

**THE VERY WOLF**  
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## α

On the third day of the Dionysia festival a small woman with brown hair and an unremarkable face knocked on the door of a mansion in a fashionable street. It took many minutes for anyone to stick their head into the street because the house in question was in mourning, and the servants in mourning most of all. In the mess and confusion left by the festival the woman stood holding a bundle to her chest.

She bowed to the porter. 'I understand this is where the servant Eponi lived, and where she has been brought for her Death Rites.' The old man gave her a suspicious scowl. The little brown-haired woman looked utterly bereft. 'My name is Makaria Kotyou. I knew her. I want to help wash the body.' She held up the bundle as if that would speak for her. The porter scowled harder, but the sight of her teary eyes framed by her himation convinced him. He'd known grief too well, and he didn't reckon you could fake the real thing.

The porter led Makaria down the rear passages of a magnificent and tastefully decorated villa not to the cellar or the kitchens, but to the main reception room. It was right in the heart of the house, and she knew there would be an elegant courtyard just beyond.

The room itself was long and restrained, with a gallery of windows high above on one side just below the ceiling and one large one which Makaria assumed would open onto the eastward bay. The walls had been painted to look as if they too had windows, but on a grand scale, and in each was a perfect piece of the city beyond. One had a fine galley with a gold animal skin for an ensign: the Argo, she assumed. No doubt the rest of the capital city of the Kingdom of Pontos was peopled by gods and heroes, and the house's owner, the courtesan Chryseis, could look out her real and imagined windows at the Sinope she preferred.

There was a huddle of women servants at one side, dwarfed by their surroundings. They were mixing oils on a little chafing dish and sorting through a large chest, finding something for Eponi to wear to her grave. At the furthest end there was a high table with a sheet

draped across it, and Makaria could see the soft peaks of a human body beneath: the toes, the nose, the breasts. Cutting through the powerful incense in the oils was another sweet scent, but not a pleasant one. It was flesh on the point of rot.

'A friend, she says, of the girl,' the porter announced, and all the women looked up. Makaria clutched her bundle tighter to her chest and stared blankly at them. The man withdrew, and then one of the women, a stout lady of older years, stepped forward to where Makaria stood.

'I'm the cook here,' she said, in a heavy Ionian accent, 'And since the girl had no family we are taking care of her. This is the housekeeper, who is in charge.' She nodded to a thin lady, who nodded at Makaria. 'You're just in time: we're about to begin. You knew her?'

'A little,' Makaria said. 'My cousins had a bit do with her. She and they are Galatian, you see.'

'I see,' the housekeeper concurred, looking Makaria up and down. 'Your...?'

'Mother,' Makaria confirmed, knowing what the housekeeper was thinking. 'My mother's Galatian. That's why I said to my cousins I would come and wash her. Make sure it's done as she would want.'

'Oh?' the cook said, glancing back at the housekeeper. 'There are special rites?'

'Everyone has their own ways. These, though, are only for initiates.' The housekeeper looked sceptical. 'Like the Mysteries,' Makaria explained, holding her bundle forward for her to inspect. The woman took it, untied its string and rifled through its contents. There was a lump of incense, a black cord, a couple of gold coins and a small wooden carving of a boar Makaria had stolen from her mother's chest that morning. The housekeeper held the last object up to the oil-lamp, a look of intense dislike upon her face.

'Teutates,' Makaria explained. The housekeeper didn't seem to know the Celtic god of war and death, and for that Makaria was thankful. 'I wondered, dear ladies, if I might have a few moments alone with her to perform the rites as the druids dictate?'

The cook looked up sharply. 'Druids?'

'Like Magi, but more... rustic.'

'I know what druids are, child-murdering bastards...'

The housekeeper held her hand up to quiet her second-in-command. 'Please. Not here. Not today. Whatever she was mixed up in, it's only right that the girl be dealt with by one of her own. Come,' she said, putting the boar back in the cloth and beckoning to Makaria. 'She was brought here late last night, still in the clothes in which she was found. Let us begin by stripping her. Then you can have some time to say your prayers.'

Makaria had only been to one funeral – her aunt's, in that fateful spring in Timoneon – and she had never dressed a murdered corpse. As the women's hands gripped the corners of the sheet she realised she was holding her breath. When the fabric lifted, though, she found herself staring at something she hadn't expected: a handsome head, pale and dirty blonde. Its pallor seemed to shine in the soft light of the lamps and the darkened room. Makaria might be looking at her own mother, and she felt genuine tears sting at her eyes. Even the set of her broad, lean shoulders reminded her of Mama.

'Ladies,' she began, but her voice was strange and quiet. The other women looked up. 'Actually... Might I do this alone too?' The housekeeper seemed to see something genuinely moving in Makaria, because her scowl softened.

'Everyone,' she said to the household, 'Let's do as she says. Come,' she said again, and headed towards the door that Makaria had entered with the porter. Everyone else trooped out behind her, leaving Makaria alone in the dark and silence with the pale girl. Makaria forced herself to turn her back on the body, walk over to the door and put a metal pot before it so she'd hear if she was disturbed. Then she turned to face the wretch on the table.

Makaria knew she had only a few minutes. She pulled her himation off her head and threw it to the ground. She lit some incense close to the door so the other women would smell it. Then she turned to the corpse and began stripping it down.

Makaria had no idea what Eponi had been intending to tell her or give her, but she knew that she couldn't have died more than a night before she was meant to meet her. There was no reason to think that there would be something that her dead body could tell Makaria about this disturbing coincidence, but now she was here standing over her corpse Makaria felt a strange sense of duty to find something –

anything – that might explain what had happened. And if that might bring her closer to knowing what Eponi knew, so much the better.

The fact that it involved the desecration of a body was one of those exquisite philosophical problems, she decided: what is the Good Citizen to do? Is the Public Good served better by observing the Rites, or by investigating an outrage?

She went over every stitch and she inspected every pin. The dress was plain and coarse, the broaches cheap plated tin. She wound the girdle through her fingers inch by inch. An invocation on a dull ring meant nothing to Makaria, and she set it aside for later. The girl was supposed to have drowned herself, but Makaria could tell this was unlikely. She'd grown up in a fishing village and seen drowned men wash up on the beach. They all had the same doubled-over, limb-curved pose from hanging in the water. She'd once tried it for herself in the shallows. Face down in the lapping waves of the Euxine Sea, she felt her own arms and legs fold gently into themselves before her shrieking mother and older brothers fished her out, fearing the worst. But Eponi's limbs and neck were so straight they could have been bound at the time of her death. Perhaps they were, Makaria reasoned, and that would make suicide impossible.

After a fervent and thorough search of Eponi's salt-caked, still-moist clothes, Makaria knew no more than she had when she walked in.

She leant over the body, with its blue veins and eerie white skin. She would have been deathly even in life. If Makaria could have raised the dead she would gladly have taken the metaphysical comeuppance that was sure to follow. She hung her head, shut her eyes, and the acrid smell of corpse and brine filled her nose. There was nothing for it but to go inside, to all the hiding places she'd learned like a litany in the warren of government offices in the Stoa. Eponi had been a professional, she reminded herself yet again. In some strange way her body was a message, her final seditious act.

She used a lamp to peer inside the nose, the ears and the mouth. Getting the jaw to open took the foot of a table-top lamp stand. She loosened the girl's hair, took apart her hair-broach completely, ran her fingers through the claggy strands. Still there was nothing. That meant going deeper still. She didn't bother with the vagina; in this day and age that was the first place someone would look, and not a secure part

of a captured woman's person. Refusing to allow herself time to think, she dipped her finger in the purified oil and slid it into the corpse's cold rectum. If there was something small enough to be hidden it had to be here somewhere, assuming whoever had done such a thorough job on the rest of her hadn't also scraped away the evidence.

Makaria let the woman's stiff trunk roll back down onto the wood below her. She watched the girl as if she were sleeping.

'*Mega Matar,*' Makaria whispered, 'If you love your daughters take pity on both of us.'

She shut her eyes, but Eponi's pale face was branded on her eyelids. If she had known that she was going to be caught smuggling information to the authorities, how might she dispose of that information? If she did it before she was killed then it could be hidden, sunk or burned. But if she was intercepted on her way to Makaria? She wouldn't have had time. She'd have had what was available to her two hands in the moment. Makaria stared into space and unfurled her own arms. She stood like a supplicant at a shrine over the body, thinking hard.

'There is someone following you,' she murmured to herself. 'There is someone behind you. There is someone who will kill you.'

As if possessed, she raised her right hand and put it to her mouth. Then she looked down at the corpse's bloated belly. There was no way she could go after anything she'd swallowed.

Makaria picked up the ring beside the girl's hip, slipped it into the bundle, and was about to call out to the women to come back when she had a sudden thought. She raced back to the table and picked up the oil-lamp. Holding it in one hand, she took the fingers of the other and forced them inside the cold, swollen blue mouth below her.

There, right at the tip of her fingers, where the windpipe and the gullet met: something sharp and dry.

Makaria pulled her hand back into the lamplight. In it was a slip of papyrus with a series of regularly-spaced and -sized letters, perhaps two dozen or so, badly blurred but etched into the fibres deeply enough to still be legible. It was tiny, it was inscrutable, but it was enough. Makaria felt a warm flush of triumph. There had to have been something to it; it couldn't just have been coincidence.

'Come in!' she shouted out. As the women trooped back inside Makaria swapped the ring in her bundle for the paper. She pushed it

onto the stiffened fingers and squeezed the lifeless hand. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

‘She does look at peace, you know,’ the cook said, smiling wanly as she drew near. ‘Whatever you did.’

Makaria looked over Eponi’s ruined body. ‘Does she?’

‘Yes,’ the housekeeper said. ‘Is that not the point?’

‘Ah... Not really. But please, like I said: only the initiates.’

The women nodded gravely. ‘Is it like an exorcism?’ a maid asked. ‘Like the Saka shamans do?’

‘An exorcism...’ Makaria took another look at her lost contact. ‘Yes: an exorcism. That’s exactly what it was.’

Makaria tried hard not to look as relieved and excited as she felt as she made her way back down the corridors towards the gates. She had only made it as far as the peristyle when she heard a voice call out. She didn’t stop at first, as there couldn’t be anyone in the household who’d notice her on such a day. But the voice called again from the shadows beyond the colonnade.

‘Hello?’ It was a woman’s voice, young and cultured. ‘Hello? Come here, please.’

Makaria hesitated: she desperately wanted to get back to her room to read the note in peace. She had little choice but to approach.

She was met on the threshold by a perfume unlike any other smell she’d known before. Makaria peered harder into the shadows under the eaves and the stairs. A leg and then a hip and then a shoulder clipped the sunlight, and finally a woman’s head appeared. Makaria, despite herself, gasped out loud.

The woman was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She was so beautiful that Makaria didn’t feel right looking at her, as if she had found some impossibility that the laws of nature forbid. She’d seen statues like her, of course, but she’d assumed they were chimaeras of ideal girls. The woman had pale, soft skin, with huge dark eyes and a heart-shaped face that spoke of kindness and a playful intelligence. She was wrapped in yards and yards of diaphanous tissue shot with gold thread; she seemed to be dressed in heaven itself.

‘I am the mistress of the household,’ she explained, although she needed no introduction. ‘I hear from the women you were a friend of poor Eponi’s.’

'I...' Makaria had not planned on being interrogated. Not by a courtesan, a general's mistress. It was an uncomfortable collision of worlds, one she instinctively disliked. 'I knew her a little. She'd not been here long.'

'True. You are...?'

Again, Makaria thought: questions. She felt a surge of indignation. But there was nothing untoward about this interest in her. In fact, it was to Chryseis' credit that she was giving the girl a proper send-off. It showed compassion for someone humble far from home.

Makaria decided to take refuge in the truth and trust in its mercy.

'My name is Makaria Kotyou. I teach. At the temple school.'

'Ah!' The courtesan's lovely face brightened. 'A scholar! What an honour for Eponi. And for myself.'

'Not at all. I've heard you've a distinguished mind yourself, Kyria.'

Chryseis batted away the compliment carelessly. It was a lovely gesture, elegant but suggesting a sense of humour. It humanised a perfect creature, which only made her more perfect. 'I am a devoted student but not a scholar.' She studied her guest with bright eyes. Makaria squirmed. She felt awkward and plain in this beautiful house with this beautiful woman. 'They tell me you performed Galatian rites for the dead. Forgive me: you don't sound Galatian.'

'My mother,' Makaria blurted out. 'She's a Celt, from Galatia. I'm not a priestess, or...' Makaria felt her words drying up, which had only happened on two other occasions she could remember. Chryseis blinked patiently at her, but she clearly wanted to know more. 'It was the least I could do.' Her half-lie was starting to become complicated.

'I understand these rites are secret. You wouldn't allow the other women to take part.'

'It's like the Mysteries. Even more so. It's the Great Mother, you see. Victory over death and, you know... It really...' Please, please stop talking, Makaria told herself. 'It really ought to take place in the sacred groves.'

'Oh.' Makaria stared at her sandals and prayed for a dismissal. 'Do we have any sacred groves?'

'No,' Makaria said abruptly. 'No we don't. That's why I'm here.'

Chryseis seemed startled by Makaria's sharp response. 'No,' she smiled eventually. 'That makes perfect sense, doesn't it? Immaculate



logic.’ There was a little pause, in which Chryseis studied Makaria fondly. Makaria didn’t like being studied. ‘Won’t you stay for some food, darling?’ she said eventually. ‘With the rest of the girls?’

‘No.’ Makaria did her best to smile. ‘Thank you, but no. I have to prepare my classes.’

‘Of course.’ Chryseis bobbed off down the hallway gracefully, pushing Makaria before her by the small of her back. ‘Then make sure you take a honeycake for the road. And thank you again for doing that poor girl such a service. Your ancestors are proud of you today, I’m sure.’

At the end of the hallway Chryseis gently handed her over to the porter, who went with her to the gate.

Makaria had seen far more splendid cities, and she knew that Sinope had nothing to rival Ephesus or Smyrna’s wide open spaces. She’d have killed for a decent theatre or a library on the scale of Pergamon’s. The city she was walking through was exactly as it appeared; dog-eared and dogged, rammed into the tiny space left by the citadel, the sea and the isthmus. But it made sense when you understood it had two purposes – trade and war – and by all its many gods it did those two things better than the rest of Asia put together.

She kept well clear of the long, three-storey government building by the docks. The Stoa and her report could wait until tomorrow. Makaria was late as she always was, the city was heaving with end-of-week commotion and there was business waiting for her on the other side of town.

As she rounded the corner of a little square she walked straight into a wall of bodies. Above their chatter she could hear the gentle, dipping beat of a drum. In the far end of the courtyard a woman in Indian clothes was singing while a man accompanied her. Like everyone, Makaria was transfixed by this strange sight. The woman knew how to work a crowd. She twirled and twisted her hands in mesmerising circles that echoed the music’s swooping beauty.

Makaria dropped an obol into the woman’s bowl and made sure she caught her eye. The two women nodded their appreciation at one another. She was a long way from home, Makaria thought as she watched her sway. Perhaps she had come up along the old Royal Road

through Persia with a caravan.

As she walked down the dusty street beside the port Makaria moved her hand, just like the dancer from the Indus had. She tried again, then again, nearly tripping over a dog in her concentration, until she had trapped the woman's essence in her own skin. A perfect echo in lighter, colder flesh.

She stopped and looked at the back of her hand as if it were a sculpture in a niche instead of a part of her body. She always had a few freckles, even in winter. It took a great deal to hide them, an unwelcome inheritance from her Celtic side.

A few more streets and Makaria had reached the elementary school on Tripod Street. She almost cleared the courtyard and colonnade without being caught, but just as she turned the final corner into the passage to the temple she collided with two men. The first was the head of the school, Phaidon, with his big, white, failed philosopher's beard. The other was Aeson, the Master of the Infant Boys and her new neighbour. If she hadn't proper work to occupy her, Makaria would have been dismayed at the shift in the school's politics since Aeson was hired. The two men had the guilty look of young lovers caught canoodling in the bushes.

'Makaria my dear, are you quite well?' Phaidon asked as he righted her.

'I'm fine,' she muttered, 'Just late.'

She tried to push past them, but only Phaidon made room for her. 'Since we have you, actually...' Aeson caught her eye. She pretended not to see him. 'I regret to say I was disturbed the other night. Again. Comings and goings from your rooms.'

'My daughter,' Makaria wheezed over her shoulder, 'My daughter had a fall. Please, I'm running late, Kyrioi.'

'You see,' she heard Phaidon's voice behind her, 'As I told you, Aeson. Nothing to take offence at.' She turned and ran for the stairs again, but Aeson's eyes were watching her every move.

Makaria took the steps up to her room two at a time and slammed her door behind her. She pulled the chair out into the room a little and stood on it to waggle the grille over the air vent open. Standing on tiptoes, she could see into the cavity beyond. This was the oldest part of the school complex, hard up against a temple precinct, and the space

in the thick wall between the inner and outer grilles made perfect safe storage. Her fingers groped and probed the darkness until they found what they were looking for: a thin leaf of fine-grained wood, covered in writing.

She looked over its spidery scrawl one more time. She re-read the reverse, the message: 'I have important information the Stoa needs. It must be exchanged in person, and I will need assurances first. Meet me first thing in the fruit market, beside the water clock. I will wear blue. You do not acknowledge; just follow.' Besides the odd grammar and the commanding tone, the tablet told her little about the person, their offer or their motives.

Makaria turned the leaf of wood over to look at its alibi. It was a shopping list, or more accurately an order. "*Eponi, on behalf of Chryseis...*" and then a long list of fruits, vegetables and nuts, some barely in season and therefore ruinously expensive. Some careful conversations with Makaria's people had revealed who Eponi and Chryseis were. The latter was a reasonably successful courtesan, and the former was her Galatian servant. Makaria could have guessed that from the names, but she had also realised that made Eponi one of the Stoa's recent successes. They'd blown her mission apart six months back and offered her a simple choice. She could die at their hands or her Roman puppeteers', or she could give them as many names as she could remember and live in a very inexpensively gilded cage in Sinope. Quite sensibly, she'd taken the second option. So why would she be contacting Makaria, who had nothing to do with offensive intelligence, and who was so lowly anyway she wouldn't be much help with re-gilding that cage?

Not for the first time, it occurred to Makaria that she wasn't paid enough for this type of horseshit and perhaps this girl was more trouble than she was worth. She sighed, put the leaf of wood back along with the papyrus and re-covered the vent. Very probably nothing would come of it now anyway, and things would return to normal.

A small part of Makaria hated that thought.

She hoped that the rehearsals would help her calm her mind. Down in the schoolyard, a collection of stern women and large men had gathered. Makaria ignored the servants' glares – they wanted to collect their masters' daughters and go home for their supper – and dove

inside the main lobby with the two large assembly rooms either side, then out into the second yard beyond.

She clapped her hands as she swept into the rehearsal room. ‘Girls! Girls, please!’ Makaria pushed the tall pupil miming a rude song back into the seats. ‘Anthousa, a lady and a scholar, remember?’ Anthousa huffed her shoulders.

‘Girls!’ she shouted one last time, and the chattering died away. Small legs too short for their seats dangled in neat little rows before her. The lamps guttered slightly at her voice. ‘Girls, your guardians are waiting in the courtyard, my family are expecting me for dinner in Armeni and you only have one month until the competition. I want this to be perfect. Big voices, yes?’ The girls nodded their curls at her. ‘Good. Klio...’ Makaria pointed at a little, fair-haired child with a dog-eared scrap of paper in her hand. ‘You first.’

Makaria took her seat at the back of the platform, and the ten-year old tumbled down onto the stone floor before her. Putting her scrap down before her, she took one last read, heaved a deep sigh, then raised a chubby little arm above her head.

“‘Oh!’”, she shouted at the ceiling, “‘My son! My sorrow! Why did I ever bear you? All I bore was doom! Doomed to a short life, you have so little time...’”

As the girls stammered their way through their lines, she tore a slip from a worn school copy of the *Iliad*. ‘*I have an important new development I wish to share with you,*’ she wrote to Youras, her handler in the government Stoa. ‘*Request a meeting as soon as possible.*’

When it was time for the hopeful contestants to go home, Makaria noticed one of the youngest, a small child called Eunike, was trailing her friends and rivals. When she called her over, the girl only took a few steps before she burst into tears.

‘Is it your brother again?’ Makaria asked. The little girl nodded. ‘Is he still missing?’ The girl’s already unfetching face crumpled into a wailing underbite. Tears streamed down her face. ‘Well done for being so brave today, then, little one.’ The girl’s sobs dimmed slightly, and she nodded her head again.

‘My, my, my sister’s husband says...’ Eunike hiccuped, ‘... Husband says he was taken by the Romans and he’ll be made a slave!’

Makaria calmly watched the girl bawl her eyes out as she imagined

her beloved brother in chains, whipped and spat on by some fat, greedy Latin. 'And what does your Papa say?' she asked once the wailing had abated.

The girl shook her head sadly. 'Nothing. He says nothing. He just cries.'

Very wise, Makaria thought. If I were that young man's Papa, I would say as little as possible for the rest of my life. Makaria hadn't been able to prove conclusively from Eunike's prattling and her servant's gossip that the father was involved with that Latin priest, but the son most definitely had been. Where he'd been taken and what had been done with him was beyond her responsibilities, and she didn't want to know.

'I think your uncle is right,' she told the girl, wiping her tears away. 'Romans have huge plantations, stuffed with slaves from all over the world. That's the only reason they're here in Asia. But don't worry. King Mithradates and the army are going to protect us. And they'll get your brother back before anything bad happens to him. It's everyone's duty to be strong, and to aid them in any way we can.' Little Eunike looked up into her Kyria's face. She nodded and smiled, which was her way of helping and being brave.

## β

She hitched a ride on the vintner's cart as she'd arranged, just as the autumn light was starting to fade. They swayed out of the city, through the massive high passage between the Bastion and Acropolis and the sea, then they headed north towards Armeni. Makaria watched the high yellow walls of Sinope growing smaller before her. On her right the scratchy beach become less stony and more golden and the rich scent of the capital surrendered to the sea and the pines. Makaria was going home. She sneaked a look at the contents of her bundle; a nut tart wrapped in oiled paper and a bright red ribbon, just like little Klio's from the school.

After an hour's trundle down the broad eastward road, they came to a small village with enormous walls. The timber merchant Kotys' house was on the hill, right at the top of the town. It was built into the slope, so you entered it at the top and made your way downwards towards the bedrooms. No doubt this made it unfashionable and rustic, but then Armeni was unfashionable and rustic compared to the smart mansions of Sinope. As Makaria came to the gate with the fig tree beside it, a little girl came barrelling out of the courtyard.

'Mama!' she squealed, her arms outstretched. 'Mama!'

Makaria dropped the bundle and scooped her up into her arms, holding the dark hair to her cheek and taking a deep breath of that sweet, little girl smell that was ineffably her daughter.

'Nyssa,' she whispered in her ear as she rocked her back and forth.

Inside Makaria met her brother and his wife and their three small children heading towards the door for an evening at the festivities. Her sister-in-law gave her a weary, superior look but her brother didn't say anything. Nyssa pulled her mother deeper into the house to look for everyone else. In the buttery, they found Makaria's mother and three enormous young men with hair that stood straight up on end, their moustaches different shades of dirty blond and brown. They had joined two other lads, her cousins from Galatia, who had arrived yesterday. They were all wolfing down bread and baked sausage as if they hadn't

eaten the pantry bare the night before. They'd come to Sinope to secure a loan and found the festival in uproar. In between stories of eating fresh tuna and fire-jugglers and the gold statue in the Agora, they said they had seen a girl being pulled from the jagged rocks on the harbour side of town. Dead, they said: drowned. They'd seen her. 'She was Galatian,' the biggest one had explained, ladling more bacon stew onto his bread, 'Imagine! They said her name was Eponi.' Naturally they'd come home straight after their business was concluded to gossip with their Auntie Kamma. Next to a fight, Galatians liked nothing better than a death.

'You're back.'

Makaria was glad her mother was busy with the boys and their insatiable appetites. It meant her telling-off would be briefer and more discrete.

'You knew I had to go to town today. For the rehearsals at the school.'

'But not until the afternoon, Makaria.'

She didn't reply to her mother, because it wasn't an invitation to defend herself.

'You remember your cousins from Taulon, don't you?' her mother said, heaving another platter of bread over to them. The three men all raised a hand and grunted a salutation through their supper and facial hair. 'They're here to help the boys get the money back to the village,' her mother explained, wiping her hands.

As she dived into the kitchen again to shovel more food into the boys, Makaria grabbed her arm. 'Mama – whose sons?'

'Tectorix's. You know: Cousin Brogimaros' boy?'

Before Makaria could say that she'd never heard of Cousin Brogimaros or Tectorix her mother had disappeared into the darkness and heat of the kitchen, and she was shouting to the slave-girl to bring more beer. But then there were always cousins, Makaria reminded herself. If she did not have so many cousins, her life would not have been possible for several years.

She turned to look through the wooden arch at the five strapping lads dunking their bread in the sausage juices. The original three cousins didn't even have the money yet, and they wouldn't until they reached Drynameton. They'd had their meeting with the temple and got their loan, which would be advanced to them on production of a

document they'd already locked up in a chest. The temple had just been the broker, taking a cut, and the lender themselves was anonymous. Mama was traditional about debt, and thought the whole thing stank. These latest three men didn't even need to be here, and Makaria suspected this was a boys' trip to the city, away from the prying eyes of their elders back home.

'Cousin Makaria!' one of them shouted as she neared the table. 'You went to the city, then, to ask about the girl? You sneaked out before we were up. Did you find out who her people were?'

'No,' Makaria said, not that that had been her reason for going. 'No-one could tell me her tribe or her village.'

'Imagine,' Kamma said, coming to sit down and shaking her head as mournfully as if she and the girl had been best friends. 'No tribe. No village.'

Now all the boys were shaking their heads sadly too. 'We'd take the message back to them,' one said, 'If we were passing, but...'

The furthest away of the cousins produced a big earthenware jug with a grinning face on it and suggested that they drink to this Eponi. Kamma declared something in Galatian Makaria didn't understand. She decided that this was her opportunity to escape, saying that she ought to put her daughter to bed.

'You do that,' Kamma said in Greek, in a tone of voice that let her own daughter know her dressing-down had only been postponed.

Her old childhood bed was Nyssa's now, under the eaves by the bottom courtyard. The girl was exhausted, but she was full of news about the village festival and her big cousins and how they'd swung her over their heads in the courtyard, which make Makaria angry and jealous at the same time. Eventually Nyssa was tucked up tightly like a swaddled baby, and her chattering slowed and slurred into unconsciousness.

She sat with the child's hand in her own until she knew she was asleep and for some time after, staring at her lovely face, her clear olive skin, her dark brows as neat and strong as if they'd been drawn with ink on finest vellum. She watched her chest rise and fall, and considered the miracle of life begetting life. She wondered how something so extraordinary could come from her, she who felt ordinary and did everything she could to stop being so.



Then she thought for a long, long time about Eponi.

By the time Makaria tiptoed through the upper floor of the house on her hunt for her father there was a loud party going in the big room. She could hear the five boys' voices bellowing in Galatian at one another, and every now and again her mother's own voice boomed out over them.

Makaria found her father on the terrace above her bedroom, overlooking the bay. He was fondling his dog's ears absent-mindedly, and when he heard her he gave her a little smile and gestured that she could join him.

Makaria sat in silence with him for a while. The lights of Sinope shone out like a beacon, glassy on the still sea water. High above a moon was chased by autumn clouds, and Makaria shivered in her shawl.

'How is her young highness?' her father asked. He meant Nyssa.

'She wants to show me her oyster bed tomorrow.'

Papa chuckled and smiled at his wine. 'It's a clump of barnacles, bless her,' he laughed. 'But don't you go spoiling it for her,' he added, pointing at Makaria with his cup.

'Did you tell her they were oysters?'

'I did.'

'And you wonder why we all turned out the way we did...'

They sat in silence again. The only sounds were the waves on the shore in the dark and the beating of the dog's tail against Papa's leg.

'Papa,' she said after a long while, 'Do you ever have the feeling that something is badly wrong, but you have no reason for it?'

Her father turned to look at her in the darkness of the terrace. He took a sip from his cup. 'In what sense? With your home, with your daughter?'

'With work,' she said quietly. Her father didn't enjoy talking about these things with her.

'Am I allowed to know what you mean by that?'

'The girl... This Eponi...' She could sense her father studying her. 'She was known to me.'

'"Known to me"? What does that mean?'

'I can't say.'

'Of course you can't,' he muttered. 'And of course you disappear before breakfast to ask about her, rather than spend the festival with your family. With your daughter.'

'But Eponi was meant to meet me and she didn't come. Now this.'

'Now what?' her father snapped. 'Makaria... People die. All the time. It doesn't necessarily have anything to do with you.' But it so often does, Papa, she thought...

A flurry of barking had started down in the village. Makaria could hear it coming towards the terrace like a crashing wave. She shut her eyes and braced herself. Sure enough, her father's dog began barking at everything and nothing, running about their ankles and snapping at the moon.

'Gordios!' her father shouted. 'Gordios, sit down! Shut up!'

Gordios took his time in obeying his master, but he eventually switched to whining quietly.

'I can't believe you still call him that,' Makaria muttered.

'Why shouldn't I?' her father grumbled. 'General or not, do you know what it is for a man, a head of a household, to be told in his own home how to dispose of his daughter? Do you?' Makaria sighed quietly. 'I don't care if he is a general. I don't care if he's got spies in every room of my house, watching me call my dog by his name. Let him.' A flurry in the dark let Makaria know her father was making some obscene old-fashioned gesture, probably directed at Gordios of Cappadocia.

'Papa...'

'All I do is think of ways to rescue you from that man.' Makaria looked in puzzled wonder at her father. He seemed to believe that she was kept in a cell by Gordios personally. For all he was a shrewd businessman, Papa was ignorant of how everything else worked. But then, she reminded herself, he couldn't vote. He couldn't hold office. Neither could his own father, as a non-citizen. Why should he learn?

He took his cup and gave it a hard stare. 'Krateros' boy is in town...' he muttered into it.

Makaria winced. 'Papa...'

'Nice chap. Good teeth. He's been widowed.'

'Papa!' Makaria realised she was gripping the arm of her chair. 'Stop this!'

'I think if I made him an offer, he'd be interested.'

'Why would he be interested?' She could feel the colour rising in her cheeks. 'He wasn't interested when I was a girl. No-one was interested.'

'That's not true,' her father scolded. 'You were sent to help your uncle before anyone could get their act together...'

'Oh, horseshit!'

'... And besides, the business is doing better now. The Crown Estates can't get enough timber for the navy.'

Makaria clasped her palm to her forehead. 'Papa...'

'Your best hope of getting out of all this is getting married,' her father declared. 'And you aren't getting any younger.'

'Papa!' Makaria slammed her hand down on the arm of the chair. It made her father jump slightly, and it set Gordios the Dog off again.

'Do you think it's that easy? That I can get out of my obligations on a technicality?'

'Marriage is not a technicality.'

'It is *not* that easy, Papa. I did something very serious, and now I have a serious debt to pay.' Her eyes dropped to her lap. 'It's as if you've forgotten the alternative to this arrangement.'

'You talk about yourself like you're a slave. A prisoner of one of the old Shahs.' He took a bad-natured swig from his cup and drained it. 'Although they at least were freed in the end, and they had done something genuinely awful. And if that's what you are, Makaria, what does that make your daughter?'

Makaria didn't trust herself to open her mouth so she sat still in the darkness. Her father glared at her for a little longer, then he pretended to look at the sea. She knew he'd be hating himself for speaking that way. She hated herself for pushing him to do it.

'The sea was lovely and warm today,' Makaria said eventually.

'Yes,' her father replied, airily. 'It is unseasonably warm in general. But then, that often means storms in the winter...'

'Papa...'

'Yes, chicken?'

'You've seen plenty of shipwrecks, haven't you?'

'Why, chicken?'

There was a brief but uncomfortable pause.

'How long would it take a body to come to shore if the sea's this

warm?’

Her father turned on her like a trap snapping shut, but before he could open his mouth a huge roar of laughter and singing erupted out of the dining room.

‘You have always had too much of your mother in you,’ was all her father said in the end. ‘Don’t go back to Sinope tomorrow,’ he told her, because he knew what she was thinking. ‘What good can you do? The girl is dead: she can’t tell you anything. You can’t help her. Stay out of it and keep your promises to your daughter.’

He picked up the cup, gathered the blanket from his knees, and stomped off into the house, clicking his fingers at Gordios to follow.

While her father had the right of it from a strictly domestic point of view, Makaria reasoned there were higher principles involved. There was clearly something odd about Eponi’s death, and while it had nothing to do with Makaria it might have everything to do with the city’s security. Aside the Public Good, there was always favour to be won in getting to the bottom of something everyone else had overlooked. She returned to the city the following afternoon. She pored over the wooden tablet and the papyrus again, but nothing new revealed itself.

## Y

Sinope's few public baths were modest, as all its non-military and non-maritime adornments seemed to be. Makaria was convinced of their benefits, though: half an hour of peace in here, or chatting to someone as she let her head come back down to earth in the courtyard, and she could just about pretend that the outside world did not exist.

Not so that day, unfortunately. For the second time in a week Makaria had been left dangling at a rendezvous. Kyria Desma was nowhere to be seen, although her note had been warm and enthusiastic: she took her jumped-up role as a priestess seriously as only a bored housewife could. Makaria knew that she'd needed a lure, and clever, pretty schoolgirls who never fluffed their lines were Desma's stock-in-trade. Officially Desma was the one who had endowed the school with the funds to create a separate girls' class and employ a lady teacher. Neither she nor her husband had asked where that money had really come from, and they happily took the magistracy that happened to be offered to him shortly after.

Makaria was on the verge of giving up when one of the boys who attended the locker room came padding across the courtyard to her in his bath sandals. He had an official face on him, and Makaria let out a little groan of frustration. Desma wasn't coming.

'The lawyer's wife the priestess sends her apologies,' he said solemnly. 'She's delayed?'

The boy shook his head. 'A message was sent. She has a chill. Time of year,' he added, gravely.

'Do you know who the messenger was, and might I catch them up?'

Again he shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. There was a present, however.'

The boy took a small fabric parcel from behind his back. It was tied with a little ribbon. That was Kyria Desma's style, to buy Makaria off with presents as she did her children. She took it from him and nodded that he could go.

As she fiddled with the ribbon she wondered what was best –

should she go to Desma's house and ask to see her in her sick bed? Desma's husband's library was Makaria's best hope of learning what those strange markings on the papyrus might be. Makaria opened the kerchief. Inside was a small honey and almond cake. She wrapped it back up and got to her feet. Makaria pulled her dress and garter and himation from her cubby hole. She dressed hastily, then she headed off into the Agora and wide streets at the bottom of the town.

She made her way through the fruit market, busy now that the sun was up but the working day hadn't yet started for most people. The stalls and barrows were alive with servants and the lesser sort of Sinopean, all trying to get the best fruit before the heat of the day got to the produce. It was a summer habit people seemed reluctant to let go of. As Makaria made her way under the colonnade in the centre of the market place she caught sight of a familiar face. The girl's distinctive ginger Dacian looks shone out to Makaria like a beacon in the crowd. Desma had been very proud when they'd got her, she remembered. A wonderful cook, apparently. 'She does things with dates you wouldn't believe, Makaria,' the priestess had whispered.

'Excuse me!' she called out. 'Excuse me, girl!' The slave didn't recognise Makaria at first. 'You're Kyria Desma's girl, aren't you?'

She nodded. 'I am.'

'I knew you couldn't have got far.' The girl scowled harder: Desma hadn't done a great job of training this one, Makaria decided. 'Tell your mistress that I hope she gets well soon and that the cake was lovely but unnecessary. When she's better I would still appreciate speaking to her.'

The girl shook her head, bewildered. 'Begging your pardon, Kyria, but I don't know what you're talking about.'

'The baths, just now. You came and gave me a message? Your mistress is sick? You gave me a present from her?'

Again the girl shook her head. 'My mistress is very well, thank Hera. She's at home. She had no appointments this morning. She's getting her legs done.'

Makaria's first thought was that this was a level of detail that she could have done without. It was only when the girl walked off without being dismissed that she realised the implications of what she'd just been told.

There were only two possibilities. Either Desma had agreed to meet and then stood Makaria up out of sheer caprice, which seemed unlikely to all but the most paranoid mind, or she had not been the person who responded to her. In turn, this would mean that she could never have even received her message.

Makaria's feet began to move quickly, carrying her upwards towards the temple and school on Tripod Street, through the morning rush flowing down the hill in the other direction. If someone had intercepted her message to Desma, all they would have to do to disrupt her work was destroy it. But disruption was not the point here: this was a warning. It was announcing that Makaria was being watched by someone who could intercept her mail and forge a reply. There had been no sensitive information divulged in the original invite. It could have been a letter to any patroness from a social inferior, keen to keep up their acquaintance. This had been done to show it could be done.

Once back in her room she set the package on her little table and unwrapped it. She stared at the innocent little cake for a moment, wondering what to do about it. It couldn't be an incidental flourish. There had to be meaning to it. But Makaria wasn't going to put that thing in her mouth. She took the cake and began rubbing it between her fingers, gently at first, then harder. The almond flour flaked away at first, then chunks came apart. Finally, her fingers felt something reedy and dry between them. There was indeed something in there.

Makaria took hold of the greasy shard and teased it out of the cake. As she pulled it seemed to grow: a short, fine ribbon of papyrus. She turned it over, and in the dim light of the morning sun coming round the shutters she saw letters: block capitals drawn in heavy black ink.

## SPASAKA

Makaria stared at the little chit in her fingers, feeling her heart hammering against her ribs and shaking the air from her lungs. Wide-eyed, she glanced around the room, but there was no-one there with her but the birds roosting in the eaves.

'Youras, this is urgent,' she muttered aloud under her breath, and she reached for her pen and ink and a scrap of paper.