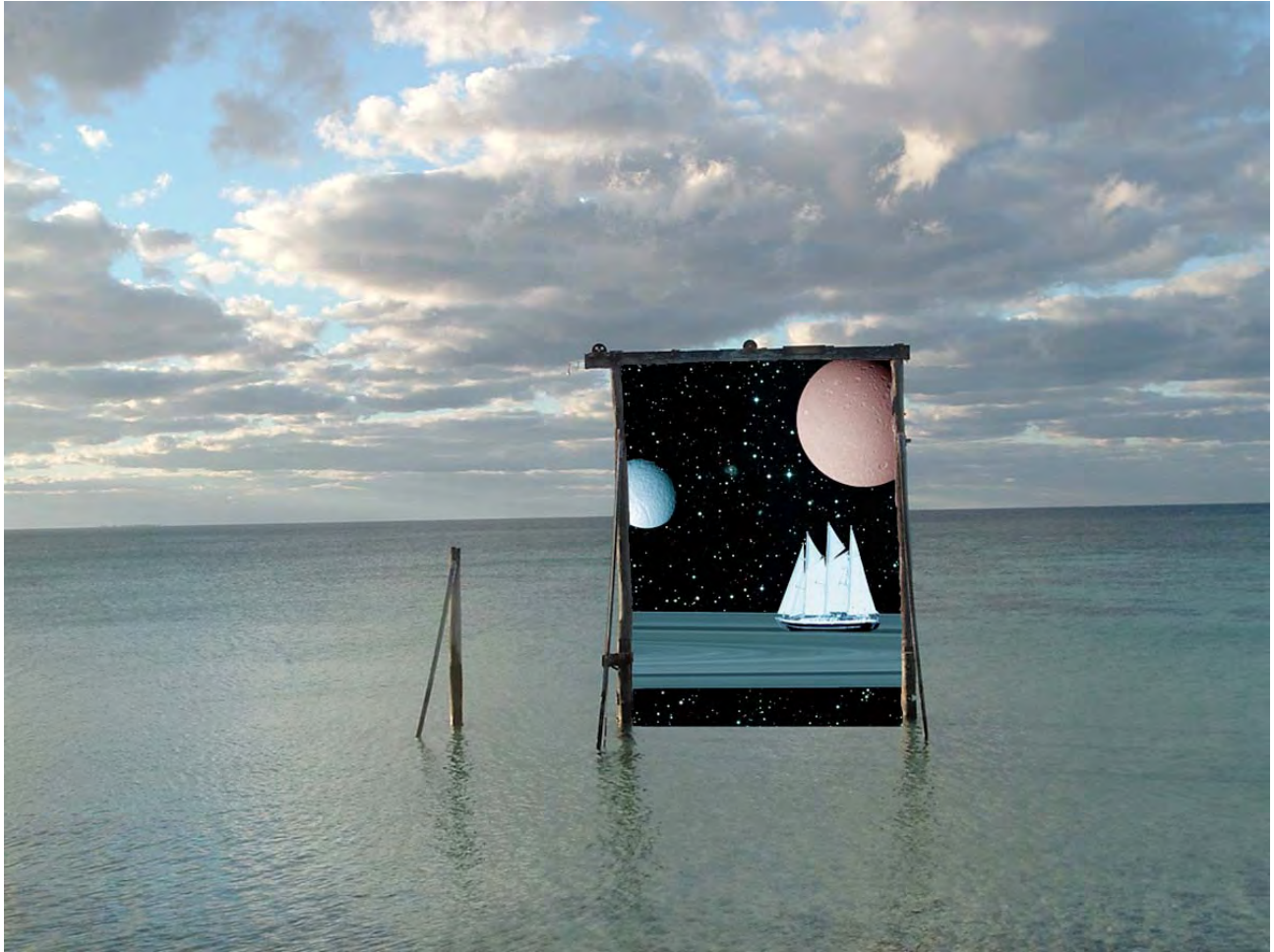


IN THE REALMS OF FIRE



BY ATHENA ANDREADIS

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PHOTOGRAPH OF THE REEF: PETER CASSIDY

Contra Mundum

Author's note: Ariáthne, the maiden aspect of the Minoan Great Goddess, was the Mistress of Animals. Her chariot, like that of her Semitic counterpart, Ishtar, was pulled by lions. There are persistent rumors of mountain lion sightings in the Massachusetts Quabbin Reservoir. No one has proved or disproved their existence. Some think they are survivors of the eastern strain, thought to be extinct. Others maintain they are members of the western species that wended eastward.

After an interminable interval of slate-gray skies came one day as clear and hard as a diamond. Ariáthne decided to postpone her -- so far fruitless -- job search and get out of the city. On the way north, she stopped at the Stoneham zoo. She had never been there before.

Her heart swelled with anger and pity. The animals were crowded, emaciated, sickly. She had left the big cats for last. Many visitors were gawking intently into the tiger pit. It was feeding time; the older, much larger male stood over the beef haunch. He periodically interrupted his eating to slap, with increasing ferocity, the young female that kept stealing up to the food, undaunted by the blows that left bloody furrows in her fur.

Ariáthne walked up to a uniformed keeper. In a voice raspy with checked wrath, she asked:

"If they don't get along, why do you put them together?"

"We don't have any more space," he said helplessly. "It takes ages to have a proposal approved by the committee. We had hoped that they would tolerate each other, but the only way this could happen now is if she were to go in heat. But her weight has dropped so much, that has also become impossible. She'll die of anemia or concussion. Or they'll come to their senses and have her put to sleep."

Ariáthne left, hardly knowing where she was going. She drove to Plum Island, but the beautiful place had suddenly become invisible. Burned onto her retina remained the image of the thin, multiply scarred flank of the tigress. She returned home, sat unmoving till it grew dark. Then she rummaged through her tool chest, selected a crowbar and a large file and left.

She had no difficulty scaling the walls. With such lax security, she was surprised the animals hadn't been hurt. She timed the comings and goings of the single guard, then set to work. Despite the premature arthritis which was already crippling her fingers, the years of laboratory research had given her discipline and skill. She worked so quietly that the animals were not disturbed -- except for the tigress, who had come up to the bars and was watching silently, intently.

Ariáthne finally released the lock and sprinted for the wall. She tumbled into the car, then turned to look. Outlined against the stars, the zoo fence suddenly sprouted a cat-shaped bulge. Without any hesitation, the tigress approached the car in a stately trot.

She is hungry, thought Ariáthne, and fear brushed her mind. The tigress put her face and front paws against the passenger window, transfixing the woman with the lamps of her eyes. Without pausing to think, Ariáthne opened the right door and flipped the seat forward. Soundlessly, the tigress jumped in the back and Ariáthne drove away as fast as the dilapidated engine would bear.

I must be finally going crazy, she moaned to herself. If I don't get eaten, how am I to explain this to the authorities? The neighbors? My landlord? What will I do, hide her in the bathtub and feed her cockroaches?

The big cat's musky smell flooded the car. Soon a rumble covered the noise of the engine and Ariáthne knew that her passenger would be civil to the chauffeur.

When they reached her apartment house, she considered carrying the tigress upstairs wrapped in the dusty quilt kept in the car, but she was too tired and her package too heavy. So she opted for the matter-of-fact approach and simply used the stairs, since everyone else seemed to only employ the elevators. The tigress didn't need much coaxing. Once in the tiny apartment, she investigated it minutely. The two resident cats initially reacted with agitation; however, they eventually decided that she smelled like their long-lost mother. Shortly thereafter, all three formed a tight, snoring coil on the bed. Exhausted, and aware that her blankets were being subjected to major shedding, Ariáthne grumpily rearranged the inert mass enough to carve out a small niche for herself. Lulled by the purring and warmth, she instantly sailed into slumber.

She awoke to snuffling and discovered that she was being examined as thoroughly as her apartment had previously been. The alarm clock showed late afternoon; the light through the window was already amber. Realizing that no one had been fed for the last twelve hours, she ran out, praying that in her absence the intra-feline truce might still prevail.

As she entered the elevator, staggering under the weight of six pounds of hamburger, she saw a note on the elevator wall: "Fumigation tomorrow, 9 am to 2 pm. Please remove all pets from your apartment." Well, she would have to put the cats on the fire ladder as usual. What a nuisance -- as if it had ever made a dent into the cockroach hordes. And then she remembered.

She went in, fed everybody. Then, to clear her mind, and recalling that big cats needed exercise, she snuck into the back alley with her unlikely companion, as soon as the darkness was complete.

She had never liked the place. Dark, dotted with garbage dumps, broken bottles and struggling sumac trees, it mirrored and amplified the alienation around it. She waited uneasily for the tigress to finish, her back against a pillar that once had held an electric lamp. And then, the nape of her neck bristled and her bloodbeat faltered.

"Hey, baby." He wasn't loud; didn't need to be. The alley was a dead end and very dark.

"Show us the good stuff."

They herded her towards the trash cans against the back of the alley. One carried a knife, the other a short metal pipe. It would do. Tomorrow she would be collected with the rest of the garbage. To her, the weapons were in sharp focus; the rest of them remained a blur.

From the mouth of the alley came a low cough. The taller one clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Check it out," he rapped. "Damn old winos. I'll handle this -- you take your turn later."

The other grumbled under his nose, then loped towards the source of the noise. The one left jabbed her lightly in the midriff with his knife.

"Make it real easy, honey. Maybe we won't have to mark this pretty face."

A short scream arose, then was bitten off. The man smirked.

"Sounds like the busybody met my friend. Hey, buddy," he half-shouted, "come share the goods."

A quiet pad, pad, pad was approaching. Two phosphorescent orbs appeared, stopped, started slithering towards him. He looked at her, fingered his knife, uncertain.

"This some kind of trick?" he started. "Don't try to pull..." and then the tigress came into full view, and his voice died.

His knife clattered on the ground; a dark stain started spreading in the front of his trousers. The tigress, disgusted with the lack of spirit in her quarry, half-heartedly closed her jaws over his calf. He collapsed to the ground. She released him, batted him around a few times, gave the equivalent of a shrug and came up to Ariáthne.

Ariáthne looked him over; he was alive, more in shock than hurt. Then she headed out of the alley. There lay the other one, untouched, his eyes frozen open, dead of heart failure.

She went to her car, opened the door, flipped the seat forward. Without demur, the tigress leapt in. Pulling on her gloves, as it was getting bitterly cold, Ariáthne headed westward. She entered the turnpike. At some point, the tigress decided she preferred the front seat, much to Ariáthne's discomfort. Nevertheless, she felt grateful to have warm fur nestling next to her.

On and on she went, under the brilliance of the Hunters, Procyon, Sirius and Orion. The highway was deserted. She started humming a Springsteen tune, the usual intoxication whenever she was at the wheel stealing upon her. She turned off at the Quabbin Reservoir exit, went all the way to the entrance of the park, climbed over the fence. The tigress followed. Then she let the tigress lead, since she had better night eyes.

When they were well into the foliage, she motioned the tigress forward. Reluctantly, the tigress moved into the bushes, then came back. Ariáthne shooed her on again. This was repeated a few more times. Finally, the tigress came over, rubbed her whole length against Ariáthne and melted away silently into the dark background.

Ariáthne walked slowly back to the car, happiness rippling inside her like waves upon the shore. There had been sightings of mountain lions in the Quabbin. Somehow, they had made their way eastward across the urban sprawls. The tigress would find her own kind. In a few years there would be striped cubs frisking in a hollow -- and, with some genetic luck, perhaps the beginning of a new species... *Felis Ariathnénsis*.

She reached her car, looked back. The sounds and movements of approaching day were starting. In her line of sight, an eagle rose, started riding the thermals upward. A good omen. She smiled; a few hours ago, she thought she would never live to see this sunrise. Now she must go back to attend to her life. It was a good thing the exterminators were coming today -- she strongly suspected the tigress had harbored fleas. She headed back east, into the gates of dawn.

Persephone

Author's note: Kyra is a Doric word for female ruler. Asterion (Made of Stars) was a Minoan royal name -- that of the predecessor of Minos, but also of the Minotaur himself.

Kyra had lived for the day when she would leave adolescence behind, move to New York and start painting full time. She promptly started all three on her eighteenth birthday.

She fell in love with the city, the dreams made concrete, the currents of potential achievement crisscrossing the air like vibrating electric wires. Despite her youth, her certainty about the value of her painting was bone-deep. But the instinct that guided her unerringly when she judged the quality of an art object stumbled where lovers were involved.

So it happened that someone took her love, used it to increase his own strength, and left her diminished and bereft. Suddenly, the canvases that had been absorbing her might as well have been gaping holes in the fabric of the world. She lay on her bed, eyes blank, as if on an operating table where pain wielded the scalpel. When she emerged from her ordeal, still dazed, she found that she had completely exhausted her financial and emotional reserves. To return to her depressed hometown was unthinkable. Nor did she intend to blunt her talent with any form of prostitution.

Thus, one fine fall day, she put her brushes, paint tubes and a change of clothes in her satchel, stole past the superintendent's door and descended into the subway. Once underground, she went to the end of the platform, past the signal forbidding further access, and disappeared into the gloom.

During her long sojourn, Kyra learned that many of the stories whispered above were true, although she did not meet any blind alligators. It took her eyes a while to adjust to the constant semi-darkness; eventually she developed true darkvision -- she could see colors where others would normally only distinguish shades of gray. Many besides her had taken refuge in the relative warmth and safety of the tunnels -- and most were helpful. Kyra found out about the spider's web of passages; where to surface if she needed food, drink, clothing; how to listen, ear against pipe or railing, for signals conducted along the metal; which places were the best for sleep, near the hot air vents. Surely, she thought, Moria at the heyday of the Dwarf empire could not have been livelier.

It startled her to realize that while she had been busy getting familiar with her new surroundings, her heartache had been cured. Now she was eager to resume painting; her retinas were filled with the images of the works she would create. And then she thought -- what better place to test out all her new color schemes and compositions than the endless tunnels?

In the next three months, she literally covered square miles of walls, until the nascent ideas had crystallized. Then, she decided she would venture aboveground and seek a proper backdrop for her first public opus.

Kyra prowled the streets for a long time before she settled on a prosperous looking house whose inhabitants were obviously away for the winter. From an acquaintance underground, she learned all there was to know about alarm systems, bypassed the safeguards, and decorated the main living

room wall. She hesitated about signing the work, and finally settled on Asterion. Like her, he had lived in a labyrinth and had no friends in the world outside.

When the owners returned, they were stunned by the vibrant fresco on the previously naked expanse; museum curators and art critics were invited, and gave unanimous, extravagant praise, some of which percolated down to Kyra's sanctuary. Thereafter, she repeated the nocturnal visits, not always to large, well-kept houses. During that winter, many well-to-do New Yorkers disconnected their alarms and risked getting burglarized for the sake of getting a visit from Asterion, whose murals were already worth millions.

One night, she ventured outside and the air smelled different; spring was coming, the trees were hazy with buds. She had already selected her next "canvas", in a small apartment on the top floor of a brownstone, whose inhabitant seemed to have tastes very similar to hers. Made lightheaded from the thaw and the sap rising in the trees, she decided this painting would be a forest scene, something that would evoke half-forgotten myths. But although she worked, as was her wont, with deft fingers and a clear image, for the first time upon leaving she was dissatisfied with her work.

She knew she had to return; to complete the mural, she needed to set a creature roaming in it. While she was furtively nearing the beckoning wall, as if under thrall, there was nevertheless no distinct vision in her mind. But once in front of the fresco, it came to her sharply, a dappled cat barely distinguishable from the background, yet an undeniably sensed presence.

She was finishing the first coat, when the door of the apartment opened and someone flicked a switch. Kyra's eyes, unaccustomed to strong light, temporarily deserted her. She stood blinking, paint dripping from the tip of her brush.

The tenant initially froze, but took the situation in very quickly.

"So this is what Asterion really looks like. Not satisfied with this one yet? I can come back later, you know..."

"No," replied Kyra. "I desire company tonight. Talk to me while I work."

"I'll make us some tea," decided the occupant and explained while doing so: "I am a research scientist at Columbia, the experiments require irregular hours."

They talked -- sentences halting on Kyra's unexercised tongue -- until her hands stopped, and enormous eyes were burning through the underbrush. The first streaks of dawn were coloring the sky as they drifted to sleep, tightly entwined. When they awoke, both puzzled by the unaccustomed weight and warmth upon their bodies, dust motes were dancing in the amber light of afternoon.

The two left the apartment -- her new lover had to return to work that could not be put off. But Kyra, for the first time in many months walked out into the light... The passersby parted to let her through, as if the leopard she had brought forth from the shadows was padding behind her.

Night Travels

The wanderer was not yet old, but she felt so -- old and scarred and bitter. She had seen years of peace, when she was content to stay in libraries and dream within book covers... or find someone who sweetened her hours and stole a little of her stamina, a little of her self-sufficiency. She had seen years of war, when fires bloomed out of what had been cities and the finer shadings of peacetime faded into black. She had ridden in all weathers, sometimes the horse knowing more about where they were going, bloodstains mingling with rain or snow on her clothing. One great love she had had, and loved a little too long and too hard, more the glimpsed potential than what had been truly there. She was well-known, although an exile from her own land; people sought her advice, valued her friendship, desired her good opinion. She had been counsellor to powerful people and sometimes had led her own band of warriors.

But now she was weary.

She had just left the relative comfort of a manor behind her, having discovered that her patience with people was seriously eroded. For someone who had helped put almost all the present princes of the western provinces on their seats, losing lovers and children in the process, daily concerns had paled somewhat. Her ever-increasing courtliness had become a shield, a distancing device.

She had left in the late morning of a calm winter day, and was slowly guiding her horse over the downs. Here and there, a tuft of trees or a clump of rocks embroidered the eggshell-colored sky. A few whiffs of smoke from the widely separated human habitations dispersed lazily in the crisp air.

She was making her way down a dried riverbed, when she discerned another rider at the mouth of the valley. She approached unhurriedly -- friend or foe, there was time.

He was perhaps in his late youth, with very long braided hair of the palest gold -- just like the sun that came hazily through the cloud cover. His face was angular and weathered, with piercing storm grey eyes, matching his worn but clean garments. But the horse was enormous and black, and the weapons rivalled her own in quality and length of use.

"No one should have to travel in winter," he said as she drew up.

"All seasons are the same for wanderers," she replied.

"If you are going westward, I would be glad of company."

She examined him. He withstood the scrutiny motionless; when she nodded, he led his horse beside hers without any more words of explanation. Her own mount became restive; she laid a restraining hand upon him, but said nothing. If the traveller had treachery in mind, she could match him.

They headed downhill, following the sun's path; their shadows went before them, bluish and long. The day passed into afternoon, and eventually, in front of them, the sun engaged in battle. The blood lingered long on the clear horizon.

The stars were distinct when they stopped for the night. A small fire was all their concession to the season; both had often slept on bare ground. She was weary and would have been glad to have

slipped into dreaming, but he stayed crosslegged, gazing at the heart of the flame; both manners and common sense required that she keep him company.

"I am a hunter," he said after a long silence, "and a very good one. But my prey tonight is fey and deadly; what would you advise?" And as he raised his eyes to hers, she saw that they were now empty and reflecting the sky, and knew him.

"Well met, Lord," she replied. "I should have known, when my horse shied. Why such excessive courtesy? You could have taken me any moment, in any way."

"And insult your dignity?"

"I wish you hadn't given me the choice... for I am very tired and would fain decline challenge."

She stood up; he followed her. With a small sigh, she donned her weapons. They faced each other at a nearby oval stone plateau, which the glaciers had worn smooth. They bowed deeply, and engaged.

She was the best, even past her prime. But the other's arm was of iron and each of his blows left blood behind, and merciless cold. Under the sliver of the late-rising moon she fought on, and her sword grew blunt; she threw it away and uncoiled her whip, holding the dagger in reserve.

He lowered his own weapon.

"You can stop now; I would be slain were I mortal. Surely honor is fully satisfied."

She smiled and tried her whip against the wind; it was rising, heralding the sunrise.

They continued circling until the stars paled and a band of many colors appeared on the eastern horizon. Her whole body grew numb and her whip fell from her hand. As he raised his sword for the final thrust, she sank her own dagger to the hilt below her rib.

"I lived to see another dawn," she whispered. "It is good that no stone will burden me. I will be able to stargaze; perhaps a tree will grow out of me... and the passing cranes will bring me tidings of the world."

Cocoon

"There are those who say beneath his coat there are wings..."

Tom Waits, "Black Wings" from Bone Machine

Author's note: Ariáthne, the maiden aspect of the Minoan Great Goddess, was the Mistress of Animals.

"We'll need a biopsy to ascertain the nature of the growth," Ariáthne heard the doctor's careful voice. "Spinal epiphyses are very unusual..."

She almost smiled – *biopsy, what for?* The tumor was growing so fast she could hear her skin crack. During her second visit, the doctor gave up.

"You know the alternatives. We can operate, but I suspect it has already metastasized. Or we could try a combined radiation/chemotherapy treatment. In either case you'll probably lose use of your arms, partial or total, I cannot quite say before the surgery. I urge you to decide soon -- even hours count. In fact, I strongly recommend that you enter the hospital right away."

Ariáthne turned away, walked down the corridor. *I'm not going*, her blood stormed, echoed, *not going... Enough morphine to tame the pain and when time comes, I'll cross the Gates erect!*

Next day, the good people sent a report to her supervisor. At his look of concern, she turned fierce.

"Have you notified your family? The doctor mentioned that you refused treatment. You are intelligent, rational -- please reconsider. If you need help, I can take care of your affairs for a time, deal with department headquarters..."

"No!" Ariáthne interrupted him. "There will be no treatment. I really like my hair, broom-straight as it is; I don't intend to lose it."

She gathered her things, walked out. *What shall I do? Grasp someone and say -- please come home with me, I have only weeks to live and I need warmth?* She threw her head back, let out a short laugh. *Remarkable doom, mine -- all in keeping, very extravagant, very colorful.*

She filled her morphine prescription, bought enough bittersweet chocolate to fill the fridge and books to cover the bed, then barred the door and disconnected the phone.

She flowed gratefully into the bed, searching for the groove she had worn in it. Once fitted, she sank down, down, through coral and seaweed, all the way to the dim green pebbles at the bottom.

The cats' motors occasionally made her surface to mark time by their feeding cycle. Then she would return to drown in blankets, books and her own hair. Her drug dose was increasing rapidly and she was no longer able to lie on her back. Normally, she would be restless, but pain crowded out all other bad habits.

Much later, she chanced to glance at herself in the mirror and was bemused to see her bones emerge like islands in low tide. *All my life I've wanted to be thin*, she reflected wryly. *Never again will I consider my magic weak! It's feeding off me like a child, sending tendrils down my arms...* indeed, her arms had grown veined and corded.

Soon after, the torment of itching started. Her throat tight with irritation, she grasped her comb and raked it across her left back side, from shoulder to waist. The tearing sound startled her more than the blade of pain. Looking down, she saw that the green carpet had turned brown.

As she trekked to the bathroom, she grinned. *Here am I, dying and alone, yet I grow vexed at how the cats will get excited by the blood and cry for hours*. She sat at the edge of the tub to drip more neatly and contemplate whether she should climb to the terrace and step off.

At that moment, she caught sight of a dark mass barely within her vision range. With the instinctive fear of people who live alone, she whirled around to the mirror. She took the sight very calmly, didn't cry out, only reached for the comb and repeated the operation on her right side.

She watched for a while, then filed out in the living room, the two cats excitedly in tow. There, fully unfurled, she stretched -- once, twice. But she had underestimated her span and so knocked off a vase at the far end of the room.

Yes, Ariáthne thought gleefully, I must definitely go up on to the terrace now. I intend to excel at flying, so I must practice. What matter if I am loved or no? I can embrace lightning!

Though I Grow Old with Wandering...

from *The Song of Wandering Aengus*
by W. B. Yeats

The two had fallen together naturally enough. It was not unusual for roving mercenaries to share short stretches of their dangerous paths. This one alarmed him, though. A formidable warrior and strict loner, she calmly entered his soul before he knew it. And highly accomplished as they both were in the arts of love and war, together they could face the world -- and vanquish it.

As a result, they quickly and effortlessly ascended the ranks of their unorthodox profession, which was despised and feared by the ones outside, yet had its own inviolable code of worth and honor. So, when representatives of a powerful city state enlisted their aid to dislodge an undesirable prince, he led the motley army to swift victory. And as proof of his prowess and stature, he was subsequently offered the prince's throne by the hugely relieved citizens.

There she came to him one day, when he was still flushed with the unexpected honor and fortune's smiles.

"I am going, companion of the road."

"Are you leaving now, when you can finally reap the rewards of your efforts? Stay here; you will be queen and rule with me."

"A woman can be king or king's consort -- and the latter's duty is to produce an heir and steady the king, not rule. You are enthralled, you so wanted to be accepted into this world. But I cannot be tethered so, while I still hear the night winds moan and call. "

Thus was he left upon the throne, in power and in glory and in unspeakable loss. Yet in his bone marrow he knew her to be right. Soon he wooed a highborn, highbred young girl who wove her life around him and never entered the chambers in his soul's core that had once been occupied.

He kept hearing snatches of his erstwhile companion's daring raids. Sometimes she would be his ally, sometimes his enemy. A few years later, he engaged her against his neighbor, who nested upon a reputedly impregnable mountain eyrie. She took the city bloodlessly.

His gaze stayed riveted on her during the victory banquet -- pared down to the essentials, all eyes and cheekbones, whereas his own clean lines were beginning to blur with contentment and security. And he noticed her eyes roving appreciatively over the dancers.

"Tell me who," he teased her, "and I will send them on border patrol."

She laughed, but there was a warning note in her laughter. That night, unable to sleep, he felt his heart whimper. Towards dawn, she slipped in beside him. She held him in her searing, smoky embrace and all his burdens fell from him as he soared. Tightly intertwined, they drifted to slumber

-- but when he awoke, she was gone from the camp and a runner had arrived to announce that his queen had presented him with the gift of a son.

Many years passed. He was a good ruler and, with his loyal consort at his side, satisfied. Then the two sons came of age. Each wanted to be the heir, since there was no privilege of primogeniture. One long evening, he was sitting before the hearth at the great hall, tormented by a sense of futility and waste. He stole a look at his sleeping queen who had been placidly knitting her silken threads, her once slender frame grown stout and opaque with good, uneventful living. His accumulated wisdom seemed not to be needed or desired by his sons. Inevitably they would repeat his mistakes. His tide was receding.

As he straightened his shoulders, he noticed a shadow next to the fireplace darker than the others. With the warrior's reflexes, his hand leapt to his dagger, as she emerged into firelight.

There were countless white threads in her dark hair, pain lines around her mouth and laughter wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Otherwise, she was unchanged like the sea.

"You have been an exile long. Come roam with me beneath strange skies. Sorely have I missed you, and will no longer be denied."

On noiseless feet he followed her out of the chamber. He took nothing with him -- left, as he had arrived long ago, with a worn tunic and two daggers. They melted into the lowering darkness and the snowstorm during the night covered their tracks.