

## ARISTOTLE

Over the many lifetimes of my imprisonment here, I've lived in fear of meeting the old wanderer. He used to be a king, even an emperor, but what else? There my memory fails me. I hoped that he'd forgotten me too, but he hadn't. One summer evening his shadow crosses the doorway of my Athens home, the house of pleasure where I was staying with two other women. I see a man in worn leather boots, a blue cloak tattered, muddy from a long journey. A large hat covers his head, pulled to one side so only the gleam of a single eye is visible. He resembles Odin of old, but he's in the wrong country.

He looks me over as if I were a troublesome insect, takes in a deep breath like a snake about to strike. He doesn't want my services. He wants me. I feel only disgust as if an unclean beast defecated in the room.

'Get out,' I say.

His withered hand brings out a pouch and slams it onto the table, so hard that the leather splits and spills out unfamiliar gold coins. 'This is in payment, though I shouldn't have to offer you a single coin,' he says. 'Not to redeem something of mine.'

I want it now.'

Saying this he lifts off his hat and shows me the gaping socket in his head where long ago there had been an eye. His creased brow is older than time, his cheeks hollow as a cadaver's. With a sudden rush my memories return of the times when I'd met him.

'You ask for favours? I would as soon dig out your other eye had I the chance.'

His dry lips part in a mocking smile. 'You remember me, but you don't remember enough. Let me remind of what happened. How you stole my eye. I want it back. I'll pay for it in any currency. Like you, I can grant the heart's desire. Tell you what you need to know.'

'Get out of this house!' I glance at a small niche in the wall where I keep my jewelled dagger. The man appears unarmed. I could dispatch his life in an instant and never have to look at his loathsome eye.

'I'll pay you more than you'd earn in ten years. You could leave this charnel house.'

'I will not give you an eye even though it was in my power. Not for any gold. Not for any price. But if you do not leave, I'll carve your other eye from your head and leave you blind as Oedipus.'

His face turns an ashen grey. 'You can't escape me. No hill or valley will take you far enough. Neither will death hide you. For hundreds of years I've followed you. You'll never be free of me until you return what you stole. Today you can buy your freedom. Tomorrow, I'll exact my dues and you'll get nothing in return.'

He disappears from the doorway. The spilled coins remain on the table. I stand in a daze my fists still clenched. Oh that I'd been faster with my dagger. That I'd

never have to look on his wrinkled face again. Perhaps if I killed him, death would visit me too. Release me from my wanderings among wretched mortals. But no, I must wait for him to return. He alone knows what catastrophe left me in this world. Why I can't escape from it.

Aristotle appears in the doorway. He's a tall gangly boy with a beard that's barely started to grow, a newfound deep voice with a lisp, more noticeable when talking to women. I knew him from Stegeira where his father was one of my regular clients. When Aristotle left for Athens I followed soon afterwards to reconnect with friends. I'd recognized in the growing boy a passion for life, a sensuality absent in Socrates, Plato and other philosophers. Perhaps Aristotle reminds me of an unnamed lover I had before my fall, now reborn as a child.

A star pupil at Plato's Academy, he even amazes old Plato with his elegant answers to questions such as, why objects fall, why the sun turns about the Earth, why people fall ill, and who is responsible for making the world and putting us in it. When his head sickens from interminable syllogisms, he comes to me for conversation. Strictly conversation while we hold hands; nothing more. It's the sort of relationship that Plato would approve of. The last time we met I kissed him on the lips to awaken his sleeping heart, but he pulled back. Though enchanted by my unchanging beauty he's troubled by the feelings I evoke in him. Feelings he can't control. He'd rather stuff them away in a philosophic category, if he could figure out where.

Seeing my frightened eyes he takes my hand. 'What has happened?'

I wrap my arms about him. 'Hold me a moment.'

His arms take me in a close embrace, sincere and caring as a brother might give his distressed sister. He kisses me on the brow, a slow and thoughtful kiss.

'Tell me,' he says.

I shake my head. Darkness lies on my heart as if I had received a death edict. I cannot purge the vision of the stranger's baleful eye. Now that Aristotle is close by I want him to stay with me. Even as a lover.

‘Will you always hide your sorrow?’ he says.

‘I must. There’s no one else who will bear it.’

‘It makes you stronger and more beautiful. In you an ancient spirit has taken a human body.’

I want to share my sorrow, repeat the words of the one-eyed stranger, but silence seals my lips. Aristotle would never understand. Were he to hear my story, even the little I remember, he would flee believing I was possessed by demons.

He accepts a goblet of wine from my hand but stands apart from me, shifting his weight from one spindly leg to the other, deciding whether to stand or sit down. His dark eyes look at me thoughtfully. Finally he sits beside me on a cushion, clasps his hands behind his head and stares out into space. Thinking. It never stops. Whether he sits, walks or eats, he struggles with some abstruse problem, analyzes categories, seeks the hidden entrails of phenomena that appear obvious.

I point to golden light on the hills. Another day is about to end. How many more sunsets will I have to endure?

‘It's beautiful,’ he says with a rapid glance through the window. He steals a look in my direction, but tries not to meet my eyes.

‘What are you cogitating?’ I say.

‘I'm exploring a new land, places where no philosopher has gone. Plato would call it chaos, disorder that precedes creation. Many times Socrates tried to banish it, saying that it wasn't worthy of study. Whenever I look on you, I find myself back in that world.’

What have I done to the poor boy? His feelings well up and threaten to topple his thinking from its throne. Plato consigns feelings to the offal barrel, to be discarded and forgotten lest they influence cold reason, but Aristotle isn't so sure. Already he sees me not merely as a sister, but as something more.

'Tell me about that land,' I say.

'The road to it weaves through mountains with sheer cliffs. Stray too close to the edge and the road may cast you into the abyss. Behind every rock lurk evil men who would strip you of your clothes and money, leaving you naked. But were you to persist, you'd find that the road takes you to flow gardens of unimaginable beauty. Trees with sweet fruit. Pleasures that those, unwilling to risk the mountainous journey, will never know.'

While he speaks he looks at me directly, not afraid that I'll see the passion in his eyes.

'Who might you find in that garden?' I say.

'Dear Herpyllis, it's a place where emotions live and run wild. All that is irrational in us has its home there. Even chaos.'

'Could I meet you there?'

'Of course.'

'What would we talk about?'

He pauses before replying. His hungry thoughts scurry around in his head like mice. 'We'd have nothing to say, because speech, dialog, argument and reason don't belong there.'

'Yet it's real, no imaginary place. Will you stand forever at that gate, afraid to enter?' I take his hand. His long fingers caress mine. Cautiously, then he lets go.

'Reason knows nothing of the passions,' he says. 'But what if time were

absent? Could we leave time behind, step into the garden, and taste only the present? Forget time and its offspring, desire, pleasure, ambition and fear. Wouldn't they disappear the moment we're freed of time?

'And love?'

His eyes shine with feeling. The fire coursing through his body is about to extinguish his analytical thinking. Despite its protestations, he wants to close the distance between us, feel my body against his. Still I make no move. I want him to express his passion.

'I would risk those dangerous cliffs,' he says.

I laugh. 'Not while you follow a road through your mountains of chaos, afraid to stray close to the edge. Look at me as I am.'

I stroke his head. His eyes wander across my body, pausing on the shape of my breasts. I've caught him in a snare from which he won't escape.

I move to where the evening sun catches my hair. 'All the basic elements are woven in my body. Touch each of them. Earth, the first of the elements. Touch my hair.'

He reaches out and plays with my hair. His fingers thread it in and out, delighting in its silky feel.

His dark eyes meet mine. I say, 'Blood courses through my veins. Fire mingled with water gives blood the colour and warmth of fire.'

'And air?'

'Approach my lips. It's here.' I blow gently into his face.' He laughs. For a moment our lips face each other and then withdraw.

He'd like to kiss me, but his stormy thoughts like small boats are still attached to their feeble anchors. He's holding onto Plato's admonitions, the old fart's ideas on

morality and on the higher life -- so called.

I take his hand, pull myself close so that our legs touch, then I draw his hand over to my knee. 'Touch me now, feel softness there. Explore the universe with all your senses. Do you come here to commune with a disembodied spirit? More than the mingled elements in your philosophy, I am a woman, whose body you can touch, and explore.'

With that, I part my dress to allow him to look at me in a way he has never looked at a woman. His eyes drift over me, pausing on each curve. He smiles, the first sign that his heart awakens, but he makes no move. I stand up and twirl in front of him, pausing close, so that he can touch. He embraces me. This time his arms draw me close so he can feel my curves. His breathing comes quickly. How the fire rises from his loins to engulf his entire body. His fingers caress my feet, ankles, my legs. Fire awakens within my core and spreads to my fingers and toes. His gleaming eyes look into mine, so tender, so aware of every feeling. He'd never focused his mind with such intensity. Not on any intellectual issue, and he loves it. For the first time his body is his shepherd. His boat has broken free of its moorings and has cast itself into the deep waters, searching for the deepest mysteries. It never finds the safe island known to philosophers, but instead wrecks itself on my rocky shore.

When I awaken the night has already overtaken us. Shadows fill the room. I make out his silhouette against the window, looking out into the darkness. Hearing me stir, he comes over quickly.

'What happened?' he says.

I pull him close to me. 'We walked in that garden where time doesn't rule,' I say. 'Did you not taste the moment?'

He kisses me, a tender kiss that I think will never end. 'I felt so free,' he says.  
'As if I had touched the unmoved mover. Let people laugh if they will, but it is so.  
Have we been there, only to return to the world? To the tyrant we can't escape?'

I stroke his face, delighting in its roughness, feeling his short beard of only a few summers. 'Your beard has started to grow. One day it will be thick as a bush. Promise me you'll never trim it. That you'll wear it long for me.'

'For you, Herpyllis, that is not a difficult promise. Long beards denote wisdom. They're respected because they take time to grow.'

'Did you hear what you said?' I sit up quickly as if stung by an insect.

'What did I say?'

'About your beard?'

'Yes, you don't want me to trim it.'

'Not that. It's about time. Do you really believe that time makes a man wiser?'

'More knowledgeable surely.'

'But wiser?'

'That too.'

'How false your words are. Time builds the walls of a prison from which you'll never escape. Your memories, all your knowledge are made by time, and are imperfect. Don't you see, that imperfect knowledge imprisons you? Surely an imprisoned man can't be wise.'

He sits still, his thoughts turning. 'You're right. Time is not wisdom. How strange that I hadn't seen it before.'

'Dearest Aristotle.' I hold him close to me, not wanting to let him go.

'Wisdom is you and I in that garden, living in a single moment without time. Let your beard grow as long as it will. People will respect you for your learning. For the many

books you will write. But I will always love you as you are, in that mountain garden where time has no place, where the flowers are brightest, the lighting is clearer, where there is no decay or death.'

I must have dozed off because when I look up again the silver moonlight is pouring through the window. I reach out for Aristotle but the spot on the pillows is cold. Then I see him pacing back and forth, gnawing his fingers.

'What's keeping you awake?' I say.

'I'm no longer the same. How can a man change so fundamentally, in an instant? Discover a new world? When I return to the Academy, I'll find it a dull, banal place. Plato doesn't understand beauty. Love as you and I know, is beyond him. As for the others? They've lost what passion they once had. Except for philosophic truth.'

'A sterile passion that cannot conceive children.'

'Couldn't your friends give the students a lesson in love?'

I laugh. 'It would be no more than a pleasurable night of debauchery. They'd be blind when they bed down with a woman, and no wiser when they're finished with her. With you and I, things are different, because not only our bodies, but our souls have embraced.'

END