

Spartan Slave, Spartan Queen

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A Tale of Four Women in Sparta

A Novel

Helena P. Schrader

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Foreword and Acknowledgements

This practically wrote itself. Having completed *Are They Singing in Sparta?*, I realized that I wanted to tell more about what happened to some of the minor characters in that book. Leon and Kassia demanded more attention. The two captive girls took on lives of their own almost from the moment I described them and started writing. At no time was I unsure what either they or the leading Spartan characters would do. The book was written easily and rapidly, but I did not like the result. On the one hand, in principle, I do not like sequels, and on the other this book seemed particularly limited in its appeal. It is very much a woman's novel, focused on women's issues such as sex appeal, love, marriage, and childbirth. It also seemed a rather simple story. I hesitated to publish it.

Thanks to the encouragement of my editor, Christina Dickson, I decided to go ahead after all, and, with some modifications suggested by her, release this book. I was encouraged, furthermore, by the number of visitors to my website, www.elysiumgates.com/~helena.com, who came to the website searching for information about "Spartan Women."

The central theme of this book—the impact of physical beauty on human interactions—is, however, a universal one. It is quite independent of any cultural or period context. This is a topic that has long fascinated me, and one deserving more sophisticated attention in

literature. Too often it is taken for granted that beauty is something positive, or—worse—that physical beauty is equated with inner beauty, virtue and all things good. I hope this book will provoke readers to a more differentiated reflection on what beauty is and means.

Oslo, Norway
August 2007

PART I

The Captive Bride



Pyros, Messenia

At the end of the 1st Year of the 30th Olympiad
The 7th Year of the Second Messenian War

Chapter 1



The sun had set behind the island of Sphaktiria, leaving the island a black bulk against the luminous blue-purple sky. The air was beginning to cool, and the evening sea breeze rustled the leaves of the olives on the long slope up from the coast. The wild birds calling in the orchard set the captive birds in their gilded cages chirping and fluttering about in agitation.

Niobe went to the cage containing the beautiful, bright-feathered bird that had been one of Aristomenes' many wedding gifts to her. She clucked to him and called him by name, trying to soothe his agitation. But he looked at her coldly with his white-rimmed eye and then flew to the other side of the cage, grasped the bars with his talons, and bit at them with his beak. Niobe knew better than to reach out her finger. Instead she drew back and looked up at the patch of sky visible through the skylight of the peristyle.

She could see a single star. Aristomenes said sailors could navigate across the expanse of the seas by following the stars as they moved, but she found that hard to imagine. Her eyes sought the familiar and slid down the painted pillars supporting the roof around the pool in the middle of the paved peristyle. The paint was fresh, a bright ox-blood base with bright blue capitals on which palms were painted in yellow. Kallisto said that Aristomenes had had the women's quarters redecorated entirely for her. "He must have spent a fortune," Kallisto told her

young mistress in wonder, adding, “which shows that all the rumours about the Lacedaemonian successes in recent years are rubbish. If Aristomenes was losing the war, he couldn’t afford so much luxury.”

Niobe didn’t know enough about politics or war to know if this were true, but she did not think her father, King Aristokrates of Arkadia, would have given his favourite daughter to a man he did not think would be king one day. Aristomenes was of royal blood and the unquestioned leader of the Messenians, but he would only be king if he could regain his city’s freedom from the Lacedaemonians.

Three generations ago, after a long and bitter war, the last Messenian king, Aristodemos, had killed himself when he realised all further resistance was hopeless. His demoralized subjects had capitulated and been turned into Lacedaemonian subjects. But at least back then, Niobe’s father had explained to her, the Lacedaemonians had been ruled by the Spartan kings. Now the Lacedaemonians had adopted new laws and although they still had kings, their kings were almost powerless. Instead, the country was ruled by the common citizens, who met every month in Assembly and decided what to do based on whatever the majority wanted.

The men of good family in Messenia might have been willing to accept the leadership of Sparta’s kings. They, after all, were descended straight from Herakles himself, but the nobles of Messenia were not willing to be ruled by the whim of mere Spartan citizens. As her father had explained to her, some of these Spartan citizens had been landless nobodies before a land reform had cut up all the great aristocratic estates into equal parcels and given each of the citizens a plot of his own. Now the Spartans called themselves “equals” or “peers,” but it was obvious to anyone who could think (as her father said) that most of these “peers” were just jumped-up peasants. It was inconceivable that men of royal blood like Aristomenes would submit to be ruled by what the majority of these peasants voted once a month!

That was why the Rebellion began almost ten years ago. The Messenians had attacked the Lacedaemonian administrators and when the

Lacedaemonians sent an army to put them down, they had defeated it and sent the Lacedaemonians scampering back behind the safety of the great Taygetos mountain range. The Lacedaemonians, however, would not admit defeat. So for nearly ten years the war had dragged on with many casualties and hardships for both sides, Niobe's father said.

In all those years, Aristomenes had proved the most brilliant and audacious of all leaders on either side—like a hero from the *Iliad*, Kallisto had told her young mistress as she prepared her for her wedding. He had once raided right inside Sparta itself, and dedicated a shield at the Temple of the Bronze Athena on the Spartan acropolis. The number of times he had slipped out of the hands of his pursuers and enemies was both legion and legend, Kallisto said—and he certainly had a large number of scars, Niobe thought blushing.

She still found the thought of his body—and what it did with hers—slightly embarrassing. She had only been married for three months, and most of that time Aristomenes had been away from her. They had spent just five days together in idyllic seclusion after the wedding, and then he had left her in the care of a large household, which was moved slowly and with considerable hardship from Arkadia to Pylos in Messenia. Here he had visited her shortly thereafter to “make sure everything was all right,” but he had stayed only one night before he rushed off again. The women who had been in the household for a long time said that was typical of him. “It’s the kind of war he’s fighting,” they explained; “he never strikes twice in the same place. The Lacedaemonians have many more troops than we, and he can’t risk a fixed battle.”

The women who had been with Aristomenes' first wife said that sometimes he was gone all summer, but Niobe hoped he would be more attentive to her. After all, his first wife had been nearly 40 years old when she died and he'd been married to her for more than 20 years. She had given him six children—which was admirable, of course, but everyone admitted it had also made her very fat. Niobe was

16, and all her life she had been told that she was by far the prettiest of her father's many daughters.

More important, Aristomenes seemed to find her very attractive indeed. In fact, when Aristomenes was with her he made the most extravagant declarations of adoration, and certainly he showered her with gifts. The morning after her wedding, he had presented her with a beryl ring set in gold that was so massive it was uncomfortable to wear. He had given her reams of purple silk, sandals with lapis beads, a diadem of ivory and gold, and a bottle carved out of crystal with a gold filigree stopper. And yet, for all his adoration when he was with her, he still left her entirely on her own for months at a time. She didn't understand that any more than she understood his peculiar behaviour last night.

Last night he had swept in very late and with no warning. She'd had no time to prepare herself for him. He had simply appeared out of seemingly nowhere, and in a very strange mood. Although she was almost ashamed to think this of the man her father had given her to, she could not avoid noting that he had behaved very much like he was intoxicated—although he claimed to have drunk no wine in days. He had literally burst in on her laughing, and declared, "This time I got him! I took that arrogant son-of-a-whore completely by surprise. You should have seen their faces! All of them cozy around their fires and we came at them out of the deep. Those Lacedamonian land-lubbers are afraid of the sea! They don't understand it is the greatest highway in the world. We overran their whole camp and threw their dinner into the bay! It will be the next new moon before they get their gear collected, let alone threaten me again! The asses! And we were away before they could even blow their silly flutes!" He had laughed until the tears glistened in the corners of his eyes.

Then he'd sent all her slaves away and made love to her in a rush of passion. He hadn't even taken the time to bathe first, and he had smelled of sweat and been dirty and covered with various minor scratches and scrapes and dried blood. His hair had been a snarled

mess, still damp, and the blond strands were stiff and rough with salt. “You married a warrior, not a philosopher, girl,” he told her when she protested.

That experience had left her confused and bruised and even a little frightened. She still hurt from the way he had taken her, but Kallisto said it was a compliment. “See! He wanted you so much, he just couldn’t wait. You should be happy your husband is so ardent. You have no idea how many young brides weep away their nights alone, while their husbands prefer drinking companions, flute-girls or pretty boys.” But Niobe much preferred it when Aristomenes paid her compliments and begged for her favours in the language of her father’s court.

Niobe was frowning slightly in the gathering dusk. Aristomenes was sure to come to her again tonight, and she had to work out a strategy to teach him to treat her—a king’s daughter!—better than the girls he presumably had while out campaigning. Niobe wondered if she should be very cool and distant to him tonight. Not actually deny him, of course. She had learned long ago that that could be dangerous. One of her father’s concubines had tried that trick and she had promptly been sold to a brothel. Not that Aristomenes would dare do that to his bride and the daughter of a king, but after last night Niobe knew enough to know that she didn’t know Aristomenes as well as she’d thought she did just 24 hours ago. She knew she shouldn’t take dangerous chances.

A sound at the door made her turn and there was Kallisto. Kallisto had been her slave for as long as Niobe could remember. Even as a very little girl, Kallisto had always been there to take care of her. Her mother was only a distant, vague memory. She had died in childbirth when Niobe was hardly more than a toddler. Kallisto had raised her.

Niobe had no idea how old Kallisto was, but she had streaks of grey in her hair and her face was deeply lined. It had never been a particularly pretty face—square with a flat nose. Kallisto came from the lands beyond Ionia and had been captured as a little girl by slave traders. She said all she remembered of her homeland was that it was very dry and

dusty. She remembered, she said, standing in the door of a tent, and the wind blew the dust sideways and there were horses and shouting, and then the dust got in her eyes and someone grabbed her.

Now she was carrying a fat bronze jug full of steaming water. “Come, child, we must get you pretty for your lord husband,” Kallisto called as she staggered under her burden into the bedchamber opening onto the peristyle.

Niobe followed her into the bedchamber. The ceiling beams here were brightly painted with red-and-yellow spirals. The walls themselves were a bright blue and painted with a broad band of dolphins dancing in stylized waves. The tiled floor was completely obscured by rich woven carpets in rust and straw-coloured geometric patterns. There were carved and painted chests all around the room containing those parts of her dowry which were movable and her personal things: her clothes, linens for beds, curtains, rugs, lamps, candelabra, pottery, jewellery and so on. There was a large bed with rich covers and the curtains drawn back. Niobe felt her pulse race slightly at the sight of it and hastily looked away to the dressing table with a chair before it. Then she focused on the small terracotta bathtub set on a woven mat. Kallisto had carried the water to the bath, and Niobe followed her there.

“Your lord husband is having a feast with his companions, but he is sure to come tonight. You want to look your best for him,” Kallisto declared.

Niobe nodded. Of course she wanted to look her best for him—especially if she wanted to make him regret the haste and roughness of the business last night. She must make him admire and desire her so much that he would be anxious to please her and fulfil her whims. Niobe could remember how she and all her sisters and half-sisters used to fight over the only mirror they owned or study themselves in the surface of the pool trying to see if they were pretty or not. That she was the prettiest had been established early on and was reinforced by her father’s obvious favour. Her father had always called her “my pretty darling,” and she was always the first of his daughters that he

kissed or took onto his lap. Moreover, Aristomenes had been the opposite of disappointed when he removed her veils on their wedding night and looked her up and down with a smile that grew wider and wider. But what good was beauty if it could not secure consideration for one's wishes?

Kallisto efficiently unpinned Niobe's peplos at the shoulders and removed the heavy gold pins with the goathead clasps. She unbuckled Niobe's belt with the knot-of-Herakles set on the buckle, and her mistress' peplos fell to the floor. Frowning, Kallisto turned and called over her shoulder in an irritable voice, "Mika! Where have you got to, you lazy bird-brain? Come quick and help me!"

At once the curtains of a little chamber opening off the back of the bedroom were pushed aside and Mika, the second of Niobe's personal slaves, emerged. Mika was much younger than Kallisto, probably Niobe's own age, and had been given to Niobe by her father as part of her dowry. Mika was very skinny with brown hair cut very short, pale brown eyes, colourless lips and no feminine curves at all. Her figure was rather that of an underfed teenage boy, while her face was ruined by warts all around the chin and lips. Niobe had been shocked by the sight of her, but her father explained that it was exactly this defect which made it certain that she would never be an object of desire. As such, the king told his teenage daughter, Niobe could be certain she would not "make trouble"—as slave-girls who were too attractive did. Who needed a slave who was pregnant all the time? Much less, one who might seduce the master of the house himself?

Mika darted in with a guilty expression and a hasty, "I'm sorry, Mistress" to Niobe. She hastily picked up the discarded peplos and started to fold it up to put it away.

"Brush it out first, you stupid girl!" Kallisto ordered with a frown, adding to Niobe as if Mika couldn't hear, "Really, the girl doesn't seem to have a brain in her head. You have to tell her absolutely everything!"

"That's not true!" Mika protested at once, but Niobe waved her silent with a regal gesture she had learned from her father's chief con-

cubine. She addressed Kallisto herself in a patient voice, "She's just a barbarian from somewhere north of Macedonia. She doesn't know how to take proper care of things yet. My father warned me I'd have to train her properly."

"Well, I can see why no one wanted to keep her!" Kallisto declared, with a hateful look at the younger girl who was brushing out the peplos with a resentful expression on her face. "I know your father wanted someone young, someone who'll be there for you when I'm gone, but there must have been many more suitable girls in the markets than that!" Kallisto cast another look of distaste at Mika and ordered the younger slave to fetch lamps, adding, "Can't you see it's getting dark?"

Mika opened her mouth to answer, her face turning red with resentment, but already Kallisto had turned her attention back to her mistress. "Step into the bath, child, and let me sponge you down with rose-water."

Niobe stood in the bath with her arms outstretched. Kallisto took a sponge and dipped it into the steaming water that she had carried into the chamber. This was heavily perfumed with extract of roses. She wiped Niobe down with this water from her chin to her toes (grunting a bit as she bent over the rim of the tub to reach Niobe's feet). When she finished, she snapped her fingers and called "towel" with her hand stretched out. Mika all but threw a towel at her, but Kallisto ignored her contemptuously. Instead she dabbed the remnants of water away from Niobe's nubile body and then threw the towel back at Mika, who had to jump aside not to be hit by it.

Niobe ignored the silent bickering of her slaves. Her father's wife had advised her not to take notice of what her slaves said or did among themselves. She stepped out of the bath and went to stand beside the dressing table, knowing the routine. Kallisto had prepared her for her wedding and on every night of her brief "honeymoon" in exactly the same way. Only last night had he come too unexpectedly for there to be time for this.

Meanwhile Mika lit all the lamps on the five prongs of the bronze candelabrum standing beside the dressing table. They cast a gentle light that glittered on the carved crystal bottles of perfume and on the gold clasps of the various ivory, inlaid and pottery boxes. Kallisto opened one of the ivory boxes and removed the little pot of henna paste. She smeared the paste carefully onto Niobe's nipples, making them appear much larger. At 16, Niobe's breasts were still a little under-developed.

Next she had Niobe sit down and released her hair from the ribbons and pins that held it up on the back of her head. Niobe had rich, red locks of hair, not truly curly but wavy, and Kallisto felt they were best set off by bands of gold ribbon she braided into the locks before winding them upon the back of Niobe's head. This she proceeded to do, finishing her work with the gold and ivory diadem set above Niobe's brow.

Next came rouge for her lips and cheeks. Kallisto applied the lip rouge sparingly. Niobe had full lips and they did not need to be exaggerated any more. Her eyes, in contrast, were a pale grey-blue, and so Kallisto took a fine coal pencil and, dipping it frequently in one of the little pots of oil specially made for this purpose, very carefully outlined Niobe's eyes. She dipped her baby finger in one of the pots containing a fine blue powder and then applied this to Niobe's eyelids, smearing the powder up to her eyebrows. Using the coal again, she darkened Niobe's eyebrows and then stood back to consider her work critically. Kallisto dabbed again here and there until she was satisfied, before smearing perfume on the base of Niobe's neck and between her breasts.

At last she snapped her fingers for the towel, and when Mika handed it to her, she wiped her smeared fingers clean. Then she rummaged through the large, ivory jewellery box until she had found the amber and gold-pellet earrings and the matching necklace she was looking for. The necklace had pieces of rolled amber set between gold beads and one large drop of amber hanging from the centre. She set this around Niobe's neck and then hung the earrings from her ear-

holes. She selected a gold bracelet with panels of embossed gold and an amber ring in addition to the rings Niobe always wore: the amethyst with Aphrodite carved into the surface given her by her father and the beryl set in gold from Aristomenes.

At last Niobe was coifed, perfumed, made-up and bejewelled.

Kallisto snapped at Mika to bring the mistress' rust-coloured silk gown.

Mika removed the requested peplos from one of the chests and brought it to Kallisto laid across her outstretched arms. Kallisto carefully spread the peplos on the floor so that Niobe could step into it. Then she lifted the gown by the shoulders and pulled it up over Niobe's naked body. Mika was already standing by with the gold shoulder pins and the belt. Kallisto deftly fastened the peplos with these. Last of all, Niobe's sandals were brought to her. These had golden and rolled lapis beads sewn on top of the leather. Kallisto bent to lay them before her mistress, who stepped into them daintily.

"Now! See how pretty you look?" Kallisto held up the polished silver mirror for Niobe. Niobe studied herself avidly. She certainly looked sophisticated when Kallisto was done with her. She hoped that in so much finery she would remind Aristomenes of who she was—a king's daughter and not some captive to be rolled in the straw!

"I'll go see how the symposium is coming along," Kallisto announced. "Mika, clear away all these towels and then fetch water and wine to set out beside the bed—and some figs and bread as well."

Niobe was left alone again. It was now completely dark and the birds were silent. Only the sound of crickets came from outside. She left the bedchamber to wander around the peristyle again. From the front of the house came the sound of male laughter and she sighed, wondering how long it would be before her husband came to her. She remembered that her father's parties could go all night, but surely Aristomenes would be eager—

The sounds from the front of the house had changed abruptly. Someone was shouting. Not happy shouting, joking and boasting and

the like, but urgent, frightened shouting. More voices joined in, louder now and more alarmed.

“We’re under attack!” A man fell into the peristyle, blood streaming from a wound in his side, and collapsed right there as if he were dead. Niobe’s hair stood up on the back of her neck as she heard a scream that sounded like someone in pain. She couldn’t believe it, though. The peristyle itself remained so still and lovely in the darkness.

Kallisto came up from behind her. “What is it? What is going on?”

“It seems to be an attack. That man said something about an attack.” Niobe pointed to the man crumpled up on the opposite side of the peristyle holding his side.

“Here? That’s impossible!” But Kallisto’s eye took in the bleeding man and her ears, too, heard the shouting and clamour. She put her arm around her mistress protectively and urged with unmistakable unease, “Come back into your chamber until Aristomenes and his companions have driven them off.”

The screaming and shouting had taken on a new quality; rather than urgency there was rage and hatred in the voices. The sound of things smashing and clattering started to reach them. Niobe looked over her shoulder from the threshold of her chamber, but all she saw was women, boys and clerks of household rushing into the peristyle.

“Lacedaemonians!” one of them gasped out.

“They’re all over the place!” cried out the next.

“They’ve seized the kitchens and slaughtered everyone there,” a woman gasped out as she sank onto her knees breathlessly, her hair torn from her pins and hanging around her face.

Niobe stared, but Kallisto pulled her inside her chamber, slamming the heavy oak door shut behind her. Kallisto’s face was white and her eyes darted about the room as if she were looking for something. Shooing her mistress before her, she drove her through the curtain to the slaves’ chamber. Here two straw pallets were on the floor, each with a crumpled blanket, and there was a wooden crate on which a chipped pitcher stood, along with a scattering of personal things. With a single

gesture, Kallisto knocked these off the crate and told Niobe to sit there. "Whatever you hear, don't move! Don't move or speak. Stay right here until I come for you!"

Then Kallisto was gone. Niobe waited. It all seemed very unreal to her. She knew the Lacedaemonians had attacked, sacked and burned various estates throughout Messenia over the years, but mostly those on the west side of the Taygetos or on the broad Plain of the Five Rivers. They had never ventured this far west before. And Aristomenes was not alone here. He had at least 100 of his companions with him and various attendants and light infantry as well. Niobe saw in her mind's eye Aristomenes as she had last seen him, on the way to dinner tonight: his long blond hair had been freshly washed and had lifted on the wind while his chiton fluttered behind him as he strode out. She had loved the way he looked, because in his light indoor clothes you could see his firm, muscular body. But now her heart missed a beat. He was unarmed *and unarmoured*. What if they *all* were? But surely a watch had been set? The watch would be able to hold the Lacedaemonians long enough for Aristomenes and his companions to arm themselves. Surely....

The palms of her hands were starting to sweat, and yet she was very cold. She strained to hear something beyond the curtain and the closed door, but although there were noises, they were confused and indistinct, nothing she could really identify. After what seemed like a long time, the noises grew dimmer and then faded away. Niobe sighed with relief and got up from her chest. She peered around the curtain. Nothing. She stood indecisively in the cramped chamber, but then decided to do what Kallisto had told her to do. She returned to the chest, sat down and waited.

At last the door to her chamber banged open and she jumped up eagerly. But something made her catch her breath and stand still. The voices she could hear were *male*, unfamiliar male voices. And no Messenian man would dare enter Aristomenes' bedchamber.

"Aha."

“Very nice.”

And then without further ado, the curtain was pulled aside and a fully armoured man, his helmet still covering his face, looked in. He started visibly at the sight of her, but then gestured and ordered simply, “Come with me.”

Niobe’s throat went dry. Her heart was pounding furiously. The man had still-wet blood all along his right arm. Blood had splattered the bronze of his breastplate. She could smell his sweat in the confines of the little chamber. He was wearing Spartan scarlet under his bronze.

He stood back to let her out of the chamber and pointed out of the chamber toward the peristyle. Niobe managed somehow to put one foot in front of the other, although her joints seemed like jelly. Her head was spinning and her breathing was shallow. Everything was happening too fast. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing with her own eyes.

Crowded into the peristyle were what appeared to be the entire household: the laundry maids, the kitchen boys, the cook and the clerks, the household slaves of both sexes. Kallisto gave a little cry at the sight of her beloved mistress and dropped her face into her hands, but Mika was nowhere in sight. From the other rooms around the peristyle, other Spartan hoplites were driving the wives of Aristomenes’ companions and their slaves to join the crowd. Niobe had never realized how large the household was until she saw it all collected here together—there were about a hundred of them. And not a single fighting man.

“Aristomenes?” she managed to breathe out, addressing her question generally, while her eyes darted about for someone who might know what had become of him.

“Don’t worry. That coward thinks of his own skin first. He got away as usual.” The answer came from the hoplite who had found her. He shoved his helmet back onto his brow, revealing a surprisingly normal face. He looked about 40 and could have been a farmer anywhere, with a thick brown beard and kindly wrinkles around his eyes. He left

her with the others and went purposefully down the corridor by which Niobe had last seen Aristomenes leave for dinner only hours earlier.

Kallisto worked her way through the crowd to Niobe. She put her arms around her mistress protectively, but her hands were trembling.

Niobe looked at the women around her. On all their faces was the same stunned horror. They were captives. Slaves. No, not that. Not her. She was a king's daughter, the wife of the man who would be King of Messenia.

"They'll spare you," Kallisto whispered to her, as if reading her thoughts. "They'll spare you for your father's sake. They can't risk his anger. You're worth a huge ransom. They won't dare lay a hand on you."

No, Niobe nodded unconsciously, they won't hurt me. But what about the others? Surely Kallisto was too old, but her eyes went to the wives of Aristomenes' companions. They were noblewomen like herself. On their faces was the same disbelief that she felt. Their husbands and fathers would pay huge ransoms for their freedom, too. No, they had nothing to fear. But they looked as terrified as Niobe felt.

What if these Lacedaemonian peasants, who called themselves "peers," didn't respect noblewomen? After all, if they could take away the land of their own nobles and divide it up among themselves, then maybe they didn't respect nobility at all?

But she had one shield that the others did not have: beauty. Lifting her chin a little higher, she reminded herself that even barbarians respected beauty. All her life she had seen that a woman's beauty could tame the beast in any man. She had to use that weapon now.

A small commotion drew Niobe's attention back to the corridor leading from the front of the house. A tall man in plain armour and a black-crested helmet emerged into the atrium flanked by two younger men. One of these was in the most splendid embossed armour, while the other was in worn leather armour and holding a torch, apparently only a low-born infantryman. They were followed by a half-dozen other heavy infantrymen, including the man who had found her.

Although his armour was much simpler than that of several of his companions, all eyes were on the tall man at the head of the little group. There could be little doubt that whoever he was, he was in command here. He was exceptionally tall, even without the black crest of his Corinthian helmet. He was lean. The veins of his arms stood out so prominently that they were visible even by the dim light of the lamps and torches. His nose had a large bump on it, and his eyes glittered with predatory coldness over a short dark-blond beard. Niobe felt a shiver go down her spine. He didn't look like the kind of man who had much sense for beauty.

Raised on the *Iliad*, there was not one woman in the peristyle at Pylos who did not know that the conquerors had their pick of the captive women. Even the Queen of Troy and her priestess daughter had not been spared. But *they* had had no fathers, brothers or husbands left who could pay a ransom, Niobe reminded herself as she tried to calm her rising panic. She failed. All she could think was that the first pick of women went to the most senior of the enemy—and that could only be this lean killing machine with the predatory eyes. And of course he would pick the prettiest of the captives....

Suddenly from the corridor to the front of the house came a crash, a curse, and high-pitched screaming in both bass and soprano. Everyone turned to stare as a burly hoplite emerged, carrying over his shoulder a kicking, struggling and screaming Mika. "Let go of me, you mother-fucking bastard! Put me down, you shit-head!"

Niobe was shocked and mortified to see her own personal slave not only stark naked but behaving like an absolute savage and using that kind of language. The man carrying her, meanwhile, cursed her back in similar language, but she had no chance of escape. Mika was far too weak and small to escape his massive, muscular arms. When he flung her down into the pool in the centre of the peristyle with a huge splash, Mika was defeated. She staggered up out of the water, gasping for air and wiping water and hair out of eyes as everyone—not just the enemy—laughed.

“Zeus! Would you look at that!” the hoplite who had brought her exclaimed with a look of distaste. “The ugly thing had no need to hide. None of us are *that* desperate!”

There was laughter again. Mika crouched down, clutching her knees to her chest and her arms around her knees. She was clearly trying to hide her tiny pointed breasts and pubic hair from public ridicule, and then she bowed her head and pressed it to her knees to cover her ugly wart-covered face as well.

The laughter died away and the predatory eyes of the commander swept across the collected household. They returned and focused on Niobe—just as she had expected. Her heart was pounding furiously. She felt as if the enemy commander were stripping her with his eyes, and became abruptly aware that she was not only unveiled but also dressed for the intimacy of her bedchamber. No strange male had ever seen her like this before. Her head and neck were bare except for the necklace, her arms naked, the silk of her gown so sheer that the form of her torso and legs must be visible even in the dim light of the lamps that hung all round the peristyle.

Kallisto could stand it no longer. She flung herself forward onto her knees in front of Niobe. “Mercy, Master! My mistress is the daughter of King Aristokrates of Arkadia, the wife of Aristomenes—”

“What? Another one? How many of these ‘wives’ does he maintain?” The question came from the young man in the splendid armour who stood just one pace behind the commander.

The commander turned his head slowly to look at the young man, but did not reply. Still, the laughter of the other men confused Niobe. She heard someone remark, “He must keep ‘wives’ the way we keep post-horses—one every 20–30 miles.”

Another man was saying, “This is the second of his concubines we’ve captured in the last year.”

“But she’s his *wife*,” Kallisto called out desperately; “his wife, not his concubine. Her father is King Aristo—”

“Yes, and we know how many concubines *he* keeps! He must have a stable of bastards he can give away to his friends,” the young man in the splendid armour cut her off. Then, turning to his commander, he remarked, “I fancy this one, Agesandros; you wouldn’t object to me taking her, would you?”

Niobe was so terrified she couldn’t breathe at all. Both men turned to look at her. There was no doubt about it now: the man with the bump on his nose and the predatory eyes was the infamous Agesandros, the man Aristomenes hated more than any other, the man he claimed to have surprised and sent running only yesterday. He was supposed to be so confused he couldn’t attack for a month....

Niobe’s found herself praying to all the gods at once: anyone but him, anyone! She let her eyes shift to the young man in the elaborately embossed armour, pleading to him with her eyes to rescue her.

He was stocky and muscular with a square, clean-shaven face, dominated by a short pug nose. Despite being nearly the opposite of Aristomenes in every way, he was undoubtedly handsome. And he was young—21 or 22, Niobe guessed—half Aristomenes’ age.

Agesandros took his time, but then he answered in an even, emotionless tone, “It’s your right, my lord, to take first pick.”

“After you, sir,” the young man stressed with a vigorous nod.

Agesandros dismissed this with an irritated flick of his hand, already turning away from Niobe as he said, “I’m a married man.” His next remark was to one of the other men. “We’re going to need a thorough inventory of what we’ve taken here. We should sell the bulk goods and livestock in the harbour and send only the slaves and important valuables back to Lacedaemon. Have Onatas report to me with the inventory and his estimates on its value as soon as possible. I don’t want to spend more than another day here.” He paused and looked over his shoulder at the crowd of women and slaves and added, “And have one of the *perioikoi* commanders look into hiring a cargo ship to send the lot back to Lacedaemon. I don’t like the thought of having to provide an escort for them all the way home.”

Agesandros was moving toward the corridor out of the women's quarters again, followed this time only by the young man with the torch. He paused just before leaving the peristyle and addressed the torch-bearer. "You can stay, Leon. You have a right to the spoils, too, you know."

"That's all right, sir. I've never done it with a girl who didn't want it. I—" Niobe could see the embarrassed way the youth looked down, not meeting Agesandros' predatory eyes, "I don't think I could."

To her astonishment, Agesandros didn't laugh or mock the youth. Instead, he laid his hand on his shoulder and she thought she heard him mutter, "You're a better man than I am," before they continued out together.

Niobe jumped as her wrist was seized. She had been so fascinated by Agesandros, she had not noticed that the young man who'd claimed her had moved up directly to her. "No point pining after Agesandros. He's madly in love with his wife. I'll give you a better time. Where was Aristomenes' chamber?" His eyes were already sweeping along the doors opening off the atrium.

Kallisto, still on her knees, flung her arms around his legs and made one last attempt to stop him. "Please, Master, please spare her. Her father will pay a huge ransom for her safe return."

"Good. If I don't like her enough to take home, I'll take the ransom instead. Now, let go of me." As he spoke he looked down at Kallisto with a cold-blooded authority that withered the resistance of the old slave woman. She released his legs slowly, but she kept her eyes fixed on his face, hoping he would change his mind.

He didn't.



Mika had been in the kitchen fetching the bread and figs for Niobe's bed-side table when the attack occurred. Her first panicked reaction at

the sight of men with bloody swords had been to hide. As she had learned to do as a child, she rushed to climb a tree, but her chiton got in her way. In her panic, she had tossed it aside. Thus when the hoplite pulled her down and dumped her in the pool in front of everyone, she had been naked. She was so ashamed, she wanted to die. She knew her body was nothing to be proud of, but she had never exposed it like that to hundreds of eyes. And no matter how true the remarks about her ugliness were, it still hurt to hear the mockery. Worse: people who she'd thought were her friends laughed at her in her humiliation.

Still, despite her own humiliation, she had been shocked when she saw Niobe, the beautiful king's daughter, led away. And then, one after another, the other young and pretty women were claimed. She heard the noble wife of one of Aristomenes' companions sobbing and crying out in despair from the room next to Niobe's. She heard another woman begging "please not that" from another chamber, and soon she began to fear in a way she never had before.

After the pretty women and youths were divided up, it was the turn of the older men and less attractive women, girls and boys. This was done more rationally and yet more heartlessly. It was a matter of adding up specifications: age, race, sex, skills, defects. Most of the men didn't even bother to ask Mika about her skills. They took one look at her, grimaced, and moved on. Late in the night when she was falling asleep with her head on her knees, she heard the men around her talking. "No one wants that one. We'll have to try to sell her with the livestock in the market in town tomorrow."

"She won't bring much."

"What else should we do with her? Something's better than nothing."

"The Lady Alethea could use her."

Mika had jumped at the sound of a new voice and turned to look at the speaker. A slender young man came into the light of the torches still burning around the atrium. He was very dark. His straight eyebrows almost met over his fine, straight nose. His eyes were a dark

brown, warm even at that dark hour of the night. He was clutching his himation around him against the chill of the night—and to Mika he seemed the most beautiful young man she had ever seen.

“Have you had a close look at her?” one of the other men answered the youth in obvious disbelief.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

“You’re an odd one, Leon. If there’s any wife who doesn’t have to surround herself with ugly slaves, it’s the Lady Alethea. She’s got Agesandros so hog-tied to her, he doesn’t even look at the captives that throw themselves at him.”

The youth smiled at that, a quick flash of even white teeth, but then insisted, “She’s still short-handed.” The others shrugged, and so the youth came and touched Mika on the elbow. “Your hair’s soaking wet and you’ve got nothing on. You’ve got to come in out of the cold and get some clothes on you. You have nothing to fear.”

Mika was at once grateful for his consideration, and more embarrassed than ever. Being naked beside such a good-looking young man made her doubly aware of both her nakedness and her ugliness. At least it was dark and there was no one else around to gawk at her. To her horror, however, the youth led her to the very chamber where the infamous Agesandros, the Scourge of Messenia, was sleeping soundly on a reed cot in his cloak. The youth gave Mika one of his own chitons and a himation from a knapsack hanging on the wall, and then spread out a blanket on a mat on the floor.

“My name is Leon,” he whispered; “you don’t have to worry. Neither of us will misuse you. Lie down and try to get some sleep.” He lay down himself, carefully wrapped in his own himation, and turned his face to the wall as if to demonstrate he meant what he said.

Mika was too frightened to think of doing anything other than what he ordered. She dropped down onto the mat and stretched herself out. But how could she sleep? The full impact of what had happened fell upon her like a great weight. Her beautiful princess-mistress was now a slave and she was herself in the hands of the Spartans. Her beautiful

world, her beautiful fairytale world, had come crashing down around her ears. She had never been so happy as she had been here with the beautiful princess, and Sparta was bound to be more horrible than anything that had gone before.

Not that she knew anything about Sparta except what Kallisto and the other slaves had said, but they said that in Sparta the women went around naked all the time and wrestled like men and went barefoot just like slaves. And the men—well, they were these horrible killers, more interested in war than in their wives or even their children. Spartans knew nothing about love, that was certain, and Mika was reminded of the sobs and whimpering that had come from the chambers of the captured noblewomen.

She knew she ought to be glad that none of them had wanted her, but there was little comfort in the fact that she now belonged to them nevertheless. And what did they want with her? The future was a horrible black nothingness and she was so cold that she started shivering. After a moment, her teeth started chattering, too. Terrified of waking the men on either side of her, she clamped her jaw shut.

It was too late. The youth on the floor beside her grunted slightly, turned over, and without even appearing to wake up pulled her into his arms—not like a lover, more like a brother or a comrade. “Try to sleep,” he murmured sleepily.

Mika could not remember being held in anyone’s arms before. She was amazed at how quickly the warmth from the youth warmed her back and stopped her shivering. The feel of his warm breath on her shoulder was like a warm, gentle breeze and the sound of his steady breathing was calming. Very gradually, the tension eased and she surrendered to sleep.