

SECVNDVS

DEINO PUSHED A STRAND OF GREY HAIR back from her face as she shuffled quickly into her lady's tablinum. She squinted and saw, with her blurred eyesight, that the other servants had finished setting the furnishings. In the center of the room stood a large bronze brazier, whose three legs had been cast in the form of entwined serpents. In its bowl were heaped glowing coals to help banish the chill evening drafts. Between the brazier and the front entry stood an elegantly carved chair. This indicated that a female guest was expected—if the witch they awaited were male, a cushioned couch would have been set out instead. Between the brazier and the far wall stood a tall screen with a cedarwood frame and panels of polished white chalcedony. Oil lamps of bronze hung in the corners of the room, illuminating frescos of pastoral scenes on the walls.

The rustle of shifting fabric came from behind the screen and Deino realized her lady must already be present. Clearing her ancient throat, Deino approached the screen.

"Who is there?" Euryale's low, musical voice called from behind the screen. "Deino?"

"Yes, Despoina Euryale."

"What is it? Has the Marsi witch arrived?"

"No, not yet. But a messenger came with a letter."

"A letter? From near or far?"

"From here in Rome, Despoina. It is from the praetor peregrinus, Scipio Hispallus."

“A praetor? What would such an exalted personage want with us? Let me guess—there is to be some new law concerning what foreigners can wear in Rome, or where we might live, nai?”

Deino unfolded the papyrus in her gnarled hands. From a pocket of her peplos, she took a large, scratched crystal lens. She looked at it a moment, then shook off the horrid memories the lens evoked in her. Holding the lens before one eye, Deino scanned the note. “No, Despoina. The praetor wishes to invite you to his home, to discuss ‘matters of mutual interest.’”

“Oh? As I recall, the main concerns of Roman magistrates are war, politics and the chastity of their women. Hardly interests of mine.”

“He says you may be in a position to achieve recognition for your contributions to the greater glory of Rome.”

“Ah. It’s money he wants, then. A donation toward his reelection, or another call for aid to legions hard-pressed in foreign lands. A pity I shall have to disappoint him.”

“Yes, Despoina. I’ll send the usual excuses.”

“No, Deino. It would not do to snub him. Our position in Rome is precarious enough. No, invite him here instead. Cite my ‘infirmity’ as the reason.”

Deino allowed herself a smile. “Yes, Despoina. What day should I suggest?”

“Whatever day he has chosen, or the nearest auspicious day. You know my schedule.”

“Yes— Ah!” Deino started, hearing the bell at the gate.

“Well, if Tyche smiles, that will be our witch. Go show her in, Deino. Hurry, now. I hear witches can be frightful when crossed.” There was laughter in Euryale’s voice, but Deino’s misgivings prevented her from joining in her lady’s amusement.

The old woman turned and walked as swiftly as her aching bones would take her through the colonnaded atrium. At the far doorway, Caecus, who was fully blind but knew the house well, was leading in a tall, thin woman.

“Are you the Marsi witch?” said Deino, putting the lens to her eye.

The woman drew herself up and stared imperiously. “I am Simaetha saga magica. I trust you are not the Domina Euryale.”

Deino frowned and noted that below the deep folds of the witch’s palla, Simaetha’s eyes were a bit too wild and bright. *Hah*, thought Deino, *are you one of those reckless Dionysians or did you need some mystic potion to give you courage?* “I am not. I am her maidservant Deino.”

“That you are still a maid at your age does not surprise me. Take me to your domina forthwith, or face my wrath for your delay.”

They are all so proud, these magi that my despoina consults. So proud and so useless. Why does Euryale bother? “This way,” Deino snapped. Dismissing Caecus, she turned and led the witch into the tablinum.

Euryale had moved the screen and sat openly, but completely veiled, on the far chair.

“The magia Simaetha, Domina,” Deino announced with distaste and stood aside.

“Welcome, Simaetha,” said Euryale. “Please be comfortable and tell me of yourself.” She gestured toward the other chair.

But Simaetha did not sit. The witch pulled back the palla from her head to reveal a mass of unkempt, unbound hair. Deino noticed something strange about her untamed tresses and squinted to see more clearly. There among the snarly locks were the skins of snakes twisted around the witch’s head.

Blasphemy! thought Deino, with a sharp intake of breath. She clenched her teeth and fought to keep her anger hidden. She looked at Euryale but the veil hid whatever reaction her lady might have.

Simaetha walked slowly back and forth in front of Euryale like a lioness examining suspicious prey. “Why are you veiled, Domina? Do you fear my evil eye?”

EURYALE

Ha! thought Deino. Rather you should fear hers, you insolent harpy.

“Not at all, Simaetha,” said Euryale.

The witch paused. “Are you a priestess, Domina?”

“I once held that honor.”

“What god did you serve, and where?”

“I served the goddess of my people, in Epeiros, near Thessaly.”

“Thessaly?” Simaetha hissed.

So, thought Deino, you think perhaps my lady is a rival witch, from the country famed for witches, eh? Do you fear that she will test your power? Well, I will not tell you otherwise. I'll let you sweat.

“If you are from Thessaly, why do you call upon me?” asked Simaetha.

“Even the skill of Thessalian witches was not enough to help me. It would seem their reputation has been enhanced by distance and legend.”

“Ah, and your goddess bade you to search in the hills of the Marsi for the powerful one you seek.”

“My heart bids me seek everywhere for one who knows the answer to my question.”

Simaetha gave a knowing nod. Suddenly, she turned and pointed at Deino. “You! Have you dreamed lately?”

Taken aback by the question, Deino said, “Well, yes. I dreamed this past night of an owl flying across a river, an olive branch in its talons.”

“You see, Domina. Hecate herself has sent your servant a vision, saying that She of the night shall send one to bring peace to your soul.”

Fool! thought Deino, any Roman worth his amulets thinks the owl is an ill omen. And it is truly ill for my despoina, as the owl is a bird of Athena, who torments her so. The dream bodes ill indeed, if she chooses to listen to you, you Esquiline bitch.

“Yes, perhaps an auspicious sign, Simaetha,” said Euryale. “Which brings us to the question at hand. Can you turn stone into living flesh?”

Simaetha raised her thin arms dramatically toward the ceiling. “Domina, you see before you one with the power to command the winds of the skies and the waters of the seas. I can call the stars from the heavens, bring the moon down from the sky and conjure the daemons from the depths of Hades. Shades of the dead speak their oracles at my command and—”

“Yes, yes, I know all that,” Euryale said gently, “but can you bring stone to life?”

Simaetha lowered her arms and glared at Euryale’s veiled form. “The gods know there is nothing I cannot do. But tell me, for such a simple question you might ask a philosopher or an alchemist. Clearly there is more to this matter than mere transformation of substance. Is this a matter of healing? A matter of . . . love?”

Hmph, thought Deino. *Perhaps there is some intelligence to this creature after all.*

Euryale replied, “Your surmise is close to the truth, Simaetha.”

“Ah! That is why you have summoned me, for spells of healing and love are a specialty of the Marsi witches.”

Deino rolled her eyes heavenward and sighed.

“I am pleased to have my information confirmed,” said Euryale. “So, since you have implied that you can accomplish this, please tell me by what methods you would turn stone to flesh.”

The witch paused, warily. “Since you have not yet contracted me to your service, Domina, I am not obligated to reveal to you my secrets.”

Euryale sighed. “The gist of it then, if you please. And speak carefully, for from your words I shall weigh your knowledge and skill.”

Simaetha gave Euryale a measuring stare. “Very well. Listen, then, and judge me as you will.

“First, certain herbs must be gathered when the moon is dark, and others when it is in its fullness. These, along with the

EURYALE

proper parts of bats and dogs, along with the ground bones of those who have died for love, shall be given into flames consecrated to Hecate.

“Then we must have blood in abundance, for flesh without blood is lifeless as stone, therefore stone requires blood for life. We will find a young boy, a patrician would be best. Then we will bind him, and place delicious food before him, but not allow him to eat. Slowly we will drain the blood from him and bathe the stone in it, and his hunger shall become the hunger of love transferred to the stone. Then we will cut out the seat of his soul, his liver, and—”

“Enough!” Euryale stood, her fists clenched. “I’ll hear no more of this murder. I’ll not waste a life to gain one. Begone! And be glad I do not inform the authorities of your evil.”

Simaetha’s eyes narrowed as she flung her palla back over her head. “So. You do not have the courage for true witchcraft. I will go. But for your insults you shall hear my curse.”

Deino saw Euryale’s hand stray toward her veil and Deino gasped in anticipation.

“Go on,” Simaetha taunted. “Show me the face you hide behind your veil. Let your eyes meet mine and feel their power.”

But Euryale’s hand paused, then dropped. “Curse me all you will, Simaetha. I am already cursed by the gods themselves. You can do no worse.”

Deino rushed to Euryale’s side and placed an arm around her shoulders. To the witch she said, “Begone, and be grateful my Despoina has spared you. You would find the gaze of her eyes far worse—”

“That is enough, Deino,” Euryale said wearily.

Simaetha stared, frowning, at Euryale for long moments. Then, without a word of farewell, the witch turned and walked out. Deino did not deign to escort her to the gate.

Euryale stood bowed, her hands kneading the wool of her stola. “I could not do it, Deino. Not even for love. I’ll have no more ghosts to haunt my dreams.”

KARA DALKEY

“I understand, Despoina. You made the wisest choice.”

“I only hope *he* would understand.” Euryale sighed. “I will go walk in the garden, Deino. I will see no one else today.” She turned and left by a side door that led to the garden path.

Deino did not follow. She only shook her head and sighed. *Ah, Despoina, he understands nothing, and it would be best if you could leave it so.* Taking a nearby ewer, she poured water on the coals in the brazier. With a mighty sigh to match her own, the coals released a writhing, grey column of smoke and steam. With the rising mists, Deino sent a silent prayer.