

Daughters of Nyx

Diane Bonavist

Prologue

The Aegean Sea 422 B.C.E.

News comes slowly to this small island. The trade ship calls once a season. We row out to it as there is no port. This spring, as we neared the ship, a youth was standing at the rail. By his dress, I could see he wasn't a crewman.

"Can you take me to the man named Timarcus?" he called down.

Although I don't consider myself a Pythagorean, they gave me one of their names when I came here to live with them, and I hadn't heard my true name spoken in a long time.

"I'm Timarcus," I admitted.

"I came to tell you that Cleon the Demagogue is dead."

My heart gave a small leap. Perhaps now I could return to Athens.

"He died some time back." The young man cocked his thumb, as if the past lay in the waters behind him.

"I'm a student of Thucydides," he said. "And I've been given the Spartan war as my task of inquiry. It's said that you had great sway in the early days of the war, when the fate of Lesbos lay in the balance. Will you tell me your story?" The young man coaxed. "Let history decide your part?"

I hadn't spoken of the old times since I'd come to this island. It might be good to talk to another about Athens and Cleon and maybe even Kore.

He took my hesitation for assent, picked up a small sack, and tossed it into our boat.

"Can you tell it all by dawn?" He had hoisted himself over the rail and was on the ladder making his way down. "That's when this ship sets sail again."

"I can tell it all before sundown," I told him."

After we emptied the provisions from the boat and tied them onto the mules, I told the youth that I had to tend my flock. We herded them to the highland, and when they were settled, I brought the fellow to the thin shade at the foot of the cypress. I removed the jug of wine from the spring where it was cooling.

The youth pulled open his sack and began to take out parchment and stylus.

I put up my hand to stop him. "You may listen to what I have to tell, and when I'm finished, make what you will of it, but don't copy it down as I speak."

He hesitated, looked uncertain as he put his tools away.

“You’ve asked a simple question: What was my part in the events regarding Cleon and the fate of Lesbos? Since I came here, I’ve thought of little else, but now that you’ve asked me...” I passed him the jug.

If I was truthful, the story began and ended with Kore. Without her, my part in the other events would never have come to pass. But this fellow didn’t want that, so I told a simple tale of Cleon and me, of boyhood adventures on our fathers’ adjoining farms. I told of the incidents that led to the turn in our friendship, and its indirect part in the Spartan wars. I never once mentioned Kore by name. But later, when I was finished, and the fellow had gone back to his ship, I wandered the hills and remembered the story as it had, in fact, unfolded.

The Sacred Way

Athens 428 B.C.E.

I entered the Agora and followed the road that led to the Painted Portico. In daylight, the paintings of battle scenes seemed to spill from the walls, but now dusk dimmed the assault of those heroes and hosts. Except for the soft slap of my sandals against marble, all was quiet. Yet I sensed a presence.

Suddenly Kore stepped out from behind a column and closed the space between us. She pressed against me—curved, soft, strong—a fawn, yet a warrior, she covered my eyes and lips with soft flickering kisses. I pushed back the brim of her hat. It fell from her head, releasing a long coil of hyacinth-scented hair. I encircled her in my arms. With a little jump, she wound her legs around my waist, her arms around my neck, and we enjoined, the mad gods of love upon us.

Afterward, when we left the portico, dusk had turned to evening. The moon was rising. It spread across the sea like wax on an ebony table. Torches, here and there, lit our way as we strolled arm-in-arm through the quiet streets. Twice we passed some men I knew, and I drew Kore closer. As tall as I, barelegged and dressed in a short chiton, her long hair hidden by the hat, the men we passed mistook her for a beautiful young man. They nodded with wistful understanding and did not stop to speak.

We followed the Sacred Way up through the acropolis. Kore tipped back her head to look at the stars and her hat fell from her head. I pulled her to me and whispered slowly, implanting the words inside her. “Promise again you will stay with me always.”

She placed a warm hand against my cheek. “Let’s race to the summit.” Her voice was smoky with challenge. Before I could stop her she was off.

“You always were fast on your feet,” I said when we reached the top. I had won, but not by much.

“I’ve been practicing, so I can better train my girls.” She spoke through labored gulps of air.

I didn’t want trouble so I bit back a reproach and willed myself not to show concern. Her body had never been as strong as her spirit. When we were children, there were times when her face would turn too red if she ran, and her heartbeat would thump so loud in her ears she could hear little else. Her father had often admonished her—slow down, don’t run—but she wouldn’t listen. Be what you wish to seem, Socrates says, and that was how Kore lived, appearing to have the health and strength she felt were her birthrights.

If she had grown up to live the life of an Athenian woman—sequestered and serene—I wouldn't have worried. But she had chosen to serve the goddess out in the country at the temples of Brauron, where young girls and their guardians lived free and wild as wood nymphs.

We continued on through the narrow streets, hand-in-hand, past the temples lit by candlelight, stopping at the sanctuary of Artemis. To avoid disturbing the servant of the temple, who was nodding by the entranceway, we went around back and slipped in among the shadows. The statue of the goddess rose before us, shimmering in the light of votive lamps placed in an arc at her feet. Unable to keep away from Kore, I reached out to stroke her neck.

She pulled away, bowed her head toward the statue and whispered, "Careful, you'll make her jealous."

I offered the goddess a quick salute and left Kore alone to worship.

"Where shall we go now?" she asked a little while later when she joined me outside.

"Up there." I pointed above us where terraced hills and temples ended and myrtle and junipers made a wide thicket. We walked single file when the path became a narrow track beside a wall. I led the way, keeping branches from snapping back and striking her. Once, I thought I heard a noise behind us and halted a moment to listen. I asked Kore if she had heard something, but she shook her head and pushed me forward.

At the top of the hill, where the path ended, I stopped in front of a tall myrtle bush and pulled back the branches. Here the wall was broken, the stones tumbled down and long ago over-run with gorse. Ahead was the night sky.

I went through the gap, showing her where the ledge widened a few paces on and there was room to stretch out, but we were high up. She sat down slowly, her back against the wall, taking in the city spread below. Moonlight illuminated some neighborhoods and deepened the curves and shadows in others.

"The theater of Dionysus is there, below. Sometimes you can see the actors from up here, they look like grasshoppers in bright robes."

I sat down beside her and pulled her close.

"Do you take all your lovers here?" She molded her hip and thigh to mine.

"I don't have any lover but you."

"Not in all this time?"

"No." I hadn't seen her for seven years, and not once had I ever stopped wanting her, thinking of her, looking for her in every crowd, no matter how improbable. Each summer, servants of Artemis arrived from Brauron to choose the girls who would become little bears, dedicated to the goddess. But Kore was never among those who came for the choosing. After so many years went by with no sight of her, I had begun to wonder if I would ever see her again, when there she was. Unexpected but always searched for. Walking through the agora with the other

priestesses, bearing the standard of the bear of Artemis embroidered on a banner they carried between them.

I knew as soon as I called her name and she turned to me, saw her eyes, that we would be together again. I soon got word to her. She too was eager to meet. As of this evening, we had been together three miraculous times.

“Am I much changed?” she asked.

In truth, her beauty had edges now. It wasn't lamb-soft and heartbreaking as it had been when she was a girl.

“You look exactly the same.” I kissed her neck.

She shook her head, her mouth a pout of disbelief.

“The same, yet better.” I took her hand and turned it over, tracing the veins in her wrist, stopping when I reached the metal band that encircled it.

“I remember when I made this for you.”

She smiled. “That summer when I wanted to play every day at being the divine huntress.”

Someone had told her a story about Artemis and playing goddess had become her favorite pastime. She told me that the goddess wore an armband decorated with a crescent moon and set with jewels, so I did my best to fashion one for her.

“Let me see how my handiwork has endured.” I opened my palm.

Kore worked the narrow band over her hand. “It was too big for me then, and you offered to make it smaller, but I would never take it off long enough for you to fix it.”

I held the bracelet up to the moonlight. “I couldn't have made it without your father's help. Lycus gave me a scrap of copper and showed me how to heat it until it was soft enough to shape and to carve the crescent moon into it.” The band was set with pebbles that I had polished as if they were gems. Tweaking each one, I was satisfied to see that they were still snug.

“I'll have it back now.” Kore held out her hand, bit me gently on the ear.

“I'll give it back, but only until I replace it with gold and lapis. A band that is prized as befits our marriage pledge.”

“Have you forgotten, my dearest boy, that I'm not Athenian?” Kore's question held a soft rebuke. “You know it's against the law for us to marry.” She worked the band slowly over her knuckles. “Our children will be illegitimate.”

I took heart in her use of will, as if she had decided. “There's nothing to stop us from holding a ceremony, celebrating with a marriage feast.”

“I would still only be your concubine.”

“I don't care.” My mouth brushed hers.

“What would Lachesis say? I wouldn't want to unsettle your sister's position in the household.”

“She'd be happy to have another woman for company,” I assured her.

Kore gazed up at the stars and shrugged. "Your sister never liked me."

I began to contradict her, but she tapped my mouth with her finger and went on speaking. "She liked Cleon though, when we were children. I think she would have liked to be his wife."

My sister and Cleon? I had never considered it.

"Now he's commander of Athens," she said. "So very different from the man who went before him."

"No one could ever match Pericles," I agreed.

"Remember how Cleon loved to climb down into that cave?"

"He didn't love it," I assured her. "That lower chamber terrified him, that's why he did it. He was always proving his prowess, mostly I thought to show off for you."

Kore shrugged. "Well now he's building a very showy shrine beside the entrance to that cave."

"I didn't know," I confessed.

"I'm surprised. We always hear how Athens is filled with gossip." She sat up suddenly and took my hand, her gaze steadily upon my palm as if reading a sign. She licked her lips. She had something to say.

"The high-priestess is dying and we need to decide who will replace her. So, I have to return to Brauron."

I felt the heat rising in me.

"For only a little while. I'll come back to you as quickly as I can."

She placed her hand against my chest. "If you and I do marry outside of the law then I will not be allowed to continue serving the goddess. After seven years devoted to the temple, I want to cast my shard for the next high priestess, before my days are done there." Her eyes met mine now, soft and pleading. "You've kept faith this long, Timarcus, allow me these last rituals and duties before I become your..."

She couldn't even say it— concubine. Could she become one?

I stretched out on my back, locking my hands behind my head.

She climbed on top, took my hands and brought them to her breasts. Her neck shone white in the moonlight. A breeze lifted the ends of her hair

"Make a vow with me," I said. "Promise that soon we will be together, pledged to each other, and we will not part until death takes us."

Before she could answer my entreaty, there was rustling in the bushes on the other side of the wall. Then we heard the bird cry.

"A crane." I recognized it's cry but was surprised. There were no cranes in Athens.

"The bird sacred to Artemis." Kore's voice was hushed and solemn. She looked down at me intently. "Surely this is a sign from the goddess, a blessing on our union, our children." I hoped, as we came together again in our love making, that I had put the seed of a child in her womb. Later, I took her back to the house where she and the other servants of Artemis were staying. Brauron was not far from my farm, so I suggested that I

come down in a day or two, that she steal away from the temple and we spend a day roaming around our old childhood haunts.

She touched my face, and I felt as if all the air went out of my chest. "Is that spring fed pool in the rocks still there?"

"Yes. And it's still so cold it..."

"Stops your heart."

"Takes your breath." I pulled Kore to me for one last kiss, then she left the shadows and walked briskly up the path. A porter stepped from the porch to light her way and she was gone.

It was late in the evening, yet the air was still warm and languorous as I made my way slowly home through the potters' quarter. Some youths ran by me crowned with flowers, laughing and singing. I passed a doorway where two men sat silently passing a jar of wine between them.

Being with Kore left me both sated and longing for more, satisfied yet yearning. She stirred in me a tumult of delight, gratitude, and a little irritation.

Although my farm wasn't far from Brauron, I had never tried to see her through all the years. Once she chose serving the goddess over a life with me, I had stayed away. But now that she was here, in my city, with me again, I felt as if I owed the goddess nothing more, that Kore and I had given all we could. The next seven plus seven and more years would be ours.

As I left the district of Keramos behind, the street widened and soon the houses were hidden behind walls. When I reached home, the lamp on the porch was still lit. My servant Zeno would stay awake all night if need be until I was home and he could extinguish it. I called into the courtyard for the dogs to keep them from barking. They wriggled and sniffed at my feet, poked my knees with their damp noses, and followed me as far as the portico. The house was one story, well-built but modest with a single colonnade. My bedchamber and the andron were in the front, the women's and servants' quarters in the back.

I went past the kitchen and storerooms, out the rear door where I found Zeno watering the garden. He greeted me with a smile. It's easy to judge a man by appearances. Big ones, such as Zeno, must be fierce, dangerous, stupid. But Zeno was smart as any sophist and gentle as the plants he so carefully tended.

"I've been thinking of going down to the farm," I said.

He emptied a jar of water at the base of a flowering bush. "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

He looked at me with eyebrows raised. "Shall I send word that you won't be attending the lady Aspasia's symposium?"

Preoccupied as I had been with Kore, I had forgotten about the gathering the following night. There was no question of missing it. I plucked a blossom closed tightly for the evening and pried it slowly open.

"Then I'll leave for the farm the day after tomorrow."

It was the end of the year, and the troops of the Spartan alliance, who had occupied the countryside for the last six months, would have gone home. The invaders had bivouacked in my house on and off for three years now. So far they hadn't burned it down, preferring to keep it standing for their next incursion, but my fields had lain fallow.

"Is it too late in the season to put in a crop?" I wondered.

"Maybe barley," Zeno said.

"You should go there tomorrow." Better we try and use the land before the enemy returns.

"To the farm?"

"Yes. If you can find some willing laborers, hire them to till and sow. We may get a crop if the Spartans don't return until winter. I'll join you when I'm able."

He refilled the jar from a barrel and continued watering the plants.

When Zeno was a small boy in Thrace, he had been enslaved and brought to Laurium to work in the silver mines. The mines were one source of my family's wealth, but my father knew the conditions there were brutal. The stewards liked to use boys in the narrow tunnels, even though they didn't survive very long. If father hadn't procured Zeno, he most likely would have died before the age of ten. My father always had great affection for him. When he was dying, he sent everyone out of the room so he could speak to Zeno alone. I had noticed, since my father's death, that Zeno had grown quieter. Although it shamed me to admit it, his grief at father's passing seemed greater than my own.

