

A Murder of Furies

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Chapter 1

Although it was just late March, Crete was already growing hot. Sweating and panting after the bird dance, I pushed my mask to the top of my head. I sucked in deep breaths and flapped the long white sleeves, pinned to resemble wings. Air rushed over my damp arms and legs,

At least my dance was finished. Other dances would also be performed, and, in fact, the next one was already beginning. The younger girls, all maidens and too young to wear the red spotted scarf, were clad in bearskins. They danced to honor the Lady of Animals and Childbirth. I remembered that hot smelly costume from previous years. Now, at almost seventeen, I danced as a bird in a graceful circle of white-clad girls twisting around one another. I thought we really did look like flying birds; not imprisoned by the earth. We each wore the mask of a different species. Although I'd hoped to dance as a gull or an owl, I was only a sparrow.

The other bird dancers removed their masks and scattered into the audience to join friends and family. Except the vulture. Funny, I thought, I didn't recognize the vulture. Now that I'd begun my agoge and visited the dorms regularly, I thought I knew all the young women – at least by sight. I certainly should know everyone who I danced with.

Despite the identical white gowns and the masks covering the faces, the bodies were difficult to disguise. This girl was heavier, that other one was as slim as a papyrus reed. Although every girl danced the same steps, some jumped higher and some twisted with an extra roll of the hips. Easy to know them even though we weren't supposed to – for this short space of time we were the creatures represented by our masks. But I did not recognize the vulture. I squinted against the bright sun. I didn't remember the vulture from the rehearsals either. And surely at least one girl was missing –

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“If you’re Martis, the High Priestess’s consort wishes to speak to you,” said a treble voice behind me. I turned and looked first at the grubby little boy and then around at the crowd. I saw no sign of Tinos.

“Where is he?” I asked, my heart leaping.

At one time, I’d thought – hoped – Tinos and I had developed a special connection. But last fall, during the investigation into the murder of the bull dancer, we’d fallen out. I’d seen very little of him since then and only at a distance, as he conducted his duties. Sometimes I imagined we were still close friends. Other times I despaired we’d ever be friends again.

“I’ll take you to him,” the boy said, extending a grimy paw. I took hold and followed the boy through the crowd.

We went a distance from the theater, finally pausing at a copse of trees. Tinos waited within, almost unrecognizable without his headdress or jewelry. His long black hair had been pulled back and tied with a string. “Martis,” he said. As his eyes drifted from my hair to my white dress, his eyebrows rose in surprise. I touched my long hair self-consciously. I now wore it in the fashionable style - with most of it tumbling down my back except for the locks pulled in front of my ears.

“You’ve grown up? I always think of you in a boy’s kilt . . .”

“I wear that only when I am bull dancing,” I said shortly, affronted. Did Tinos believe I would be a child forever? I was old enough to marry - although I’d vowed before the Goddess that I never would.

Tinos nodded and stared over my head as though regretting this meeting. I could see he felt awkward, without the easy camaraderie we’d once enjoyed, and I was both sorry and angry with him. I’d looked forward to talking with him once again and now he seemed, well, disappointed. “You wanted to see me?” I asked, my tone taking on some sharpness.

He turned to look at me.

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“That’s the Martis I remember,” he said, grinning for the first time. “Still as quick to anger as ever.” I went hot.

Unable to think of a smart response, I tossed my head.

“Have you seen Atana lately. I know you and my daughter are friends.”

I knew Atana of course and I’d made an effort to befriend her. At one point, I’d hoped to see more of Tinos, which hadn’t happened. Atana was only nine so I didn’t spend a lot of time with her.

I turned and looked over my shoulder as though I could see through the trees and the crowds beyond. Atana should have joined the younger girls in the bear dance but, because she was the High Priestess’s daughter, she’d been allowed to dance with the birds. Now I knew who’d been missing.

“Did you see her this morning?” Tinos continued, his words rushing out.

“No,” I said. “Didn’t you?”

“No. We – um - quarreled,” he admitted, his eyes seeking the ground beneath his booted feet. “I haven’t seen or spoken to her for several days.”

“Ah.” I said in understanding. Before I moved to the girls’ dorm, I’d been arguing frequently with my mother. Now that I stayed occasionally in the dorm, I saw her less often and so we quarreled less. “I saw Atana at most of the rehearsals,” I said now. “How many days has it been since you’ve spoken to her?”

“Almost three. She’s been avoiding me. It was a very bad quarrel,” Tinos’s eyes slid away from mine. He took a deep breath and looked at me. “I’m worried about her.”

“Surely the High Priestess –” I began. But Tinos was shaking his head.

“She’s too busy now,” he said. I narrowed my eyes at him. Too busy to wonder where her daughter went? After so many days without seeing me, my mother took pains to seek me out. “Atana talks about you,” Tinos continued. “She says you are her friend.”

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I stared at him. Friends? Sure, we were friendly, but she was more like my younger sister. We were the two outsiders. I'd just moved into the dorms, years after most girls my age, and I stayed there infrequently, so I didn't know any of them well. I didn't care to. They were all looking forward to marriage' I wasn't.

"Where would Atana go?" I asked. Atana, Tinos's oldest child, was much shyer than her older half-siblings and did not make friends easily. Perhaps because of her position – Atana's mother was the High Priestess after all, the other girls alternately teased or flattered her.

"That's it, I don't know," Tinos said. A pleat formed between his brows and he suddenly looked tired. "But I am very worried. Will you ask the other girls if they've seen her?"

"Why can't you ask them?" I asked. "They would have to answer *you*." As the High Priestess's consort, I meant. Tinos was the most important man in Knossos.

The fingers on Tinos's right hand began to twitch nervously. "I can't," he said at last. "It wouldn't be wise. The High Priestess . . ." His voice faded and disappeared.

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"Speaking to them would be easier for you." Tinos tried again. "You see them regularly and no one will find it surprising if you talk to them. My appearance would cause too much comment." He looked at me and I nodded. I was not so much around the younger girls but I did see them as they ran races and wrestled. "Well then," he said as though it was all settled. "I just want to know she's safe."

"And if I find her?" I asked.

"Tell her I'm worried," he said. "Would you ask her to come home and visit me. And tell her – ." He paused. "Tell her I'm sorry. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, all right," I said. I did not believe this would be so difficult.

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“And Martis,” Tinos continued, “if she objects or becomes angry with you, don’t argue.” He shot me a stern look from under his heavy brows. “Understand? Just come and tell me.” I nodded although I didn’t understand. Why would I quarrel with Atana? Why would Atana argue with me? More to the point: what exactly had happened between Tinos and his daughter? That was the real puzzle.

“I have to go now,” Tinos said, glancing at the sky. “It is almost time for the Showing. I’ll see you later.” He turned and started down the slope. I watched until he disappeared behind a thicket of trees.

I slowly made my way back to the throng of people gathered around the theater. I did not think I could force my way through the crowd to rejoin my fellow birds and besides I would not watch the Showing. Every spring the High Priestess and her consort copulated in full view of the people of Knossos. It was important for the fertility of this land. But now that I knew Tinos and knew him well, I couldn’t bear to see that ritual.

I pushed my way through the crowd at the bottom of the paved area. As I squeezed by a woman in the fashionable ruffled skirt and tight jacket, the lady wrinkled her nose and tried to move away. I guessed I stank of perspiration.

And then, with a collective sigh, everyone turned to look at the walkway below. The High Priestess, riding sidesaddle on a white bull, was approaching. Her unbound hair tumbled down her back and, instead of skirt and jacket she wore a loose white robe that left her neck and arms bare. Bronze bells hung from the bracelets on her wrists and ankles and they tinkled with every movement. The bull was also decorated; garlands of bright spring flowers festooned his horns and encircled his neck.

Usually, the High Priestess smiled and waved at the people of Knossos but her expression today was uncharacteristically grim.

I turned to look at the top of the stadium. The bull-masked consort waited, glistening with water, as if he had

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just arisen from the sea. The huge white bull's head covered Tinos's head and part of his shoulders, the horns tipped with gold and glittering in the sun. Even though I was not supposed to recognize Tinos, even though who else could it be but the High Priestess's consort, I'd have recognized him anywhere. His broad shoulders tapered to the narrow waist where the thick twisted scar was just visible as it reached his back. Once a bull leaper, the scar served as a reminder of the bull's horn that had caught him and ripped open his side.

The white bull came to a halt and the High Priestess's attendants helped her down. She walked the last few yards to the bed at Tinos's feet. When she reached him she slid the robe from her shoulders and stepped out of it. But she did not unfasten Tinos's loincloth, as she had done every one of the nine years previously. Instead, after an awkward few seconds, Tinos slid off the garment himself.

I turned and fought my way through the audience, arriving on the other side of the crowd gasping and trembling. I'd seen this ritual enacted almost every year of my life but a year or two ago I had found I couldn't watch it anymore. I knew that the bodies coming together on the stage were not the Goddess and Her consort but the High Priestess and Tinos acting their parts. And knowing Tinos and wishing he had his arms around me made everything different.

I set off running, fleeing the central court, to hide in the room in which the dancers changed.