, and you can't rely on other people's eyes and ears. And keep in mind that old Aeëtes is a quick-tempered man. A cause for war might easily be found.'

Diomedes grinned. 'You are a cunning politician, uncle. I think I was right not to take your life. You are the right one to advise a king. I assure you I'll do my best. But I am a warrior. Whatever a warrior can do will be done. And then, the gods made me cunning too. But there is the crew to consider. Those I have in mind are brave warriors and great princes in their own realms. What am I going to tell them?' 'Let the true motive be a secret amongst us. If you tell them the truth it will be before the council in no time, and you will have lost your kingdom before you even had it.' When they finally set sails the other forty-nine members of the crew knew nothing about a secret arrangement between the king and his successor.

Let him bring back what I want, thought King Pelias. Let him do the work. Did I not say that I'll get what I want? Be it so.

How are you to reach The end of these troubles and rest in a safe port?

After a twelve hour journey they sailed into the strait where Phrixus' sister had met with her fate, and they saw the watchtowers of the City of Troy, the town itself being situated about a league further inland.

A strong wind blew from the west, and Nauplius the Navigator who held the tiller in his strong hands had difficulties manoeuvring the vessel. Shortly before reaching Abydos, where they had planned to anchor for the night and to purchase food, a sudden gale smashed them almost against a rock. It was not possible, not even for the well-experienced Nauplius, to steer the ship into the sheltered harbour.

The only one who bore the power of nature with calmness was Ophruoeis the Singer. In spite of the howling of the wind and the turmoil the waves made splashing heavily against the hull, he sat in the cockpit tied up against the stern rail playing the lyre and chanting soft tunes. Diomedes, seeing that all the rest of the crew were busy running to and fro on deck, shouted at him angrily.

'This is not the time for music, can't you see that? Stop it, and do something useful! We need every hand on board to get ourselves out of this mess.!' His voice sounded hollow against the wind.

'What for?' the Singer replied. 'What do you want me for? Running about aimlessly like the rest? The sails are down, the fenders are out, Lynceus is on the look-out in the pulpit, and Nauplius holds the tiller while the rest of the crew are busy being in each other's way. If you have a sensible command, captain, I shall gladly carry it out. If not do your duty elsewhere.'

Diomedes stared at him with anger in his eyes. If I didn't need him and his knowledge and power I'd throw him over board right now. Rage and sarcasm dominated his voice when he shouted again, 'Listen to my command, then, Lord of the Lyre! Calm down the wind with your music, and get us through this damned strait!. Is this sensible enough?' He turned round, so that he could not hear Nauplius giggle nor see the Singer smile. Ophruoeis' fingers glided over the strings of his lyre, and his voice reached out for the wind. And the wind seemed to listen, since only a few minutes later it calmed down, and what was left of it was a soft but constant breeze blowing from the west. They had reached the exit of the strait, and the Propontis lay calm and shining in the evening sun. The singer put away his instrument, pleased with himself, and looked into the sky where the evening clouds were gathering.

'Why do you stop playing now?' Diomedes asked. 'Now that we have leisure to listen you stop.'

'I did not play for you. Remember? You asked me to calm down the wind; thus I played for the wind. It's calm now. I've done my duty.'

Nauplius roared with laughter and slapped Diomedes on the back.

'Never argue with this one, young man. He's more than a match for you.'

They sailed on eastward for three days and nights, and the sails caught the wind and brought them closer to their destination.

Knowing that he would need Ophruoeis' knowledge, Diomedes apologized for his bad temper, and asked him where it would be best to anchor without being seen. 'Hold starboard for a while until you see the shore clearly where this range of mountains rises. In this you don't risk being seen by the people of Phasis, the greatest port along this coast. Sail close inshore then, and you'll find a sheltered bay, where we can anchor.'

They followed his advice, and when they had reached their shelter they held a council of war.

'There is not much to be discussed,' Diomedes said. 'My proposal is going to Aea accompanied by only two of you. I want to remind Aeëtes of the old alliance between our kingdoms, and confront him with the saying of the oracle. The oracle is sacred, and he has to obey its orders. Only if he denies to hand over the fleece and Phrixus' bones I will threaten him with force.'

'What do you mean by force?' Phanus asked. 'Fifty of us can do a lot, but it needs more than that to run an attack against the palace. Aeëtes is no idiot. They say he sees straight into people's hearts. And his priestess daughter is a cunning little bitch. So be careful with whatever you're going to say to the king, or you'll be dead before you even get a chance to strike.'

Diomedes nodded. 'I will be careful, Phanus. And to be entirely on the safe side I'll ask you to accompany me. Do you know the palace?'

The other shook his head. 'What I know about this region and its ruler is what people have told me. There is only one amongst us who knows. Though he is no warrior he mastered plenty of dangers on his travels. Let Ophruoeis go with you.'

'I will gladly listen to his advice, but I had not in mind to take him with me. As you said correctly, Phanus, he is not warrior, he's a singer.'

'But you don't need a warrior, friend, you need a man of knowledge and a man under the protection of the Muses. If you go to Aeëtes in the company of warriors he won't listen to you. And if you don't feel safe enough with Ophruoeis and me, then why don't you ask Alcaeus? He's the strongest man the world has ever seen.'

'And my reputation is well known at Aeëtes' court,' Alcaeus replied. 'Though they know me by another name. No, my company would not be wisely chosen. Let me stay behind to guard this beauty.' His hand stroked the rail of the ship. 'We know that Aeëtes does not like strangers along his shores. If they find us here we'll have to fight his entire fleet. But let Echion go with you. He's the best runner on board and can well serve as a messenger if needed. And then he is an eloquent speaker. The wrestlers and fighters amongst us will be prepared to help when help is needed. Let the intellect negotiate and the muscles fight. Otherwise we'll have lost before we have begun.'

The question was settled, and the four of them set off for Aea. Crossing the river they went upstream to Aea which lay on the right arm of the head water. To reach the outer rim of the city, they had to cross the cemetery where male corpses wrapped in untanned ox-hides were exposed on the tops of willow-trees for birds to eat. All apart from Ophruoeis turned away from this sight in abhorrence.

'This is repellent!' exclaimed Diomedes. 'Are these corpses of criminals stuck on trees to put off others to follow their bad examples? Are these the corpses of traitors who are not allowed a proper burial? And so many of them! What strange place is this?'

'No wonder Phrixus' ghost haunts the fields. If he was a criminal in their eyes ...' Phanus shuddered with disgust.

'Don't judge what you don't understand,' said the soft voice of Ophruoeis. 'Oh, come on, you're not going to tell me this is their law? What law can it possibly be which does not allow the soul to enter the underworld to be judged and sentenced properly to find its destination in its future existence? These shadows will walk the

earth forever. They are doomed to haunt the living.'

'Again I say, Diomedes, don't judge what you don't understand. These corpses are given to the Sun, not to the Earth. All male corpses are. And all female corpses are given to the Earth. The former fertilizes, the latter gives birth. These rites are older than ours, and I can assure you that this kingdom is not haunted by these spirits, since these spirits are taken up by the Sun.'

Diomedes stared at the Singer with distrust. 'Tell me what you will, Singer, it's repellent, and it can't be divine law. Let's get Phrixus' bones, so that his poor soul may find justice. Traitor or not, no man deserves .. this!' He almost ran to get away from the cemetery followed quickly by Phanus and Echion, while Ophruoeis walked slowly, humming a soft tune to accompany the souls lifted up by the Sun. They walked on and reached the foot of the mountain on which, radiant and beautiful, lay the palace of Aea overlooking the town like a guardian. Higher and higher they climbed until they reached the white marble walls shining bright in the sunlight. On their way up they saw agricultural terraces, each of them presenting a different type of vegetable or fruit. There were olive trees, shaped by wind and soil, and in some of their trunks they could see human faces staring at them. On another one grew lemon, orange and lime trees, and when they climbed higher they passed terraces of full of aromatic herbs. The odour of sage, basil, oregano, thyme and rosemary was in the air. There were even terraces used as pastureland, where sheep and goats were kept, and where donkeys and mules were grazing.

'Why has no one stopped us on our way?' Diomedes asked the Singer. 'Is it that easy to enter the palace?'

Ophruoeis smiled. 'It's easy to get to the palace but not to get into it.' He pointed uphill to a gate. 'There ends your journey if the king is not willing to see you. And not

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even fifty of us would be able to enter by force. These people are no fools, Diomedes. They know who to protect and defend themselves. Don't underestimate King Aeëtes.' Diomedes was not satisfied. 'Surely there must be another entrance to the palace. There never is but one. You need a sort of back door.'

'I didn't say that there wasn't another entrance. I don't know it. There are rumours, of course. Phanus must have heard of them, I'm sure.'

Phanus grinned. 'I thought everybody knew. You mean the tunnels, don't you?' 'Yes, the tunnels. You see,' he continued looking at Diomedes. 'there is a story about a whole system of tunnels in the mountain. According to the rumours the mountain must be hollow by now.'

The Singer and Phanus laughed, but Diomedes' expression was serious. 'There is no smoke without fire, dear friends. And if there is but one subterranean passage of which we don't know ...'

'Why are you so interested in tunnels?' Echion wanted to know. 'You wouldn't find them. Even if the entire mountain was a net of tunnels they would be well hidden. And they wouldn't tell you either. But if there is anything we should know before entering the palace tell us now, Diomedes. If you are holding anything back ... within these walls they are very careful so I've been told; they are not fond of strangers, particularly not if these strangers are after the fleece.'

'They have their reasons for their mistrust too,' added Ophruoeis.

But Diomedes just looked at them. 'I am just careful, that's all.' He would need an ally in the palace, someone who knew the place, especially if Aeëtes was not willing to part with the fleece and Phrixus' bones. They could enter the palace, but there was no guarantee that they would be able to leave it again. No, the king was no fool. They approached the gate.

Have you not learned that anger's a disease Which words can heal?

'Know then, young man,' said the King, when Diomedes was brought before him, 'know that it was only Ophruoeis' name which opened the gate for you. Strangers are not very welcome here these days, and had the Singer not spoken for you no power on earth could have made me even talk to you. Who you are I know, but what brings you here, Diomedes Aeson's son?'

Diomedes bowed politely and answered, 'My lord King, I've come to your country following the advice of the Great Oracle. Our fields lay barren, and twice the crop failed for no reason, so that King Pelias, my uncle, sent to the oracle to seek for guidance. And thus spoke she who is the great god's mouth, "A generation ago the surrogate king escaped with the golden ram. When he died in foreign parts he was not given a proper burial according to the rites we honour and which were made known to us by the great god himself; and therefore, Phrixus' restless spirit haunts the fields and makes the crop fail. Bring home Phrixus' bones and the golden ram's fleece, and the curse will be lifted from the land." Thus she spoke, and I set off to plead my cause and ask your majesty to hand over to me the fleece and the remains of Phrixus.' The Kings' voice was hard and cold when he spoke. 'I should have slain you the moment I saw you, for all I hear are lies and excuses. The oracle told you? Is it not strange that whatever pain and trouble you bring to other people is due to one of your oracles? And whatever you want to get hold of, even to steal – there's one of these oracles at the bottom of it.'

He would have preceded had not a young woman entered the study in which the audience was held. There could not be another woman in the world with more beauty and more grace. The moment Diomedes set eyes on her he was lost. This must be the king's daughter, the priestess. Who else would have dared to enter the king's private study? And not even she should be allowed to do so. Were they not talking business? And had a woman not to keep distance when men were talking business? She even looked straight into his eyes. If she were mine I'd teach her proper behaviour in the presence of men! But how beautiful she was! Her hair black as a raven's plumage with this bluish shine that made her look almost unreal. Her skin to soft and but lightly tanned, and her eyes green like emeralds. Are you real? He wanted to ask, or are you but an image of my mind? Then she spoke.

'Father, you did not tell me that we have guests. I had to meet Ophruoeis to find out.' Her voice was like the soft murmuring of a stream.

'I haven't told you, daughter, because I was taken by surprise.' And he told her what Diomedes had asked for.

'The fleece?' she exclaimed staring at the young man. 'How dare you? The fleece is sacred. What right could you possibly have to ask for the fleece?'

'What right, my lady? I'll tell you what right I have. It is the fleece of a sacred ram. Together with the surrogate king it was to be sacrificed as the rites demand.' 'The rites, my ignorant friend, have been changed arbitrarily. The rites demanded, and they still demand, that the king is to be sacrificed, not anybody else. And you see, neither Phrixus nor the ram accepted this king-given law. They were not willing to die for no reason. The ram was sacrificed here by Phrixus to honour his god and most willingly did he go up the steps to the altar, I can assure you. We all witnessed it.' 'This is but your side of the story. Phrixus took what he should never have taken. He stole a sacred animal.'

'If you don't want to understand I can't help you. Phrixus is dead; he cannot speak for himself anymore. But be aware, Diomedes, that he was loved in this country, and when he died he was given to the Sun as it is the custom; a custom which was very well known to him. If he had asked for a burial we would have given it to him. We are not disrespectful. But if his family in his home country has any claims to make you should not talk to me nor to the king but to his widow, my sister. She has to agree. If she does so you'll have the right to take his remains home with you. If she does not his family will be allowed to connect with his bones whenever they wish.' Diomedes glared at her in disbelief. 'His widow? Why should I talk to his widow? She is a woman. I am certainly not going to discuss this matter with a woman. Is it not the king who has to decide?'

'Be careful what you say, young man!' the king reprimanded him angrily. 'You are a guest at our court and you enjoy our hospitality. But if you are not willing to respect our customs and laws I'll take this as an offence. My daughter is the Queen. She chose a good man, and she gave a good man to the Sun. Talk to her, or leave the court at once if you do not feel well in the company of intelligent women!' Once again Diomedes wanted to speak, but a small gesture made by the beautiful priestess stopped him. What power these women have! Women shouldn't have any power at all. Women shouldn't be intelligent. Women should please men. That's what they are there for. But how beautiful she is ...

And whose hand on the helm controls Necessity? The three Fates; and the Furies, who forget nothing. He loves me. I saw his eyes. And more. I say his soul. But how strange his love is. It means possession. And possession can't be love, or can it? My beauty he admires, my appearance attracts him, not who I really am. But I have chosen. And now I can't take back what I have offered. And yet I know my father is a thousand times a better man than this young handsome stranger. There's something false in him. I can't see through the mist which covers it, but I know he's lying. I feel the lies in every look of these brown eyes. What cause, what reason makes me even fear him? Thrust down the fears which burn your virgin heart – you have the strength. Such strength is what you need. Without this strength your home will be destroyed. One way my heart, another reason calls; no easier course I see, and thus the worse I follow. A princess for a stranger; sad thoughts of wedlock with and alien world which keeps it women as they keep their slaves. My heart, for sure, is wounded, but my retreat would then betray my father's throne and make this stranger dominate my house, a stranger for whom women are but lovely prey, and he would turn my country into his. Whatever I may choose I'll have to pay the price, and yet I've chosen. His treachery I have to fear, another part that's hidden in the mist of his dishonoured mind. And thus, I'll make the gods, his gods, witnesses of our pact. Act now! Why hesitate? You've promised. Diomedes shall owe himself always to you. And I shall sail away, and leave forever sister and father, friends and home. And then, before her eyes duty and honour stood clear, and fear turned away.

He declared his love again and again, and it was real. He loved her in the only way he could. He wanted to marry her, take her home to this country, where he would be king and she his queen. She said she would follow him, although no woman ever followed a man.

'Be careful, Diomedes, don't let the king know. By rights, you should stay here with me, and be king where I shall be queen.'

'But you will follow me, won't you, Medea? Medea, my love, I can't live without you, but I am on a mission for my kingdom, and this kingdom is waiting for me. It's mine. By rights. I shall be king.'

She took his hand. 'I'll come with you, Diomedes, I will, but all I ask is that you don't talk to anyone about it. Perform the marriage rites, and you'll have me and the fleece; my sister is willing to part with her late husband's bones. He lives in her heart, she says, she does not need this bones. But only he, who can accomplish the marriage

tasks shall marry me; so says the law. It's possible to steal the fleece or the bones of Phrixus, but not both.'

The rites had shocked him.

'Not so long ago,' the King said solemnly, 'they were the same or similar in your own country, so don't behave like a child. If you are true and honest about marrying my daughter, who will succeed the throne you have to prove yourself worthy of her and the kingdom you will serve. A kingdom is a burden, not a toy, and only a brave and honest man can rule it at the side of a brave and honest queen. You have to convince your lady and your people that you are the right one. And these are the tasks you have to complete: on the first day bring under the yoke the two fire-breathing bulls, so that you, on the second day, can plough the sacred field with them and sow the seeds, so that there will be a harvest, when you reign. On the third day, then, you have to fight the twelve bull-dancers, strong warriors whose only thoughts are to fight you. You either sacrifice the bulls, or the bulls sacrifice you. If you complete the marriage rites I shall welcome you at my court as my son.'

'These tasks are impossible, Medea! No man can survive them, and you very well know it. This is a death sentence. He wants me dead!'

What a stupid little coward, she thought, but then she replied, 'my love, these are ancient rites; every king had to perform them; Phrixus did, my father, and all the other kings before them.'

'I can't believe it. It can't be done.'

'Of course it can be done. They all did it. How do you think my father became king? A king has to prove he is able to be a king. No queen would accept any other man.' 'This is not a kingdom, it's ...'

She interrupted him. 'It's a queendom, love. It has been ever since. Didn't you know it? And so was your kingdom long ago, before you changed the rules. You do not know much, my love. You have to choose, Diomedes. But if you choose not to fight you'll go away empty-handed.'

Empty-handed. Yes. She was his only ally here. She was the only one to show him a way out of the palace. He needed her to get the fleece. And then, he loved her; loved her more than he had ever loved a woman. And this woman wasn't a real woman at all. A witch, a priestess, a woman who had been taught to think. How could he have fallen for her? And yet he had. And she loved him. He knew it. She wanted him to perform the rites, and she wanted him to win, to become her king.

'Medea, I love you with all my heart, and I have some strength, but this needs more than I have. Fire-breathing bulls and bull-warriors. I am but one man.' She smiled, but he did not realize that it was a pitiful smile. 'It needs not more than I have,' she said.

Down on his knees he grasped her hand and in low tones besought her aid and promised to be true to her forever. 'Help me, my love, and by the pure rites of my gods I swear that I will love you and honour you forever. You shall be my queen, my only queen and my only lover.'

'I heard your promise, and so have the gods.' And out of a small bag she took dry herbs and handed them to Diomedes. 'Take these herbs and prepare your bath with them. Great magic they contain, since they are protected by the triple-faced goddess whose priestess I am. I gathered them calling her name and asking her permission. Bathe in these herbs, and fear no harm. And then send the messenger to your ship, for all your friends shall be invited to share your triumph and be guests at our wedding.' He hugged her and covered her face with his kisses. 'A true priestess you are, my love. And for that I love you too. But tell me, how can we flee after the wedding? We have to. The fleece has to be brought to my country.'

'I'll see to it. Trust me, my love. Send Echion, and then have your bath. Tomorrow you have to yoke the bulls, and although you'll be protected you'll need all your strength and a clear mind. You may be used to goats, but a bull, even if he doesn't breathe fire, is stronger than you are.'

And thus they parted for the night.

Fire-breathing bulls. He did believe it. Good. He had to believe it. And so had his friends. But then, if they could believe in golden rams they would believe in anything. The true magic was to make them believe what they saw. The herbs would see to it. The herbs in the bath, and the herbs in the wine. Of course, she wasn't sure how much Ophruoeis knew, but did singers not believe in magic? And was it not said of him that he believed in his ability to calm down storms and make mountains weep? Some herbs and mushrooms did that to you. They played with your imagination. They showed you another world, a world of magic and distorted images of the mind. She knew. She used this magic. There were herbs for everything. To kill and to heal, to show you every possible reality. They could take you on journeys far beyond your imagination, and they could give you power. A priestess of the triple-faced goddess was trained in herb lore, and she knew when the herbs were most potent.

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It was true, not every man had survived the rites, and Diomedes could still fail, but he believed in her magic; and did not believe make you strong? He would see the fire, but he wouldn't feel it; and if he didn't feel it he would believe. All depended on his ability to believe. He had been down on his knees. That was to show that he believed, wasn't it? And he had sworn by his gods.

Dawn saw people arriving to watch the rites. Diomedes' friends had come ashore to watch his victory or failure. Willingly they had accepted the spiced wine and had been told what to expect. Their minds would work accordingly. Medea was sure. They wanted to believe, so they would. And this was what they saw: be bulls came forth, their nostrils snorting fire which burned down the grass; and as in a kiln the slaking lime hisses, so hissed the flames which roared within their chests and throats. Diomedes first stood and felt petrified by these gigantic beasts, but looking at Medea whose eyes he felt upon him, went forward to meet them. And when they saw him coming they lowered their muzzles and pointed horns ready to attack the leather-clad dwarf. Their hooves stamped on the ground their roaring sounds filled the field. Diomedes' friends were shaken with terror. But he went on and did not feel the flames nor could they harm him. And finally his hands reached out to stroke their hanging dewlaps and then he fitted the yoke on their necks, thus leading them to their sheds. The king rose.

'The first task is completed.'

The spectators jumped off their seats and applauded frantically. He had given a good performance, and they were pleased.

Diomedes spent the rest of the day in solitude. He was not allowed to talk to his bride nor was he allowed to see his friends. For three days he was a non-entity. Only on the field he was visible to others. The man-servant who delivered his food never spoke a word with him, and when he met someone on his lonely walks they turned away from him. He belonged to the goddesses and gods, and only his shadow walked among the mortals.

On the following day he led the bulls into the arena and forced them to draw the heavy plough across the sacred field, and cut deep furrows into the soil. He ploughed until the entire field was ready to receive the seed. When he had sown the seeds, he bowed deep before the king who rose.

'The second task is completed.'

The morning of the third task had broken, and the spectators had already gathered for the fight with the bull-dancers. Some of the old people remembered King Aeëtes who had been fast and gracious, when he had taken part in the fight. He could have been one of them, they thought, he could have been a bull-dancer himself. In they came. Twelve of them. Strong men with black bull masks and sharp spears, roaring and shouting and stamping with their feet as the bulls had done with their hooves. And when Diomedes' friends saw them with their spears poised to hurl at their friend's head, fear was on their faces. Medea, however, smiled. It was a dance, although to them it seemed a real fight, even for Diomedes. The herbs had sent them into a reality in which they believed that they were determined to kill him. And thus he reacted the way he did. Let him believe it; let them believe it. Thus, when Diomedes bowed before the king, he was sure that he had killed twelve men. The king rose. 'The third task is completed. The wedding will take place in three days time.' Soon the young man was surrounded by his friends who embraced him and kissed him. He looked out for Medea but saw her not. Only when his friends had left again to spend the time until the wedding on board, he found her in the palace garden. 'Why did you go away?' he asked between his kisses. 'You should have been there with me. Only because of you I was successful.'

'You were amongst you friends. They celebrated you. I did not want to disturb this moment of triumph. They were proud of you. And then, I am a priestess. I have to keep my dignity.'

'You are my one and only love, and there are still three days between now and the wedding. Am I allowed to see you now, or have I to pass these days in solitude too?' Medea laughed. 'You can see me if you want. But you won't have much time, I am afraid. The preparations for the wedding will occupy most of your time.' 'But we have to talk. We need a plan, and we need the fleece.'

'I have a plan, and we'll get the fleece. Now listen. My father does not trust your friends, and he still doesn't trust you. The morning after the wedding your friends will have to leave, and they will take Phrixus' bones with them. Tell them to leave the harbour instantly to sail to the port of Phasis and anchor there. The reason for going to the port is to provide themselves with food for the journey home. We have to wait till nightfall, and so have they. At night they shall sail up the coast until they come to a small bay, where they will find a wooden hut on the beach. There we will wait for

them to arrive. No one knows about this little shelter, not even my sister, so that no one will follow us down to the beach.'

'And the fleece?'

'Will be with us.'

'But will they not find out that it is missing, and will they not know who took it?' 'They won't. they won't find out anything until the next morning, when my sister will go to the grove. And by then we'll be miles away, and my father's fleet won't be able to follow us anymore.'

'I love you, my queen. I would have been lost without you.'

Medea only smiled. With the wedding she would bind him to the court. He would not conquer his own domain, but he would not be king either. She would see to it. He would never become king here. Father, sister, people of my country – I promise. I, your queen, promise. My sister and my father shall reign for me, and then my daughter, one day. There has to be a daughter.

Where, where, where Will my endless journeys bring me?

After the wedding, before she went to see Diomedes, she bid fare-well to her father and sister. 'Now it's too late to turn round,' the kind said sadly. 'The deed is done.' 'Yes,' she replied. 'It is done. He bound himself to an oath. He swore to his gods; and he won't conquer what he believes is his already.'

'You took the roughest possible course, dear child, and it won't be forgotten. This is all yours. You are the queen here. I only wish I could help you carry the burden.' She felt tears in her eyes, and she saw her father's and sister's tears. 'But you do, both of you. Rule this country in peace, make the people happy. Then I know it was worth doing it. We avoided a war. We avoided thousands of victims. I kept my promise. Our people won't suffer. Make them happy. I can't do it, when I'm far away. Knowing that you'll do whatever is in your powers will lighten my burden.'

Her father embraced her gently. 'You shall live in our hearts, and one day your story shall be sung at this court.'

'Sing stories of a reign of peace and good harvests, and I'll hear them wherever I'm bound to go.'

Her sister hugged her. 'That we'll do, dear sister.'

'Have you changed the fleece, Chalci?' Medea asked.

'I have, and the genuine one is in your room. Do you think they'll find out that they were betrayed?'

'They won't. Any fleece would do for them. They do not want the fleece. They want power. I'll give them the illusion of power.'

Her sister smiled. 'Yes, any fleece will do for them, but not for me. Phrixus' soul connects with the fleece, and through the fleece connects with me. I can feel his love when I touch it. I would never give it away. They may have his bones. They don't mean anything to me. But they can never have his love.'

Quietly, they said fare-well, and they did not know whether they would meet again in this world.

They grove was quiet and peaceful, and Diomedes felt a strange power taking hold of him.

'You are in the presence of the goddess,' Medea explained. 'This place is under her protection.'

'Why are you carrying this bag, love?' he then asked. 'It seems to be a heavy load.' 'I told you they won't find out about the fleece until tomorrow.' She opened the bag and a black fleece became visible. 'It looks exactly like the original. Only my sister can tell the difference. Everyone else will take it for the true one, and Chalci never comes here before late in the morning. There is but one danger here – the serpentguardian, and he will sleep tonight for the first time in his life.'

'You are truly cunning, Medea. I would not like to have you for an enemy.'

You would not? But you have, my dear husband. To Diomedes she said, 'Over there is the oak-tree. You have to wait here. You can't follow. The guardian would kill you instantly. You are a man. No man is allowed to set foot here. And even I cannot take away the fleece without being killed by the serpent. So I prepared a potion to send the old beast to sleep. Wait till it works; I'll tell you when to follow.'

Diomedes obeyed but thought that his wife now had to learn to obey *him*. I'll teach you, he thought. I love you, but if you can't pay me respect according to the law you have to learn it.

Medea approached the serpent-guardian who smiled at her. 'Are you bringing back what I've been missing?'

'Here it is, old friend. And all is well. He never questions anything, the fool.'

The warrior smiled again. 'Why should he? And how could he possibly tell one fleece from another? He ahs no power whatsoever. He cannot even feel the power of the fleece. I'm glad you brought it back. We were all feeling lonely on watch.' 'I know what you mean, brother. You don't need to be lonely anymore.' 'What did you tell him who I was? A beastly serpent?' Medea laughed. 'A beast that never sleeps.' 'Well, you're right there. Not on duty, anyway. Do they really think that there is only

one of us?'

'They do, and why should we deny it? We have to keep the beliefs and myths awake. But now pretend to sleep, and make sure he only sees your garment. He doesn't know you're a man. Don't forget that you're a monster.'

The guardian laughed. 'So be it. I shall go and neglect my duty. Good luck to you, priestess and queen. We might see each other again before it all ends.' She called Diomedes who, with his own hands, took away the fake fleece and replaced it with the authentic one. Mine at last. All mine. The fleece, Phrixus, this wife, and this kingdom. A kingdom Pelias had been waiting for so long, and I did not even need a war to gain it. Mine. And proud he walked with Medea to the beach and to the hut, where they were picked up to sail home.

What land is this? What race lives here?

When they arrived at the port of Iolcus showing the fleece, though black still golden in the people's memories and minds, and the shrine which held Phrixus' bones, farmers and citizens alike brought gifts to the gods, burned incense and sacrificed a ram as it was the custom. Medea noticed that the women were not truly included in the port's life. They were there, and they had their duties connected to the household, but they seemed to be only a sort of appendix to the men. When she finally spoke to them she realized that these women were indeed not capable of ruling a kingdom. Kept uneducated, they did not know anything about politics and economy, so that all she heard them talking about were meals and servants, who was with child again and the latest gossip from the court. Although not taught to listen to gossip, Medea became interested, since this was such an alien place and she didn't know anything about the country Diomedes was to rule. Had it not been Ophruoeis who had told her that the best source of information were old women? They had daughters, nieces, friends of friends working at the court who were most eager to share what they heard every day. Strolling along the pier, where market stalls offered a great variety of goods, she found herself listening to a group of elderly women admiring fine fabrics from foreign parts.

'A fine man that old King Aeson has been,' an old woman with snow-white hair pointed out while examining the quality of a finely woven woollen shawl. 'A good king I say, not like this Pelias who ruins the country, and everything ends up in his own pockets. A rich man he is. A rich man ruling a poor country.'

Now this was interesting. Medea went closer. What had the woman said? Had not Diomedes told her that his father was dead? Killed by the king, his half-brother? Thus immersed in her thoughts she must have missed out something, since another woman was talking now.

'... will be better, I hope. With his son back with a lady and him finding out everything, and old Pelias – may he end up in Tartarus forever – having to give back the throne and all.'

A third woman spoke now, stout and grey-haired. 'You know what I've heard? My daughter she knows the son of the baker that delivers bread to that Pelias, told me that the young one doesn't even know his father being alive. Doesn't know that he's kept prisoner in his own palace for all these years. Pelias won't tell him, that's for sure. Wouldn't come good, would it? Telling him that his father is alive. Would bring him an early grave, it would. Bastard that one, I say, a real bastard. One should tell the lad, one really should. Mind you, there are storm clouds on the horizon, big storm clouds coming all over the land. As I live by bread, it will all end up in a great catastrophe, it will.'

Medea turned away. If what she had just heard was the truth, Diomedes the conqueror would become Diomedes the victim. Pelias probably had already planned his execution. And sending him to Aea had only been the first step. He could and should have died on his mission. And now, if he killed Diomedes everything would have been in vain. She had to talk to him right now. If he heard the news from someone else he would, quick-tempered as he was, rush to the court and headlong into disaster. She found him surrounded by admirers who wanted to hear his adventures. When he saw her coming he embraced her and introduced her to his listeners telling them that without her help he would never have survived. They all stared at her as if she were a strange animal. These men made her feel uneasy, and she longed to go somewhere on her own, even with Diomedes, but not with these strangers staring at her. She signalled that she had to talk to him alone.

'What do you want?' he whispered, slightly irritated. 'These people came to welcome me. I can't just go away and talk to my wife.'

'You'd better come, Diomedes, since your welcome might be short lived,' she whispered back.

'What do you mean?'

'Answer me one question. When you met King Pelias for the first time, did he tell you that your father was dead?'

He stared at her. 'Why? What are you up to?'

She remained firm. 'Just answer my question.'

'I asked him if he were the man who had killed my father, and he said, "Yes."

'He lied.' It was all she said.

'What?' he grasped her by the shoulders and shook her. 'What do you know that I don't know? Tell me, I implore you!'

'Stop behaving like a madman, and I will.'

He stopped shaking her, but his hands still rested upon her shoulders. 'I'm sorry, love, I'm terribly sorry. I loved my father, although I didn't even know him. I wish we had met, but all I have are other people's memories.'

She told him what the women had been talking about and saw the alteration in this face. Rage, sadness, pain, and the urgent impulse to run. She held his arm.

'Wait! You can't go there on your own. You'll need help, and you'll need witnesses. Your uncle is a clever old man. All his actions talk about it. Ask one of your friends to

go with you, and I'll accompany you too. If you face him on your own you won't survive the day.'

She saw tears in his eyes, and she pitied him. There are good aspects in him, she thought. If he had been brought up differently he might have turned into a man she could really love. His feelings for his unknown father were true, and the rage against Pelias was true. She would have helped him even without her own motive. 'Phanus shall go with us, and Alcaeus, and if what you tell me is true this bastard won't see the end of this day.' They took King Pelias by surprise. He admitted everything, and couldn't but give the kingdom back to Aeson who, however, was near to death, weary and worn by the weight of years and imprisonment.

For a long time Diomedes spoke to his father alone, while Medea waited in the garden where she had found rosemary and basil, the beautiful herbs which grew on the terraces of Aea. She enjoyed the scent that reminded her so much of home. When Diomedes finally joined her, he was full of grief and sorrow for the old king. She held him and tried to console him, but he did not seem to listen. His mind was on strange paths. When he finally spoke this voice was weak.

'Medea, my love, my only precious. To you I owe my return, to you I owe my life. You brought my father back to me. Your magic is strong. I saw it work. Never before did I believe in this kind of magic. But I saw it, Medea. I saw it. Please, my love, I implore you, help me once again. And not for me I beg but for my father. He's dying. Life has been a burden for him. He is not old, but look at him. Pelias made him old. He stole his years, his life, and now that he could live he can only die. Please, my love, I know how strong you are; take from me some years and give them to my father, so that he can live.' His tears fell unrestrained, and he buried his head between her breasts. Take away his years? Who did he think he was? But then, he didn't know any better. And could she not use his ignorance? Aeson was ill, very ill, and if she didn't do anything he would certainly die. She knew all the potent herbs, even more potent if picked at the right time under the protection of the goddess. 'Please, he can't die now. I've only just found him. I don't want to lose him again.' Softly but determined the priestess spoke. 'You ask me to commit a crime.'

'A crime? There is no crime. I offer my years. Voluntarily I'll give them away. There is no crime.'

'A crime it is, since I am not allowed to take life from you, and the Goddess whose priestess I am and who reigns over my powers, forbids it. Your request is neither right nor fair.' It was true. She did not lie to him. Even if she had the power to do what he had asked her it couldn't be done. It had to do with balance. Everything had to be in balance.

He lifted his head, and on his face she read rage, grief, disbelief and sadness. 'Not right? Not fair?' he shouted, and again a flood of tears poured over his face. 'Was it right to keep him prisoner? Was it fair to take me away from him? He deserves to live!'

'Deserves to live? Many you killed in your wars deserve to live. But you never questioned your own unfair deeds. Can you give life back to them? Don't measure with your double standard what is beyond your knowledge. I don't want to hurt you, but you must accept the truth. Magic has to keep the equilibrium, and it is not in my power to do what you have asked me. Magic is not a toy. The Goddess gave it to me, and she can take back what she once offered if it is ill-used.'

'You don't want to help me. You left your father, and now ...'

'Shut up!' she shouted at him. 'Stop behaving like a child having fits, and stop talking nonsense about things you don't understand! You have to learn a lot before you'll be ready to become king. Listening for once. If you had not interrupted me with your unjustified rage I would have offered a solution. But you couldn't even wait until I had finished my speech. Is that the politeness of a future king?'

Again he broke down. 'Sorry my love, I'm so sorry, but I can't see him like this. What was it you wanted to tell me?'

'If the triple-faced goddess gives her aid and prospers with her presence my magic I'll attempt to win again your father's years long gone. But as I said, only if the goddess gives me permission.'

He hugged her and kissed her like a child and told her that he would be eternally grateful.

She understood his grief and pain and knew she would have given anything to bring back her mother, but then death had its meaning, and life had its meaning, and she did not like to interfere. There were greater powers at work, and to these greater powers she would prey. Here was more at stake than Aeson's life. She could not refuse without losing his love and admiration, and losing these would mean that she had suffered in vain, that she was exiled in vain.

Very gently she told him that in three days time she would begin the preparations, and from that time on it would take her nine days to do what had to be done.

'What can I do to help?' he asked eagerly.

'Stay with your father, love; you can't help me, but you can help him. Keep him occupied, keep his thoughts away from death; let him talk about life, the old times when he was happy; when I come back I'll need you help. Right now I have to do what only a priestess can do.'

See, my friend, how thankless were all your benefits

When the moon's bright horns met and formed her orb, shining in fullest radiance and looking down upon the sleeping world below, Medea left the palace. Barefoot she walked through the stillness of midnight. No sounds she could hear of beasts or men; even the leaves hang mute and still on their branches, and the air, moist with dew, was calm and silent. Only the stars shimmered in the sky. There was no other movement. To the grove she walked, where a small, swift stream was the only source of sound in the stillness. Ancient willow trees, the trees of the Goddess herself, grew on the green banks of the stream. Here she stood still and stretched her arms to the stars. Thrice she turned round, thrice she bedewed her long black hair with water from the stream, thrice she uttered a wailing cry.

She did not speak, but in her mind the words took shape. So small I am, and yet I feel the burden of a kingdom now weighing heavily upon my shoulders. I am but one to keep the fragile balance. I ask for peace. If that's too much – refuse. But if you think, Mother of mysteries and depths, my cause is just then let my chariot appear to carry me to where the healing powers grow.

She closed her eyes and waited for the vision to appear. And not in vain she asked, for when she turned round the chariot stood there, drawn by winged dragons. The dragons took her up into the sky straight to the gardens of the eldest, where she plucked the star herbs. And finally, at the outer rim of the garden, on a bed surrounded by a lake, she cut but a few blades of the grass of life.

Nine nights and nine days she spent in the gardens, so wide an area it was amongst the stars, but then she returned. When she dismounted she stroked the helpful dragons. 'Thank you, dear friends of the visions,' she said warmly, and opened the bag which contained the herbs, and the dragons only touched by the scent of the plants, sloughed their ancients skins and became young again.

'Thank you, sister. A great gift it is. It makes us feel like children again, us, belonging to the eldest of this earth. Whenever you need your soul dragons again, and your thoughts are good, call us.' They flew up into the sky.

Medea awoke. She knew now what to do. She knew that she was free to heal the old king. Back to the grove she went, where she built two altars. The right one she erected for the triple-faced Goddess, the left one for Youth, and covered them with the grove's sacred foliage. Two trenches then she dug, and then she took her knife and

plunged it into a black sheep's throat, thus drenching the ditches in blood. Next she poured a stream of wine and a stream of milk. While chanting sacred words she summoned the spirits of earth, and the King and Queen of the regions below so that, of their mercy, from old Aeson they would not haste to take the breath of life. The monarchs, knowing well her cause, agreed, and the Queen, solemn and with dignity said, 'You are the cauldron.' They withdrew.

Medea went to the palace but did not enter. The walls would have been oppressive for her who had come back from the infinite gardens among the stars, from a vision journey far beyond mortal reach. Diomedes was there, pale like a shadow. His voice was but a whisper, when he told her that there was not much life left in this father. 'Take him and follow me. But only you.'

Diomedes brought the dying king and followed her to the grove. Whispering soft words, words like a spell, Medea charmed the old man, so that he slept a deep sleep, and then she asked Diomedes to lay the body on a bed of herbs she had prepared. He looked at her ritual items and wanted to know for what purpose they were, but Medea ordered him to go away.

'Let me be with him,' he begged. 'I won't disturb you. I only want to be with him.' But she told him, friendly and in a calm and consoling voice that no profane eyes were allowed to see her secrets, which were the secrets of the Goddess.

'Wait for me in the garden, where the rosemary grows and the basil. It is a good place. It will help you to calm down.'

When he left she noticed that his movements were slow and tired, but she had no time to think about the son, while the father lay dying. Thus, with water, sulphur, and fire she purged the pale body of the king. In the copper cauldron the elixir boiled. Roots and seeds and flowers she added and bitter juices; and crystals from the farthest eastern shores and sand washed by the sea's ebbing waters, and hoar-frost gathered in the night of a full moon. With these and other secret ingredients she prepared the healing liquid. With a second stick of sacred olive wood she mixed the components and stirred the elixir. Then she took a goblet and filled it with the liquid. Slowly she let the old man drink, and while drinking his body already began to change. The king grew stronger again, but it would take some time for him to recover entirely. The king awoke and saw in amazement the changes he had undergone. Although still weak, he could not stop thanking Medea and held her tight against his heart.

'Beloved child,' he cried, 'my daughter, you've given back to me what Pelias took so many years ago. I am alive. I am myself again.'

'You are not fully recovered yet, but you will be in a few days. Don't exhaust yourself now. Give the herbs a chance to do their duty.'

'But I feel young again. Alive. You'll always have my love.'

She doubted it but said, 'Thank the goddess, Aeson, who allowed me to perform the rites, and thank the lord and the lady of the worlds below who generously withdrew, although they had called you already.'

'A great sacrifice will be held, and I shall thank and honour the gods.'

Together they went to the garden, where Diomedes had been waiting, and when he saw his father changed he did not know who to embrace first.

The earth rocks; thunder, echoing from the depth, Roars in answer; fiery lightnings twist and flash. Dust dances in a whirling fountain; Blasts of the four winds skirmish together, Set themselves in array for battle; Sky and sea rage indistinguishably.

Some days of peace and joy followed, while Aeson recovered entirely, but Medea knew that this peace was deceptive. And one night both Aeson and Diomedes came to speak to her.

'Pelias is spreading rumours about us. That evil has come with you and me, and that evil turned my father into a young man, a young monster. He still has friends, even among the members of the council. These rumours must be stopped.' And they tried to convince her that he had to be killed, and his daughters with him.

'Only you can do it, Medea, only you can enter his house without arousing suspicion. You must kill Pelias. Tell him to rejuvenate him, tell him we split up, anything you like, and when he is dead, my father and I will kill his daughters, so that there will be no witnesses to tell the deed. Medea, please, you must help us.'

She refused. If they felt threatened by rumours they had to deal with Pelias. She did not want to be entangled in a murder plot to stabilize their power. But then they threatened her to do it themselves and blame her for everything that went wrong in the kingdom, so that she finally agreed.

It was easily done, and when Pelias and his daughters were dead – killed by burglars as it was spread – Medea felt sad and lonely. She prayed to the Goddess to forgive what she had done. From this moment on she hated Diomedes, and she knew that sooner or later he would turn against her, and his oath would be void. They could not stay at his father's court for much longer. Diomedes wanted power, he wanted to be king, but this was impossible here, where Aeson ruled, and Aeson knew that if he were not careful in handling his own son his destiny would be that of Pelias. They were pleased, when a herald from Corinth announced that the usurper Corinthus had died without leaving an heir, and Medea told them that she had every right to claim the throne being the rightful heiress, since Corinthus had driven away her father. They went to Corinth, and the citizens accepted Medea as their queen and Diomedes as their king.

For more than ten years they reigned the kingdom, and Medea gave birth to seven daughters and seven sons, who she loved dearly. The kingdom prospered, and everything seemed to be peaceful and right, when Diomedes fell in love with the young daughter of the Theban king and met her openly in the queen's presence. It was too much. Not to love him, and no longer being loved by him was one thing, but being openly betrayed in her own palace she could not bear. Thus, she stopped him on his way out. He only laughed at her and finally accused her of having murdered Pelias and deceived her own father.

'I can't live with a murderess any more, and I want you to leave the court at once.' 'And what are you? Killing his daughters? You did it, because you wanted power; I did it because you threatened me. Don't you remember the oath you swore in the name of all your gods?'

'Oath?' he shouted. 'This oath was forced, and is therefore invalid. There is no oath between us.'

'I owe my return to you, I owe my life to you, you brought my father back to me,' she mimicked him. 'Do you remember wincing these words? Creeping on the ground you were, begging you were. No, you don't want to hear it. And then comes some young bitch half your age and everything is forgotten. Even your children. Not that they miss you much. But you keep forgetting everything, you bastard, because your brain moved into your prick! You even owe this throne to me! You have nothing of your own!'

He hit her hard. Her face burned.

'You witch! You horrible, cunning witch!'

She steamed with rage. 'You dare hitting me, you ignorant, silly, ridiculous little bastard, you uneducated, stupid goat-herd? You are the murderer, the oath-breaker, the thief! You call me a witch? Good! You shall fear a witch's power then!' 'You're banished, witch! Do you hear me? Banished! I'll give the command that everyone who finds you within three miles from the court is welcome to kill you. Take your breed and go! Tell Medeius to stay. If Glauce cannot give me children he may as well be my heir.'

Suddenly Medea became calm, and looking at him as if looking straight into his heart she said very quietly, 'You won't have a line, king. You are cursed. And my your gods remember that the Corinthian king is an oath-breaker. And this shall be the name you are to bear in front of them. Oath-breaker. By no other name will you be known by the gods.' She spat in his face and left him standing.

Having told her children what had passed between them, her eldest daughter shrugged. 'He was never much of a father, and he won't reign for very much longer.' 'Have you seen it, Eri?'

The girl nodded. 'I see many things.'

They took what they could carry and left the palace. Diomedes was waiting at the gate.

'No woman spits at me!' His face was red with anger.

'No oath-breaker ever talks to me,' Medea hissed when she passed him. 'And don't you dare hitting me again. This time I'll spit poison. You called me a witch. And now you have to live with the hatred of a witch.' She went through the gate not looking back, so that she did not see Eriopis now standing in front of him.

'You shall be alone, king,' she said. 'Without shelter, without a name, hated by men and without hope. Before you die you shall curse yourself for what you have done, and the gods won't forget. I go now with the certainty that I do not have a father. And I do not say fare-thee-well to you, because I know that you won't.'

He wanted to reply but couldn't. no sound could leave his mouth, and only when Eriopis had left was he free to speak. The younger children passed without a word; they only stared at him with anger and even hatred in their eyes, and Medeius the eldest was just to leave, also without a word, when Diomedes stopped him. 'I told your mother that you were to stay. You could be my heir, Medeius.' The youth laughed. 'Your heir? They heir of a traitor? The heir of an oath-breaker, a murderer? There is more I could call you. No power on earth could make me stay. I'd rather die. And did my mother not say that you won't leave a line? Let me go! You are not my father anymore. You are banished from my life as we are banished from the court, which is not even yours.'

They left the palace and went to a house outside the city walls, which had always been a refuge for Medea during her life at the court. It was not far from the temple of the Goddess, so that she could perform her rites as a priestess. The house lay very sheltered in the forest, and it was a place where she felt she could breathe. Only a week after their banishment it was announced that King Diomedes would celebrate his wedding with Glauce, daughter of the Theban king, and that therefore the people of Corinth were invited to the palace to celebrate with them.

'At last,' Medea sighed. 'The day has come. And no one in Corinth shall ever forget this wedding, as I live. May the Goddess be my witness, and may all the gods who understand my pain and know I was betrayed, help me to perform my revenge.' She went to the temple to pray, and was soon followed by Eriopis.

'We will die, mother. I saw us dead. Not you, but us.' She spoke gently, not at least frightened and without any regret in her voice.

'Then I can't do it,' Medea said. 'If you see my actions causing your death, my love, I won't do it. I am not going to sacrifice my own children for my revenge. Maybe the Goddess doesn't want me to do what my heart desires. Let him have his will then.' 'No, mother, you carry on. You must carry on. I have only told you, because you should know before you leave. Would it not be horrible coming back and finding us all dead? The Goddess spoke to me, mother. She knows how brave you are, she knows how much you suffer, how you were betrayed, and she, too, wants revenge. You see, if you don't do it his first step will be to sail against Aea. Strong as he is now, it will be easy enough to follow his old plan, Pelias' plan. No, you do what you have to do. The Goddess will make us immortal. That was what she told me. And to become immortal you have to die.'

Medea looked at the girl. There was a beautiful light shining in her eyes, the light of the goddess. She is already immortal, my large-eyed girl.

'Mother, take your revenge, save our home, and let us go into immortality.' But the priestess shook her head. Tears were in her eyes, when suddenly she heard the familiar voice in her head, the voice that had spoken to her at the waterfall, when she was young. 'Don't you trust me anymore, Priestess Medea?' it said. 'Why don't you trust me anymore? Give your children into my hands. I will protect them. I love them as much as you do. And you know, don't you? We all shall meet at the end of our journeys. Do you remember, Medea?'

She did. 'In your hands, mother, I lay the lives of my children.'

'Then tell them to come to my temple, and no harm will be done to them, though it might look otherwise. I'll take them to a place, where they will be free and happy, and one day you will follow. Your journey is not over yet.'

They left the temple, and on their way home they did not talk, but when Medea saw again her daughters eyes they were glittering like crystals, and a smile lay on her face. I am the tool of the goddess. This is not only my revenge. Yes, mother, if you protect my children I'll do what I have to do. I once made a promise. I won't break my oath. There were but a few days left, so that they immediately set to make the wedding gift for the young queen, a gift she certainly would not refuse being a young woman who liked beautiful clothes. Medea took the finest fabric she could find, bleached it until it shone in the most radiant white and made a robe for the new queen, who had no right to be queen at all as Diomedes had no right to be king. And yet, they were. They were. She held the robe and smiled. 'A robe for a woman with the burning desire to be queen. Yes, burn she shall, and the flames shall go deep and consume her life as their ugly deed consumed mine. Unquenchable, these flames shall devour all who will be around her, all but one, for death is too mild a penalty for him – even if death meant to be tortured in his Tartarus forever. He shall live and suffer. He shall live to see before him the consequences of this crimes. May his gods and goddesses let him survive. The Goddess certainly will.'

She wrapped up the poisonous garment, ready to take it to the palace. Her eldest son tried to stop her. 'Mother, let somebody else go. They'll recognize you, and all would be in vain.'

'Who will recognize me, Medeius?' And when he looked at the old woman who suddenly stood in front of him she smiled. 'You are right, no one will.' 'I have to be there, love, I have to. I have to make sure that he survives. My children,'

she said with tears in her eyes, 'my children, I have to go now. I don't know what will

come of it, but I love you. I love you so much that I can't express my love. Promise me to follow Eriopis. Do what she asks you to do. Go to the temple, and don't be afraid. The Goddess will protect you.'

She said fare-well to all of them, knowing that they would not meet again in this world.

O divinity of the sky, and swift-winged winds, and leaping streams, O countless laughter of the sea's waves, O earth, mother of all life! On you, and on the all-seeing circle of the sun I call!

People seemed to approach the palace from all corners of the region. They came in groups or single, and they all carried presents for the royal couple. Medea was but another old woman among other old women. Carefully climbing the steps to the palace garden, she was even helped by a guard; and he, who had seen her so often, did not recognize his former queen. The deception was perfect.

She had to wait until she could give her present to the queen, who sat among her family and friends on the terrace where Medea had sat not long ago. It overlooked the garden which was hedged with bay trees. The terrace itself was supported at the front by only two pillars the capitals of which were decorated with leaves, flowers and berries. Medea thought that it would be best to direct Diomedes to the right, which seemed the easiest way to escape, and then it would be easier for her to find a hiding place. The gate was at the left side of the garden, and the guards would be watching the entrance. Diomedes would expect her to react today.

The Queen thanked her politely, and asked her to join the other guests in the garden, where food and wine were prepared. Medea bowed. 'May the gods be true to you, my lady, and my present suit you well.'

Having found her hiding place she waited. Finally King and Queen opened their presents showing them to the waiting crowd. And when Queen Glauce opened Medea' gift everyone went quiet. So beautiful a robe it was, so perfect a piece of work shining in the afternoon sun that the Theban king and Diomedes burst out simultaneously, 'Put it on, Glauce. Let us see what the Queen looks like in this beauty.'



No sooner had Glauce put on the robe than flames shot up, high blue and yellow flames. There were screams. From Glauce, from the crowd.

'Take it off!' her father commanded.

'Take it off?' she yelled. 'Take it off? I can't! Oh gods, I can't. Help me!'

But no one could take the garment off her. And those who tried were consumed by these unquenchable flames. Diomedes ran for water, but it only seemed to strengthen the power of the flames. And thus he stood there petrified like a statue. His wife burning to ashes by a fire that was not of this world. The crowd had fled, and he, watching her burn, realized that they were all dead. Family, friends – who had touched Glauce had died with her, all victims of the flames which now slowly died down, since there was nothing left to feed upon.

Medea saw him standing alone shouting like a madman. 'You witch! I know it was you, you wicked, murderous witch! I'll get you ... you ... you dirty bitch! I swear to the gods I'll get you!'

You swore once, Medea thought, and you broke your oath. None of your gods will listen to you anymore. She left knowing that he would soon be after her.

She stood in front of the temple but feared to enter. They are immortal. I'll see them again. I only have to face their bodies, empty covers left behind, since they are of no use where they are now. Alive and free they are. Alive and free.

Then she saw the stones; and when she finally made the effort and entered she knew why there were so many stones. Stoned to death. Children. What had these children done to them? In his mad anger Diomedes must have stirred up the Corinthians even against children. His children. And these most honourable citizens had nothing better to do than to follow their mad leader and their own lowest passions, entering a temple to commit these cruel crimes.

'Goddess!' she cried. 'Goddess, answer me! Are they safe?'

Her daughter's voice was in her mind. 'We are safe, mother. Our bodies were empty, when they came. They couldn't harm us at all. But they shall be punished for their idea of stoning us to death. They shall be punished.'

She closed her eyes. Safe. They are safe.

'Mother?' She started. This was not in her mind. The voice had come from behind her.

'Mother, don't be afraid. I am alive.'

She turned round. 'Medeius? I thought ... you are ... not?'

'No, I am not.'

They hugged each other, and Medea covered his young face with kisses.

'You did not go with them?'

'The Goddess visited me in a dream,' he explained. 'I have to live. That was her message. For me it's not over yet. I am still on my journey. And perhaps she thought you should not be left all on your own. She cares.'

'Yes, she cares. And I am grateful to her. We shall grieve later. We are not safe here. Let's go, Medeius.'

'Are we not going to perform the rites for them?'

Medea shook her head. 'No love, we won't. Those who were responsible for this shall be the ones to do so. And on this city I lay a curse. They shall be punished, as Eriopis wanted it to be. And he who ordered this crime shall be punished even more. But let's go. It's all in the hands of the goddess now.'

'Will she punish?'

'She will.'

'Where do we go?'

'Home,' she said. 'We're going home.'

'Home? You mean home to Aea? I wonder what will expect us there.'

'My sister called out to me. My uncle Perses usurped the throne and keeps her and my father prisoners.' She sighed. 'And I am so tired. When will I find some rest? Why can't we go to the beautiful garden among the stars and live in peace? I am no queen anymore, and I don't want to be involved in politics anymore. All I want is to find my true home, somewhere in eternity. I saved my father's kingdom, son. I thought I could go now. Is this really my mission?'

She felt her son's firm young hands upon her shoulders. 'No, mother. This is my mission. That's what I have to do. This is why I was left behind. Let's go to Aea. I want to give the throne back to my grandfather – as soon as possible. I am afraid I am not very patient.'

Medea took his hands. 'Patience is the very last thing we need now. But you are right, this mission is for you. Let's go.'

Now it is happening: threat gives place to performance

Seeing that there seemed to lie a curse upon the city, the council elders sent a messenger to the sacred oracle to ask for guidance.

'And thus she spoke, the priestess who receives the messages from the eternal ones, "The City of Corinth is cursed by the gods and haunted by her who holds in her hand the whip of revenge. The most terrible crime was committed in the most sacred place. There is but one way to heal the city and take the curse of her. The king who ordered the crime is to be banished. He must not be killed but send away with nothing apart from the clothes he wears. His destiny will be fulfilled later. The corpses of the female children are to be given to the earth. The corpses of the male children, however, are to be laid on the trees around the temple by those who killed them to be consumed by the sun as is the tradition in the country the queen came from. And finally, the City of Corinth has to pay tribute. From now on seven boys and seven girls, dressed in black garments and with their heads shaven, shall spend a whole year in the temple where the crime took place. And after this year fourteen other children shall take over. And this shall continue as long as this city lasts.'

The sentence was accepted.

If you want to persuade me, use a different tone And give other advise.

Through a secret tunnel Medea and her son had entered the city of Aea, and suddenly appeared behind the usurper king who stood in the garden admiring the herbs. He was too shocked and too confused to call the guards.

With his sword drawn, Medeius approached the old man. 'Are you the one who stole the throne from my grandfather the king?'

Perses laughed. 'Don't be ridiculous, boy. Put that sword away, you could hurt yourself. Go to your mother. I am the king, and no one else. Whoever reigned here before me does not count. This is my kingdom. And now go away, you silly little toddler!'

Perses could have saved his life, Medea thought, but not by means of irony and not by offending a young man who was her son. You are dead, uncle. He is my son, and I am the king's daughter.

'So you think it's funny, old man? A funny blade? A funny little boy? Right then, here comes a funny stroke!'

It was easy. Perses was dead. Medea called the guards.

'Take this corpse away, and feed it to the sun; and you set my father and sister free at once.'

She embraced Medeius. 'You will get on very well with your grandfather. You inherited the family temper. I am so glad you are here, my son.'

The cataclysm advances visibly upon me, Sent by Zeus to make me afraid.

Banished from the court and having forfeited the favour of the gods whose names he had taken in vain, Diomedes wandered homeless from city to city hated by people. He was called by no other name than oath-breaker, and he was shunned even by the beggars in the streets. He avoided his home town, where his father still ruled, but he went to see his foster-father. The old man looked at him with sad eyes. 'Did I teach you to break oaths? Did I not call you by the name of Iason, because I thought you could become a healer? I fostered a viper instead, I shared my home with a traitor and murderer. I cannot help you. Even if I wanted to I couldn't. They call me the Hand, but this hand can only support a small family, and this hand is an honest hand. So many chances were given to you, but you threw everything away in favour of a young girl whose father had another throne to offer. You better go now, before my wife comes home.' In old age he found himself once more in Corinth. Old, tired, in rags no one recognized him, and no one asked the beggar what his story was. He went down to the harbour where his ship was still tied up. He sat in her shadow; and remembering his past glories, he grieved for the disasters which had overwhelmed him, and finally he cursed himself and his life.

He took a strong rope and was about to hang himself from the prow, when it suddenly toppled forward and killed him. There was no one there to grieve.

... somewhere in eternity ...

King Aeëtes and Chalciope happily embraced Medea and her son.

'Welcome home, daughter, and welcome home, my dear grandson. The entire kingdom has to thank you. I hope you will stay with us now. This is your home.' 'I did what I had to do, and yes, this is my home. There has never been another one. And I have a lot to learn. Mother?'

Medea smiled. 'Not from me, Medeius. I did my share. I will stay for a while.' And to her father and sister she said, 'Numerous times I was reaching out for you; my heart was always here, and here I shall rest for some time and be with you, and enjoy being at home. But then I have to go. There is another home waiting for me.'

They all stared at her.

'What other home?' asked her sister.

'This ...' she pointed at the cauldron, 'was not given to me without a purpose. I have to go ...'

'But where, daughter?'

'Yes, where, mother?'

'To a place somewhere in eternity. You'll find out later. To reunite.'

'To reunite?'



Scene change. The palace faded away, and where it had stood, a green valley appeared surrounded by soft rolling hills purpled with heather. And among the heather grew the yellow gorse. A winding river ran through the valley, the waters of which were murmuring the river's song. On its banks small flowers lifted up their heads towards the sun. Poppies peeped through the grass and dandelions, and then snow drops and buttercups and daisies. How beautiful it was, and how pure the air. And all the odours which reminded of spring-time. But they did not only touch the olfactory sense but it also filled with happiness and peace and an almost untameable sensation of joy. Birds were singing in the trees. On the banks in the height grass Medea stood, a queen, a beautiful, radiant queen, and in her hands she held the cauldron. A beam of light came out of it reaching for the sky above. It felt strange, as if everything had come to an end. The end of all growth? I could look into her eyes, and what I saw was eternity, and the beam leaving the cauldron was infinity.

'Who are you?' I heard myself whisper, not expecting an answer from a phantom. I had followed through a story, I had shared a dream, I was outside. But the Medea phantom spoke to me in a soft but determined voice.

'I am she who is the natural mother of all things, mistress and governess of all the elements, the progeny of worlds, the keeper of the power divine, alone and manifold, the Many and the One, the one and the Many. At my will the planets of the sky, the winds of the seas, the silence of darkness are disposed. My name is adored throughout the world in many names.'

'Are you the mother, then?'

'I am the sister.'

To reunite

Return to the Inn

In the Beginning there was Chaos.

And I was in the centre. I was shape. I *was* centre. Around me a raw and indescribable mass. I was here before she was born. Everything was in the process of constant change and motion, and I was there. Being her. No. She wasn't yet. She was born after. Where is the desert? The Inn? The moving rocks? It's cold here. 'We are before.' I know. But all the tales are before. And I was here, when everything was created. I know.'My tale is different.'

Why are you talking to me? They never talk to me. I am an observer.

Laughter. 'You can't observe me. There is no story. All the stories are false. I am the threshold. I am motionless, and yet I move. I am mother, sister, and daughter. I am the demiurge, and I created the demiurge. I am the one who rules. They say I gave birth to those who fought us'.

Did you?

'The birth of my children marked the turning point of history. Am I guilty?'

I don't know. What is the Inn?

'The only place in the universe which does not move. Would you like to hear one of my stories?'

I would like to know who you are. Have you got no name?.

'Names? I have too many names. I wasn't born with a name. They gave me names, but none of them is really mine. Do you have a name which is yours?'
There was only one name given to me, so I guess it's mine.
'Only one name? Then you have only one story.'
Tell me one of yours.
'They are all false.'
But you can tell me the truth. They are your stories.

'I can't. They all belong together. If I tell one story I have to omit important thoughts and important truths. Your stories are different. You can split them into single streams. Like the delta of a river. I can't. And even if I told you about my children and the turning point of history it would raise more questions than it would answer. But look. It's changing. Everything is changing.'



And it was. Clouds drifting apart, colours were born, because there was light. I don't know where it had come from, but stars exploded without a sound, and gas nebulae appeared, where a moment ago nothingness had been. Again I was in the centre of the birth of the universe. I told her that I had been here before. That I had been a universe, and I felt her smile in my mind.

'Of course you are. It is life. All you can see now is life. The beginning of life. One of my children I had to hide in a cave. At least that is what they say. They said I couldn't nurse him. And I had so much milk. I have to go now.'

But I don't know anything about you. What is your story? Without a story I ... Your name. If I had your name ...

'But you know me. You know me. Don't be afraid. I only go where I belong to. You saw me at the Inn. We are the Inn. Don't you remember? There is no door. I can't leave. And you are only an observer ... or are you?. We'll meet again.'

And suddenly, as if someone had spilled sugar over a black cloth, there was a ribbon of stars in front of me. How beautiful it was, and how far away. I had never seen it before. Not like this. And some stars were brighter than others, and ...

The Continuation ...

Translations

The Beginning of the End

The Fifth Hymnos of the Sibyl's song was written in Latin and Greek. Compare the way T.S. Eliot treated the story of the Sibyl in 'The Wasteland'.

Here is the translation of the hymnos:

NAM SIBYLLAM IPSE OCULIS MEIS VIDI IN CAVERNA SCRIBERE, ET CUM ILLI PUELLAE DICERUNT: $\Sigma i \beta \upsilon \lambda \lambda \alpha$, $\tau i \ \theta \varepsilon \lambda \varepsilon \iota \varsigma$: RESPONDABAT ILLA: $\dot{\alpha} \pi \sigma \theta \alpha \upsilon \varepsilon i \nu \ \theta \dot{\varepsilon} \lambda \omega$.

With my own eyes I have seen the Sibyl Writing in the cave, And when the girls said, Sibylla, what is it you wish She answered, I wish I were able to die.

The Third Hymnos

The song Apollon sings in the Third Hymnos was originally written in German. I have then rendered it into English, whereby I had to change the syntax and adapt it to a language which does not allow the use of composites. The meaning was not altered, but those who speak German will see the difference. For those of you who can read and understand German, here are the original 2 songs.

Wir reisen durch die Strudel ew'ger Zeiten Und trudeln in der Ewigkeit Gefaelle, Sind Reisende und Jäger ohne Beute Und warten auf ein Ziel, das wir nicht kennen. Von Traurigkeit umschlungen unsre Bahnen, Nach Liebe heischend, aber Lust empfangend Und Lust für Liebe haltend und verstummend Erfüllen wir nur uns, nicht unsre Träume.

Göttinnengleich, oh Geliebte, erscheint mir dein Bild; Deine Form, deine Seele, wie habe ich all das ersehnt, Was ich noch nicht kannte! Und wie dich vermisst, obgleich ich nicht wusste, Dass es dich gab. Auf silbernen Schwingen reist Eros, die Liebe erweckend in mir Und eine nur, eine kann alles erfüllen, Was schattenverhangene Sehnsucht erhofft. Dein Antlitz vollkommen und rein Gleich dem silbernen Mond in den Nächten der Klarheit, Dein Auge das Meer, das unendlich und grün sich ergiesst, Die samtweichen Lippen so blütengleich rosig, Dein Haar wie die Sonne in goldener Pracht, doch nicht hoch im Zenit, Wo niemandes Augen den strahlenden Glanz vermögen zu schauen, Sondern so wie am Morgen, wenn flammenfingrig und zart Ihre Hände lassen erröten das Meer. O zarteste Knospe, dein Bild war ein Teil meines Denkens, Dein seidiger Körper erschien mir im Traum Und im Traum einst liebkoste ich alles an dir, *Und als deine Seele mich schliesslich umfing.* Als dein köstlicher Leib im Genuss sich ergab, Da war ich erfüllt, oh ich glaubte, ich glaubte so fest; Doch da ich dich sehe, dich spüre, dich rieche, dich schmecke, Da ll meine Sinne sich öffnen für dich, da erst weiss ich -Ein Traum, nur ein Traum, und nichts weiter als Schatten. O lass mich die Wirklichkeit spüren im Hier und im Jetzt.