I

TWO nights ago I went to the cave once more, hoping against hope. The sky was sharp and clear, star-pricked, yet holding the first hints of approaching winter. I knew the signs: what islander does not? There had been a sultry stillness at noon, with clouds gathering across the straits, eastward from Mytilene: monstrous storm-dark chimaeras that crouched, like mating lions, along the mountain ridges of Ionia. I walked in the garden, by the stump of the great fig-tree—memories, memories—and watched them. A flicker of summer lightning scrawled itself across the sky, as though the branching pain in my head had swollen to embrace the whole universe. I could feel the muscles flickering in and round my left eyelid—always the left, the unlucky side, the dark lobe of the brain.

My throat was raw, parched: yet I could not drink. Every sense in my body, each fold of skin and flesh seemed naked to the nerve beneath. All nature was a mirror to my passion and my despair: those obscene clouds spoke to me of more than winter. I shivered and sweated as though I had a fever, and the light linen robe I wore—too late for turning autumn—burnt my skin. It was ridiculous and humiliating, and the worst of all was—is—that I can no longer laugh at myself. Nothing frightens me more than that. All through my life one part of me has stood aside, amused by my own passions and inconsistencies, ready to prick the bubble of pretentious self-pity. But no longer. I am being pretentious and self-pitying now; I know it; there is no help for me.

The afternoon brought thunderous gusts of wind from the north-east, ripping down through streets and alleys with a noise like a split and

bellying sail. I could hear, high above the city, the subdued roar of the great forest, and thought of other days when we had climbed the ridge, under a blue autumn sky, to gather fallen chestnuts and pine-cones.

(So still on the needle-carpet, the light slanting between tall tree-trunks, catching and glinting suddenly on a golden shoulder-clasp, the flush of a young girl's cheek, the wildness of blown hair.) The wind whipped up hard granular particles of dust, stung my face and lips: and with the dust came a few random rain-drops, hot, heavy, ominous. But by sunset all was clear again, and the wind had dropped. I called Praxinoa and put on a light shawl, and together we walked down to the headland. Lanterns flared on the quayside below us: the black boats bobbed at anchor still, and fishermen called to each other across rows of barrels. I could smell tar and seaweed and the faint tang of fish. Praxinoa glanced at me, troubled, eyes half-shadowed in the fold of her hood. But she said nothing.

The sun was melting-crimson now, spreading over the dark water like coloured oil. In a soft lemon sky the evening star, Aphrodite's star, gleamed out clear. Now it seemed baleful, curse-laden; yet how often in past years had I not taken it as the very embodiment of fulfilled passion, the gatherer-home of beast, child, and lover? Aphrodite, Aphrodite, it has taken me a lifetime to see what lies behind that still, enigmatic smile. And now I know it is too late: the trap is sprung, my own remembered words mock my helplessness:

> *Some say a host of cavalry or guardsmen,*
> *And some a fleet, is the finest sight of all*
> *On the dark earth; but* I *declare the best*
> *Is what you love.*

I turned my back on the headland and the harbour, and the winking lights of Mytilene that lay beyond: still in silence we walked up towards the house. There was a smell of thyme and hay in the air, and when I looked out over the dark-glinting water I could see, where the male lion clouds had crouched, a refulgence, a radiance under the dazzled stars. I touched Praxinoa's sleeve, and we stood there in that stillness till the moon's rim thrust up over the mountains and swung clear, riding full and silver-pale, stippling the straits with its cold, colourless fire. I glanced up at the black ridged mountain rising inland above us, seeing in my mind's eye that familiar twisting path between rocks, smelling the scent of pine and rosemary, the dark, close goatish odour of the cave. With a shiver, I walked on,

Praxinoa following, up the long, stony land by the pine-grove. The owls were hunting early: there came that faint, whickering, unearthly cry and the small squeal of some trapped animal. (*Ghosts, lemurs, witches, avoid this house:* the formula muttered three times, the furtive gesture with finger and thumb, the rosemary and garlic. My Ionian friends worked hard to dispel my island superstitions about owls. They never quite succeeded.) Burning, burning. Down the shoulder of the hill, beyond the apple-orchards and the first farmsteads, the lights were springing out over the city.

Praxinoa had the big key, worn with long use, and stepped in front of me, a black, subdued shadow, to open the garden-gate. The wards rasped harshly: the gate itself was peeling, its rusty iron studs matched by the weeds clustering under the wall. We passed inside and walked down the flagged alley to the fountain. Here I paused again for a moment, listening to the soft chuckle of the water, observing the black-and-white chequerwork thrown up by marble in moonlight: all familiar as my own body, yet now strange, alien, disturbed, and disturbing.

Like my own body.

From the dark house came a flicker of light, a snatch of broad-accented island song. I recognized a lullaby: the new dark girl in the kitchens, with the smudged, searching eyes and the fatherless two-year-old child. *A runaway, Lady Sappho,* Praxinoa had said, disapprovingly. *A slut. She should be sent back to her master and branded.* Sometimes, after nearly forty years' intimacy, Praxinoa can still surprise me. But do I know her at all? What unimaginable thoughts can one woman conceive who belongs, body and soul, to another, who is at once her servant, her protector, her guardian, and her slave? Yet I cannot begin to conceive a world in which Praxinoa would have no place. This, too, frightens me. What is left beyond the familiar landmarks? Over what sheer ocean must I set out while autumn turns to winter? Too late, too late.

As we approached the house I heard old Apollo stir and growl, with a rattle of his chain. He was a Cretan mastiff, ten years old now and the ugliest beast conceivable, with grey-flecked jowls and a rheumy, sour expression that never changed, even during his moments of slobbering, over-demonstrative affection. It was Cydro, in one of her more irrepressible moments, who had had the notion of giving him his grotesquely unsuitable name—and of installing as our porter and doorkeeper a Scythian near-dwarf who bore the most disconcerting resemblance to him. It was, I must confess, somewhat

entertaining to watch the reactions of visitors when confronted with Apollo and old Scylax for the first time, simultaneously. But now the joke had gone sour, and I found myself hating dog and slave with equal violence for their dumb, patient, submissive loyalty.

Scylax heaved himself up awkwardly in his cubby-hole as Praxinoa and I approached: the big house-door still stood open, and the lamps were ready for us, wicks fresh-trimmed. He scuttled sideways, like a big black crab, with those odd, pale-blue Scythian eyes that seemed so incongruous in the seamed, leathery, toothless face. He was hoping, I knew, for a word, a joke, a quick pat on the shoulder: behind him Apollo uncoiled in equal expectation. Really, I thought, in a gust of irritation, they not only *look* like each other: to all intents and purposes you can treat them identically.

With the briefest of nods I took the lamp he gave me and went straight through the lobby, past the little shrine of Aphrodite—the candles were flickering down in their sockets, the smile on the Goddess' face was shadowed, foam-cold, with (I thought) the cruelty of the sea in it too—not stopping, not thinking, barricading my mind against the silence and the memories, up the staircase where little Timas' statue stood forlorn in its niche, and the tapestries still hung that Gongyla had brought back from Colophon, along the corridor to the two big rooms at the end that were my private sanctuary from the noisy, imperative clamour of the heart.

In the study all was still. I paused a moment on the threshold; one shutter had blown to, and the moonlight cast a cold, latticed beam on the shelves of scrolls, the plain white walls, the oddments that littered my writing-table—a glittering quartz-crystal picked from the river near Pyrrha, a sea-urchin's shell, a Lydian scent-bottle, a pair of golden knuckle-bones, four or five wax tablets, a new papyrus-roll (untouched for a month and more), an onyx ring. I carried the lamp in, and sat down. The first thing I noticed was a sealed scroll carefully placed where I was bound to find it: for an instant my heart swooped upwards, breath catching, and the tremor began to run through me again, wave upon wave, till I held the lamp closer and saw the seal and recognized the device of a merchant whom I disliked intensely and who—till recently—had always been only too ready to supply me with imported goods on credit—the alabaster lampstand from Egypt, that only revealed its pattern when light shone through it; the bale of flowered silk, the Syrian ear-rings, the striped cushions; the pair of inlaid chairs with the running deer pattern (I was sitting in one of them now); the ivory-faced dining-couches, the

Asian rugs, the creams and scents and lotions—yes, I knew, all too well, what would be in *that* letter.

There was a discreet tap on the door, and Praxinoa appeared, a nervous slave-girl (Thalia, was it? Erinna?) at her heels. I told them to light the lamps in my bedroom and heat the water for a bath. No, I said, I would not eat. Praxinoa shook her head sadly. There was a fine dish of quail waiting for me, she said. I suddenly felt weak and small and childish. No, I said, *no*, and Praxinoa caught the edge of hysteria in my voice and whisked the girl away. I heard them talking together quietly in the bedroom next door, and then the chink of metal, the sound of water being poured, a crackle of twigs as the fire was lit under the great copper pan in the bath-house beyond. Presently Praxinoa came out again, and I heard the soft, familiar pad-pad of feet moving away down the corridor towards the stairs. The girl, still in the bath-house, began, shyly at first, to whistle a haunting little tune that was quarried from my earliest childhood memories: I had first heard it in Eresus, sung by women as they worked at the loom. I sighed, got up, and moved into the bedroom like a sleep-walker.

On either side of my dressing-table, like sentinels, the great seven-branched candlesticks stood, a candle burning clear and steady in each branch, light glinting on gold scrollwork and wrought iron. They were not the gift I would have asked for, and the giver—though long dead—still had the power to make me uneasy in retrospect with the lingering memory of his harsh, half-hostile, uncompromising masculinity. When Antimenidas came back from service with the Babylonian king in Judaea, the candlesticks had been a reconciliatory gesture, but a challenge, too. From some looted Jewish temple, he said carelessly, black eyes flicking from me to the enlaced, five-pointed stars worked into the juncture of branch and stem. There was supposed to be a curse on them: something to do with the spilling of priests' blood. But that was idle gossip: common soldiers, old market-women. It was difficult to tell, from his tone, which category he despised more.

But the magic was in them, running from stem to branch like Dioscurean fire: Antimenidas knew it, and so did I. He knew, too, that between pride and covetousness (they were beautiful and unique objects) I would never get rid of them. I remember him striding to and fro in the south colonnade, iron-shod boots ringing on the flags; a tall, powerful, awkward figure with his close-cropped greying hair and the white puckered sword-scar down one cheek, a braggart soldier

who (like all his family) would frequently, and without warning, slip into a mood of delicate, perceptive seriousness that caught one unprepared after the roughshod cynicism or political rant which had preceded it. I liked him better than either of his brothers: which, I suppose, was not saying much. But one thing that he told me, on that spring morning nearly a quarter of a century ago, has stuck in my mind ever since.

"You find a people's roots in odd places, Sappho," he said. His voice had an abrupt, jerky quality, as though he were consciously trying to subdue its natural rhythms. "Six years as a mercenary teach you a lot. Books—" He broke off, fumbling for words, leaving the unspoken sentence to hang derisively in mid-air. "You and my beloved poet-brother can tell me all the old stories about our Pelasgian ancestry. But I have *seen*—" He stopped again, fists clenched, frowning. "I served with Cretans, you know that. Hill-Cretans."

I nodded. I knew all about Antimenidas and his private obsession with Crete: to hear him you would have thought every noble family on Lesbos descended from King Minos in person. A strange legend he had pieced together, from soldiers and merchants and wandering minstrels, from beggars on the waterfront, from any Mediterranean traveller who would talk for the price of a drink. He told us of great maze-like palaces built in the old days, of black ships and strange goddesses, of fire and rapine and a terrible tidal wave roaring inland over harbour-works and cities and the proud, rich, peacock-elegant nobles in them. Some—not many—escaped, sailing northwards, away from that vast convulsion, bringing their knowledge and art and leisured way of life to the coast of Ionia and the islands.

Few people believed Antimenidas, especially since he seldom spoke of these things unless he was far gone in wine. But sometimes I wonder, still. It is true (and a thing which foreign visitors frequently point out to us) that our freedom and elegance and individualism compare very well with conditions elsewhere in Greece—especially as regards women. When I heard Antimenidas speak of those magnificent Cretan court ladies—legendary perhaps, but vital and believable—who were the equals of men and in ways more than a match for them, I found no difficulty in imagining such beings. How should I, when the freedom I enjoyed so nearly matched their own?

I said: "Hail, brother-Cretan."

Antimenidas seemed not to have heard; he was pursuing some private path of thought, and finding it unexpectedly stony. At last he said: "When we were fighting in Judaea they didn't like it, my

Cretans. There wasn't much you could put your finger on. Just a feeling in the air. But I found out finally."

He stopped again, frowned, rubbed his nose, and said: "They had a tradition that these men of Judaea were their kin, that they'd sailed to Crete, generations back. Interesting, don't you think?" The black eyes met and held mine. "A tenuous thread, perhaps. But then so was the thread that Ariadne paid out in the labyrinth; and *that* led to a bull. Or a king. Or perhaps both. I wouldn't presume to argue with you on such matters, my dear."

It was a sunny day: but my hands and feet seemed suddenly ice-cold.

So, last night, I sat between the candlesticks and stared at my shadowy, flame-tinted image in the great bronze mirror. Night was kind to me, hiding the grey streaks in my thick, wiry-springing black curls, smoothing out the lines from nostril to mouth, the fine web of laughter-wrinkles round my eyes. *What unimaginable blood runs in my veins, what history has gone to make up this I, this time-bound self?* The robe scorched my flesh, as though it were Deianira's. Too-swarthy skin, irregular features in a wedge-shaped face, small bird-boned body. I smiled bitterly. *How could this two-cubit I ever touch the heavens?* The question—and the answers I had sought to it—echoed mockingly in my mind.

I raised both hands to my cheeks, as though protecting myself against—what? Self-knowledge? Time? Despair? The rings on my fingers glinted in the candle-light, each a wrought, tangible reminder of past passions: the entwined gold snakes, the great cold sapphire, the double signet with the lapis inlay, the dark Egyptian scarab. At my throat hung the necklace of gold pomegranates, a family heirloom so old that no one now knew its history. How many Persephones, I wondered, had worn it down to the cold abyss before me?

I loosened the girdle of my robe, and let it fall in a heap at my feet as I stood up between the candlesticks, naked and burning. *Changed,* the voice whispered, *all changed. No,* I cried silently, *no: I am what I was*—and my hands flew up, touched my breasts, seeking reassurance, knowing them high and firm as they had always been, seeing the nipples dark and neat in the mirror before me, my hands moving as though of themselves, as though they were the hands of some other person, over my still-slender hips and firm, smooth, gently curving belly. The fire raged in me, I was quicklime. *Tonight. It must be tonight,* I thought.

I remembered, hot with shame, the words I had scratched on a scrap of papyrus a week before. *Come now. Quickly. Quickly*—buying love-charms like any village girl, humiliating myself to that filthy old hag—oh yes, she knew, she knew too well who I was—intriguing with contemptuous, moon-faced sluts for nail-parings and scraps of hair, open utterly now in my extremity of desire, a scandal to put my brother's in the shade. *Wryneck, wryneck, draw that man to my house*—the crucified bird flickering on its wheel in the firelight, the spells and burnt herbs and small, obscene sacrifices, there is nothing I have left untried, no shameful trick to which I have not stooped. But if the Goddess has betrayed my devotion and my trust, where else can I turn? She is cold and capricious as the foam from which she was born, and her eternally renewed virginity the cruellest deception of all.

The moon was at the full now. My skin prickled: I knew, without looking, that the slave-girl—Thalia, yes, I remembered: how could I have forgotten?—had come softly through to the curtained archway from the bath-house, and was standing there in the shadows, watching me. Perhaps that is the answer, I thought: to drive out fire with fire. I sat down again and called softly: "Thalia."

She caught her breath, startled. "My lady," she whispered. She was behind me now: I heard the crisp rustle of her skirts, and the sound of her sandals padding across the floor. In the bronze mirror I glimpsed a young, nervous face, eyes two great questioning smudges, hair braided in a heavy coil. She had no idea what to do with her hands: she either clasped them frantically, as though in agony, or else let them hang, awkward and inert, at her sides. I picked up the pot of lanolin and began to wipe off my make-up.

"Is the bath ready?" I said.

"Yes, my lady." The same choked, breathy whisper. What was she feeling? Shyness? Fear? Embarrassment?

"Shall I bring your bath-robe, my lady?"

I paused, stretched luxuriously, and yawned like a cat: I could feel a quiver run through her as I did so, like the ripple moving over a field of green barley, the spring breeze that sets leaves dancing and stipples a calm sea with fugitive shadows.

Desire? Surely not. And yet—

"Thank you," I said, and turned to watch her move across the candle-lit room, picking her way with neat, short steps to the big press in the corner, beside my bed. She was slighter than I had thought: there was a touching fragility about her movements. She had

to reach up on tip-toe to fetch down the saffron-and-green striped robe, and memory stirred uneasily in me as I watched. *Atthis,* I thought: *of course;* yet the realization came without surprise, or indeed any violence of emotion. Atthis as an awkward schoolgirl, eyes starred with tears, waving good-bye to me on the quayside at Mytilene; Atthis, a chrysalis no longer, but the small, brilliant butterfly who burst on my senses when I came back from my five years of Sicilian exile. Even the coil of hair—and then I stopped short, remembering the miniature that hung in my study alcove, seeing the pathetic imitation of it that Thalia had achieved.

She came back with the robe, smiling shyly, her great brown eyes anxious and adoring at once. I turned back to the mirror and let her wait while, very slowly and meticulously, I wiped the last traces of make-up from my face. Then our eyes met in the mirror and I nodded, leaning back as she slipped the robe over my arms and wrapped it about me. Her hands—how well I knew the symptoms!—hesitated at each physical contact, in an agony of uncertainty. I smiled to myself, and then thought, disconcerted: It is not only the Goddess who is cruel. So many years her votary, and can I hope to have escaped her nature?

I walked through to the bath-house, beckoning Thalia after me. The water was steaming, fragrant with pine-resin. I lay back in it, letting the heat work through me, watching Thalia as she stood there, fingers unconsciously stroking out the folds in the heavy linen robe. I smiled at her, feeling nothing except the blessed warmth of the water, conscious of my power.

"Now," I said, "you may wash me."

She came to the side of the marble bath—slowly, very slowly—and I saw her tense her muscles to hide the trembling of her hands. She washed my back, and all the time her breath was coming faster and shallower. I felt nothing, nothing, nothing. Then I lay back again, and waited, smiling, still. As she touched my breasts the tremors ran faster and faster through her till she could hardly stand, and she snatched her hand away as though the water had suddenly become scalding hot.

Not yet. Wait. Be cruel.

She wrapped me in a heavy warm towel, and we went back to the bedroom again. I sat on the side of my bed, still in the towel, while she unpinned and brushed out my hair.

"Now the powder," I said, and almost purred as she dusted my

shoulders and feet with the fine-smelling talc Iadmon had given me in Samos.

Time enough, I thought, and took her hand in mine, and shook a little talc over my breasts, and guided her fingers to smooth it out. She was sobbing silently now, the tears streaming down from wide eyes, and I slipped my other hand inside her robe, caressing the high young breasts till they rose under my touch and her lips reached out to me blindly, and I tasted the salt of her tears. Nothing still. Nothing. You cannot drive out fire with dead ashes. Suddenly I felt active disgust surging up through the emptiness and the boredom—disgust with myself, with her, with the whole absurd situation. I flung her off me violently: she lay on the floor with hurt, bewildered eyes, staring up at me, terrified by this sudden change of mood. I wrapped the robe round me again, and found, to my astonishment, that I was shivering.

"Get out," I said. "Out of my sight."

"I don't understand—I thought—"

"You thought, you *thought*—what right have you to *think*?"

The dry tinder of my frustration flamed up in sudden fury. It must have been a comical sight: two small women, inarticulate with rage and fear, drifting rapidly towards physical violence.

"I love you, my lady." It was a thin, supplicating whisper, almost inaudible.

"Get out!" I screamed, my last shred of dignity blown away. *How dare this nothing behave like a human being, blackmail my senses and my emotions with her cheap tricks?* My fingers crooked themselves in an atavistic reflex, became long-nailed claws; and the girl fled. I heard the frantic patter of her feet down the stairs, the slam of a door in the servants' quarter.

Well, I thought grimly, Praxinoa should know how to deal with *that* situation by now. I took a deep breath, willing the rage in my body to subside. Little by little the blood began to pulse slower through my veins, the violent pounding of my heart sank to a quiet, regular beat. I walked across to the window and flung the shutters wide. Cold and pure, the moonlight streamed down over the mountain: somewhere an owl whickered, and from a tavern by the harbour there came the distant sound of singing, the plangent thrum of a lyre.

The moon is high, I thought; but where is Endymion? My flesh crawled with desire and humiliation. This last time. This time he

must come. Aphrodite, cruel goddess, I implore you, make him come now, quickly. Now before it is too late.

A dog barked: strung out across the strait I could see six faint dots of light, where the night-fishers were waiting for the shoals to rise. Slowly, like a sleep-walker, I pulled on a heavy woollen robe and my black travelling-cloak. Slowly I pinned and braided up my hair, binding a single sprig of rosemary into it. But I put on no scent, and left my face bare of cosmetics. The day he first kissed me he said, laughing: "Why do you paint yourself like an old whore?" My hand had flown out at him before I thought; he caught both my wrists, imprisoned them with strong, callused fingers, and held me at arm's-length from him, like a child or a doll. "Wipe that damned mess off," he said at length, and let me go. The wind blew through his thick brown curls. "Whores need it. You don't." And tears of rage and gratitude stinging my eyes, I did as he told me.

I walked out into the silent corridor, down the stairs, across the courtyard. There were no signs of Praxinoa: presumably she was comforting the wretched Thalia. I tiptoed quietly through the lobby, Scylax was nodding in his cubby-hole, though I knew very well he was awake: we played an elaborate conventional charade on such occasions to preserve the domestic proprieties. Apollo twitched and snuffled, curled up at the old man's feet, hunting long-dead hares up the hillside of his dreams. I slipped through the front-door, taking care to leave it open, and walked back past the fountain and the shrine to the garden-gate. Once outside, however, I turned away from the town, and set off up the mule-track into the mountains.

The moon shone down on me as I moved, and my shadow danced, faint and fluttering, over the silvered stones. When I stopped for a moment I could hear the minuscule sounds of small nocturnal creatures in the brushwood, and, away to the right of me, the cool clear chatter of water on rock. My footsteps, as I crunched over loose shale, sounded preternaturally loud. But presently the path was swallowed up by the pine-forest, and here I walked ghostly-silent, on a thick carpet of fallen needles, with only the occasional random moonbeam to light my way.

The cave lies about half-way up the ridge, close beside a little spring. It is not really a cave at all, but a hollow formed by three gigantic rocks, tumbled together earthquake-fashion against the steep fall of the mountain. Others besides us must have used it: the floor of the hollow is covered with a thick layer of dried grass. The spring gushes out from the rock-face into a worn stone basin, bright

with green weed, and spills over down a narrow, stony runnel. There is a tiny shrine beside it, sacred to the Nymphs, a whitewashed niche with a lamp and some cracked clay figurines and, sometimes, a withered bunch of flowers.

When I got there all was still and the cave empty, as I knew it would be. But it was early yet. The lamp in the shrine was flickering; I took the oil-jar from the ledge where I had hidden it, and filled the lamp. The wick needed trimming: that took up a little more time. Then I prayed to the Nymphs, who are kindly deities, and have always been near me in country places: but my words seemed to echo through a great emptiness, as though the tutelary spirits of this place were either gone, or sleeping, or indifferent to me. So I dipped my face in the stone basin, bracing myself against the shock of the icy water, feeling my skin tauten and glow at that astringent touch. I drank a little, remembering, as I did so, that I had not eaten all day. Yet I felt no hunger: indeed, at that moment I could not have stomached food of any sort.

When I had drunk I came back, sat myself down at the mouth of the cave, wrapped in my cloak, and waited.

The pines were sparser here, and I had a clear view of the moon and stars overhead. He must come now, I thought: he must, he *must.* At every crack of a twig, each faint rustle in the darkness, I started up, tense with expectancy. For eight days now, nothing. Not even a letter or a message. No explanation, no apology. People shrug and make evasive answers to my enquiries. I can see the pitying contempt in their eyes.

Time passed; the moon moved inexorably across the sky, and the Pleiades followed. It was after midnight now, and still I kept my vigil alone.

When the first grey was streaking the eastern sky I walked quickly down the mountain track, numb, not letting myself think, a dead husk. A kitchen-maid at the well behind the courtyard stared at me as I came in, and I saw her furtively gesture with finger and thumb against the evil eye. Thin, hot wires of pain twitched under my eyelids, behind my temples: the skin seemed drawn tight over a burning skull, and fiery granules rasped through every nerve.

I lay down on my bed as though it were a rack, while the mocking light lanced through the shutters, and cocks began to crow in chorus, and day swung up, bright, autumnal, full of false promise. Let me sleep, I prayed, let me sleep or let me die. Then I remembered the small, iridescent glass phial that Alcaeus had brought me from Egypt,

and which (for reasons I can only surmise) I had hidden away at the bottom of a cosmetics-chest, and forgotten for twenty-five years. Now his words came back to me, the hard yet epicene malice in his grey eyes as he said: "For you, my dear, nepenthe: the blessed gift of forgetfulness. A paradox, you think? Now, perhaps. All your senses are open to the sun: you turn lightwards like a budding flower. But later—later you will understand. Not, I fancy, that you will be grateful for my thoughtfulness on your behalf. The gods have bestowed some rare gifts on you, Sappho, but gratitude is hardly one of them."

"Nepenthe?" I repeated, too bemused by his smooth, barbed words to be angry as I should. (I was not so young and foolish then, either: it was, I recall, just before my twenty-fifth birthday.)

"Yes indeed. Homer's true prescription. You should be flattered, my dear: this little bottle cost me more than I care to think about."

"You must have had some good reason of your own for giving it me, then," I said spitefully. Alcaeus' closeness with money was notorious.

"Perhaps so," he agreed, a gleam of amusement in his eye. "You must exercise your admirable wit on determining the motives behind my generosity. I may say it works extremely well. It was sold me by a quite *terrifying* priest in Memphis, and I would no more have dared ask him for proofs of its effectiveness than have desecrated an Egyptian tomb. But I tried it on young Lycus the other day, with most spectacular results."

I took the glass phial from him awkwardly, embarrassed despite myself at the reference to Lycus, a black-eyed creature whose dark, lustrous hair was as long as a girl's, and who could hardly have been more than fourteen when Alcaeus picked him up on his return from Egypt. Lately, too, he had—out of sheer mischief—been encouraging the little beast to make eyes at my young brother Larichus.

"I haven't told you the dosage yet," Alcaeus said, watching me closely. "That, as you'll realize, is rather important. Three drops in a little wine will give you a good night's sleep. Five drops will make you pass out for twelve hours. Ten drops"—he gestured expressively—"is a really lethal dose. It need *never* be repeated, my dear. So be sure to have your coin ready for the ferryman before you take it."

Now, years later, I turned the glass phial over and over in my hands, resenting the cold insight which it symbolized, the curious malice that had governed its giving, yet unable to deny my need

for the forgetfulness it held. I took the little jug of wine which Praxinoa had left on my bedside table (when did *that* start? four years ago? five?) and poured out some into a cup, and mixed it with water. Then I opened the phial and sniffed: the very odour was sweet, drowsy, soporific. Carefully I measured the drops: one, two, three. An imperceptible pause. Four. Five.

Why not? Now. Quickly. Without pain.

No. It would give *him* such satisfaction. To be proved right after a quarter of a century, what exquisite delight! *No.* With a decisive gesture I put the stopper back. Then, before I could change my mind, I took two quick steps to the window and flung the phial out. I heard the small, brittle, final sound as it smashed on the flags below. So much for that. I picked the cup up, conscious now of my utter exhaustion, of the dry, burning agony in my bones and nerves. Sleep. I must sleep. But another thought struck me, and I went quickly out, down the corridor towards the silent, shuttered room that belongs to my daughter Cleïs. I had not thought of her all yesterday, or for several days before that: it is a week now since she went to stay with Megara, in the square grey house on the citadel, and I feel as though some stranger, a casual guest, had departed, leaving no trace of her presence behind. Because she has rejected me, I must, in self-defence, erase her from my consciousness.

Ah, Cleïs, my lovely one, it was not always this way. You were like a golden flower, and we loved each other, Cleïs, the hatred, and the violence and the terrible unforgiving, unforgettable words had not happened. Guilt, jealously, bitterness: is this all the harvest of our sweet spring together?

Everything was still in place—the bedspread with its chequered pattern of green, yellow, and black, the carved obsidian toad with the jewelled eyes, the portrait you painted of Atthis just before my illness (no, I must be honest, *that* always made me uneasy: what could have been going on in your mind, even then?), the scattered rugs and carelessly rolled books.

But then I looked closer, and saw—why only now?—that you had, after all, taken some things with you, all fragile, personal, private possessions: your birds' eggs; the purple scarf Hippias gave you (not that, I can't face that yet; give me time: must we always acknowledge our guilt?), a few small trinkets of no particular value, your worn, much-scribbled-on copy of the *Odyssey,* with your own pictures in the margin—do you remember how amused I was by your Polyphemus? So irresistibly like Pittacus after his third bottle—and what else I

could not be sure: the room was there, on the surface it was the same, and then the small twinges of absence would begin to nag at my mind, another missing piece fall into place.

It was broad daylight by the time I got back to my own room. Once again I sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the cup of drugged wine. This time I took a sip, realizing as I did so that I was very scared indeed. I had nothing but Alcaeus' word for the nature of this drug, and it would not be the first time he had played an embarrassing practical joke on me. But something obstinately drove me on: whatever else, I was not going to, could not, let that man intimidate me.

I took another sip.

The only effect I noticed at once was a very faint numbing of the tongue. The taste (which the wine could not disguise) was intriguing: heavy, sweetish, yet with a dry, musty-fresh underflavour that put me in mind of a threshing-floor at harvest-time.

Just as I was nerving myself to swallow the rest I heard a vague commotion down below: old Scylax expostulating, an indistinguishable gabble from Praxinoa, and a third voice—high, edgy, irritable—which I instantly recognized as belonging to my brother Charaxus. After a moment or two there came footsteps on the stairs: my defending forces had clearly been routed. He strode in without even bothering to knock, sniffed, blew out his lips disgustedly, and flung the shutters wide open. We looked at each other for a moment without saying anything.

Though for years I refused to admit the fact to myself, I have always had an instinctive and total antipathy towards Charaxus. It is ironic that the one action in his life which (however infuriating at the time) at least convinced me he was a real human being should, by a series of misunderstandings, have merely driven the wedge deeper between us.

I stared at him now, observing the unhealthy little paunch he carried before him like some oriental badge of office, the squat barrel-body set on short, slightly bowed legs, the plump fingers with their expensive, vulgar rings. Though it was autumn, the walk up the hill had left him sweating: he mopped his forehead and grunted. His little argument with Scylax could not have improved matters, either. He really is a hog, I thought, with tranquil loathing. A white, larded, bristly hog, rooting after truffles, and evil-tempered when disturbed. Then it occurred to me that my own appearance must leave much to be desired just at that moment, and, unexpectedly, I giggled.

Perhaps I was a little hysterical. Or perhaps that Egyptian drug had unexpected properties.

His eyebrows went up, and he looked at the half-full wine-cup. For once he seemed to be enjoying himself in my company: there was a lip-licking air of anticipatory relish about him. He sat down, wrinkling his nose, savouring his undeniable position of advantage. Well, I thought, two can play at that game. I settled myself back against the pillows, sipped at my drugged wine, and waited.

Having made his point about my drinking habits, Charaxus proceeded to scrutinize first my face (with obvious disgust) and then the bed and the linen-press, as though expecting to find a lover hidden there, or at least some unmistakable evidence of my gross debauches. This, I had to admit, was rather effective. But then he ruined the whole thing by saying: "This room smells like a whorehouse." My brother can be relied upon to produce the appropriate platitude for all occasions.

I smiled (poor booby, it was like taking sweets from a child) and said: "My dear Charaxus, how travel does broaden one's experience."

He flushed, and rubbed the back of his hand across his nose: a sure danger-signal. A warm, delightful torpor was stealing through my body: I had all the time in the world before me.

Charaxus said: "Now listen to me. I don't propose to argue about what happened in Egypt. That's my affair—"

"It was a family affair."

"And so is this."

I shrugged, and drank a little more wine.

"Your position," said my brother, "is extremely vulnerable. I would have preferred to avoid such plain speaking, but you leave me no alternative—"

"What a liar you are, Charaxus. You came round here with one idea in your head: to humiliate me."

"I see there's no reasoning with you. Very well, then; I shall give you some facts. One: your recent behaviour has alienated all responsible people in this city, including your friends. You have disgraced the class to which you belong. You have caused grave scandal in our society. These are not small things."

He paused, apparently expecting a comment.

"Go on," I said. "I prefer the speech whole, not in installments."

"There is also the question of your financial position."

Ah, I thought. Now we come to it.

"I am right in saying—am I not?—that you now have no assets what-

soever apart from this house." His whole voice and manner changed when he was talking about money, became quick, shrewd, authoritative. "The capital which your husband left you has been spent, and there is very little to show for it. You no longer derive any income from your—guest-pupils." His tongue curled unpleasantly round that last word. "You are living very largely on credit—I think I could tell you just how much you owe in the city, and to whom."

"Naturally," I said. "Tradesmen have no secrets from each other."

He shrugged: he could afford not to take offence if he felt so inclined.

I said: "You are forgetting my patrimony. I still have a share in the family estate."

"That," Charaxus observed smoothly, "is a debatable point. I agree that according to our father's will the four of us were left equal shares. But Eurygyus died as a minor, and so his share reverted by law to the eldest male descendant—"

"The eldest descendant," I said. "There is no distinction of sex."

"The court, you will recall, decided otherwise."

"I also recall who the judges were."

Charaxus said: "You are, of course, at leisure to reopen the case if you wish. It will be a long and costly business, but—" He spread his hands expressively.

I said: "There is my own share." I knew what was coming.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. But there are two points again, which I really must remind you of. A clause in our father's will specifically places your share of the estate under my administration from the day I come of age—"

"It also guarantees me a proportionate income from the vineyards and olive-groves."

"Just so." Charaxus rubbed his hands. "But since you chose to mortgage your share to me when you were regrettably short of ready money, that provision no longer applies."

He cocked an enquiring glance at me, half-triumphant, half-apprehensive, as though expecting an outburst of fury, perhaps a physical assault: but the drug was taking firm hold of me now, and (in any case) I had used up most of my temper on poor Thalia. When I made no comment, Charaxus said: "You are in an unfortunate position, sister."

I sighed wearily. "All right," I said. "What are your terms?"

Charaxus placed his fingertips together and stared at the floor.

"You can keep this house," he said. "No, don't start protesting; if

every merchant you owed money to foreclosed—*and they well might* —the place would be sold over your head."

"I see," I said; and indeed the picture was all too clear.

"Furthermore, I will cancel the mortgage on your share of the estate and pay you an agreed income from the profits on all sales."

"Are you quite sure you can afford to?" I asked tartly. The unprecedented—and, I must admit, most uncharacteristic—way in which he had squandered money on Doricha in Egypt had made dangerous inroads into the family capital.

"Oh yes," he said, mildly: "I can afford to—now."

An unwilling flicker of admiration rose in me. It is not every man who can recoup his own extravagance with so sure a hand as my brother (an exceptional vintage helped, but it was his knowledge that placed the exports); nor, indeed, every merchant who travels the Aegean with his own cargoes, as far afield as Egypt too, in search of good markets—especially if he is nearly fifty. But money always has had the most extraordinary effect on Charaxus, ever since I can remember.

"Now," I said, "you had better tell me your conditions."

"Very simple, my dear." But he looked ill at ease as he said it. He got up and stared out of the window, with his back to me. "There is only one condition: you must give up this fellow, this boatman or whatever he is. I must have your word that you will never see him again."

I said nothing: there was nothing to say.

"Think," said Charaxus. "You will have a house and an adequate income. The scandal will soon die down if you do nothing to encourage it. It seems a very generous arrangement to me. You will have ample time for your writing. There may be some pain at first—I know that, who better? But you have Cleïs still, my dear. A daughter's love is truer, more deep and enduring, than some vagrant lust for a common fisherman."

I stared at him, realizing that he *meant* it, that he was full of self-congratulation on having found so reasonable a solution to a vexing family problem. This was how his mind worked. Yet the malice was there, unacknowledged: "vagrant lust," whether he remembered it or not, had been the phrase I used to describe his own liaison with Doricha. And how much did he know about the breach between me and Cleïs?

"I'm sorry," I said, and in a curious way I *was* sorry: the whole situation lay so far beyond his comprehension. "But I can't promise

you that. It's blackmail, Charaxus. Besides—" I broke off, unable to justify or explain myself: how could I talk to my brother of dignity, self-respect, words that for him were smooth, debased coins, rubbed into a meaningless blur by much handling?

In the silence that followed I could hear his heavy breathing, with the faint catarrhal wheeze that never seemed to leave him, winter or summer.

"Then I am sorry too," he said at last. "I had hoped to give you some sort of free decision. But whatever your choice, the end will be the same."

A cold trickle of terror ran through my body, eclipsing momentarily the numbing effect of the drug.

"No," I whispered, "no, no, no," like a child who has dropped some fragile, beautiful toy and tries to will the moment back, make things as they were before.

Charaxus said: "Your young friend has been—how shall I put it?—somewhat *indiscriminate* in his favours. So I had a friendly little chat with him. He proved more amenable than I expected."

"You bribed him," I said dully.

"Not at all. I told him that one or two well-connected citizens were considering whether to lodge charges of adultery against him—which, I may add for your benefit, is quite true. I also told him that if he were to leave the country voluntarily, the matter would go no further."

Whether from the shock (though I had known in my heart, surely I had known) or the increasing effect of the drug, I felt a total physical paralysis spreading through my body. Every muscle seemed stiff, sluggish: it was as though Charaxus had become some obscene male Medusa, gorgonizing me into brittle grey stone.

"I see," I said, but my lips scarcely moved.

"The young man shipped as a deck-hand on a cargo-vessel two days ago." Charaxus smiled complacently. "I have a certain influence with the harbour authorities. Everything was arranged in the most discreet way."

The last hope. "This ship," I whispered. "Has it—"

"Sailed? Indeed yes." He might have added: Would I have been here otherwise?

Two words, like slow bubbles, formed themselves on my lips.

"Where?" I whispered. "When?"

Charaxus stared at me, and for the first time I thought I saw an expression of genuine pity on his face.

"Yesterday, at dawn. The long haul to Sicily."

It was one of his own vessels, then. Wine to Sicily, grain on the homeward run. Sailing south of the Peloponnese, by Crete and Cythera, to avoid haulage-dues at the Isthmus, with an underpaid crew and the constant risk of savage storms across the Ionian Sea.

As though reading my mind, Charaxus said: "Not all my ships go down, you know: give me credit for a little business sense. Besides, that particular young man is much more likely to end with a knife in his back."

I said: "Go away now. Please go away."

He hesitated, shifting from foot to foot.

"You must see the whole thing was hopeless," he said at last.

"Oh yes. Quite hopeless. I knew that." My eyelids began to sink.

"You've had a shock. Of course. But you'll soon get over it."

"I expect so."

"You ought to start writing again. It would take your mind off things."

Perhaps I will, I thought. Perhaps I will. But not as you suppose. This time it is different. This time I must take the shattered pieces of my life and see them whole. I must purge my suffering with words, cast out the pain visibly, cauterize to heal. There is nothing else left for me.

I tried to smile. "Thank you, brother," I said.

"Everything will be all right. You'll see. I'll attend to all the legal details today. There's nothing for you to worry about."

I closed my eyes, and seemed to plummet down a sheer black vortex, an engulfing throat of darkness. But before I could open my mouth to scream, or catch my breath, I was asleep. I never heard Charaxus go.

I was wrong to mistrust the Egyptian drug Alcaeus gave me. I slept, as he said I would, for twelve hours: it was dark when I awoke. I stretched till my muscles cracked. It had been months since I felt so buoyant. Then the mists cleared, and I remembered. But the pain had lost its rawness: it was as though during my drugged sleep a fine protective skin had grown over the nerve.

He was gone, irrevocably, and I remained.

Over, finished, broken.

I was forty-nine years old—very nearly fifty, indeed—and now the Goddess, herself eternally young, eternally virgin as the new spring came round, had played her last, most merciless trick on me.

But my body refused to acknowledge the words, or their meaning:

unaccountably that sense of euphoria, of sheer physical well-being, persisted and spread. Had Alcaeus foreseen this too?

I took a lamp, walked through to my library, and unlocked the great chest that stands beside the south window. Here, tumbled in hopeless confusion, lay the fragmentary record of my life—bundles of letters, invitations, love-tokens, half-finished drafts of poems, old bills, journals (I never had the patience to keep one for more than a month or two at a time), the trivia that every woman accumulates, quite unconsciously, and finds a recurring surprise whenever she spring-cleans or moves house. I stooped and prodded into this musty confusion of papers, smelling the camphor-wood, the dusty, faded tang of old documents, old emotions, all a dead past. Well, I thought wryly, here's material enough to raise the dead, indeed. And as the words passed silently through my mind, my fingers closed over that old, battered silver locket. I lifted it out and sprang the catch, knowing what I would find, seeing the blue ribbon and the lustrous curl of dark auburn hair through a sudden dazzle of tears. *I loved you once, Atthis, long ago, when my own girlhood was still all flowers*—the heartbreaking awkwardness, thin arms and legs like a colt's, the great grey eyes and the ridiculous dusting of freckles. Atthis, Atthis, my true spring love, what has become of us?

I closed the lid of the chest: the hinges creaked, and fine dust flew up as I turned the heavy key. Tomorrow, I thought, tomorrow I will begin to find the answer. I went back to my bedroom feeling curiously at peace. When I got there my supper was waiting for me on the bedside table, and my finest Coan nightdress, with the tiny embroidered roses round the yoke, had been laid out for me. It was only then I noticed I was still wearing the bath-robe in which I had fallen asleep.

In the shadow beyond the lamp a slight, timorous figure stood, hands folded, waiting.

"Thalia," I said, and at the note in my voice she stepped forward, breathless—eager, into the light. "Thalia—" And then she was in my arms, sobbing and shaking, her warm, sweet-smelling hair against my cheek, while I stroked and soothed her as though she were some small, frightened animal. I said: "Did Praxinoa send you?" and she nodded, unable to speak, still trembling violently. *A small, ungainly child.* I held her closer, feeling the hardness in my own breast break, loosen, flow free in a warm flood of tears, the deadness quicken, memories crowding my mind, the past of a sudden spring river, lit with unlooked-for sunshine. Tomorrow the search would begin. But tonight, at least, I had a brief, sweet reprieve.