

~ The Annals of the Queens ~

by Pysta

This story is the sequel to The Judging of the Queen and The Chakram and the Dragon.

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Violence: Hey, there's not a heck of a lot! Sorry if that disappoints you, but if you've read the previous stories in the series, you know by now that our favorite Soul Mates are embarked down a different road.

Main text (not Subtext!): The only other disclaimer is, again, the one about it being about two women who love, honor and cherish each other above all others, through all of their many lifetimes together, and who wouldn't dream of being inhibited or embarrassed about expressing that love as they choose.

I want to thank those fans who have responded to my first two bardic endeavors. I pray that they willingly follow me down this road, to see where I have gone: and that in the end, they enjoy the journey. I only went where Xe and Gabi have led me. I have tried to be true to what they had to say.

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Prologue

I have, of late, begun the task of putting our annals in order. Xena and I recorded the story of our journey to Lemnos; the settling in; all that happened after we were accepted as the rightful Queens - and to our dear Io and Paphos, and all the women who sailed with us - the surviving Amazons of Thessaly. We wanted to add it to the Queens' library, so that there would never be any question of the truth of our oddly . . . enhanced abilities, for those who would come after we have gone, and have no knowledge of the heritage passed down by the Amazons of Lemnos. Truly, it has been a strange and wonderful thing - and after all, I am a Bard. What else -but tell the story?

- Gabrielle, Amazon Queen of Lemnos

PART I: ACROSS AEGEA'S SEA

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Chapter 1: Gabrielle

Pagasae: Early morning:

... This is the day we finally sail for Lemnos! The sea is already a brilliant aquamarine, with deeper patches of dark blue. The day dawns clear as our decidedly reluctant band of thirty-two women, goats, assorted gear and piles of supplies wait, under cover in the shipwright's shed at the harbor of Pagasae, from whence we will depart: first south then east, past the northern tip of Euboea and then out into Aegea's Sea - and across to Lemnos. The briny air is crisp and refreshing. The gulls cry raucously, as they dive and swoop around. Piles of nets and floats are heaped about everywhere.

As I sit in shade of the open doorway, writing this account and watching Xena striding about - first on deck, then down onto the secluded area of the shipwright's dock, as she directs the loading - I feel less panicked, as if a great weight is ready to fall away from me. Yesterday, Xena and I, Talia, Io and Althaia went into the town. We had to see about procuring a vessel of a size large enough to carry us all across to Lemnos. Io, Talia and Althaia were charged with adding to our meager stores of foodstuffs and potable water for the journey across. We also took the opportunity to get some clothing, as much was lost in the scramble to escape the flames. We got many of the simple short chitons in a variety of sizes for us all. They are cool and comfortable in the heat - especially when having to fend off hostile townspeople!...

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". . .How and where are we going to get a boat, Xena?" I ask her again, as we stride down the main road leading out of the hills and into the town. Our objective is to go in and get our business done safely, and find out what obstacles, if any, we might encounter in getting our Amazons down to the ship tomorrow. To that end, we are going in armed. It feels strange, to strap on the sais again, and bear my staff as a weapon. Even Xena has her sword strapped to her back - although she has foresworn the armor. It seems so strange, to see her like this, after her renunciation. She says it is mostly for show. So far, it is working. Although we get strange looks as we pass folk in the streets. They haven't seen a band of Amazons in a while, I'd wager.

"Xe?"

"Don't worry - I have a plan." She pushes her hair back from her face, and pauses to unstop the water skin and squeeze a stream of it into her mouth. We follow her example - it is hot, and it has been a dusty walk. The buildings are mostly stone, and between them, the air is still. We lean up against the shaded side of the street, and rest for a bit.

"I know a man here who is a boat builder - his shop is down near the docks. At least, it was. It has been years since I last saw him. Maybe his sons have carried on the business, if he is gone. Anyway, I am going to collect on a debt owed me." She smiles grimly, and I wonder what she did for him, that he owes her so much. Another Xena story still to be told.

"Anyway - this is a good a place as any to split up. You three, see what you can get in barter for our wagons and horses. You know what we have - see if you can do a deal for food and water, and clothing. We can send some of our women to pick up the supplies in our wagons, and they can drive them down to the docks, Then the merchants can take the wagons and horses in exchange. We won't need them, once we have sailed. Gabrielle and I are going to see about the boat. We'll meet here - say, by sundown? Then we can go back to camp together, for safety's sake."

They all nod agreement.

"And I needn't remind you - we want to get ourselves safely launched tomorrow from this harbor - so don't start anything that will make it harder for us to do so! Prudence in all things . . . and try to give a wide berth to any trouble!" And they go off down the cross street, towards the marketplace. I watch them go, a slight shiver of trepidation lingering in my mind. Somehow, 'Amazons on their own in a strange town' and 'staying away from trouble' seems like a contradiction!

We take the other way, towards the harbor. I walk beside my mate, waiting for the rest of it.

"All right." she mutters, glancing sidelong at me. "I know I can't get away with that closed-lipped Warrior thing any more I'll just have to give you the bones of it." She sighs. I can hear the rasping of swords in her words. I listen, silent. Accepting.

"His name is Anacreon. He was a . . . colleague . . . of mine - back when Borias and I were doing our crazed warlord thing. We . . . hijacked a merchant ship bearing a load of goods while it was still on the docks in Athens. Then we sailed it up here, to Pagasae. But Borias and I had a . . . falling out over who was going to be the captain. We always argued, over most everything. I was pretty . . . headstrong in those days. Anyway, I think we would have fought to the death - it was that bad. Then Anacreon intervened. He suggested that we throw the dice for the ship. Whoever won, would take the ship, and leave the other the cargo. That appealed to my twisted sense of humor - I was always blowing hot and cold with most of our ventures, then - so I agreed. Borias was less enamored of the idea, because he wanted all of it. He wanted to buy off the men, lead them, and run more raids on the shipping. He attacked Anacreon for even suggesting that we split the takings. So I defended Anacreon. It wasn't any fun, anymore, anyway. I managed to fend off Borias, and secretly had Anacreon hide on the ship. Later - when Borias had gone off to one of the taverns to drink and lick his wounds - I told Anacreon to take the ship - cargo and all. And he did. We never saw it again. Borias was livid. I though it was really funny."

She looks at me. I can tell she is wondering how I will respond. Even now, after all this time, and so much behind us, she still worries about my disapproval.

"Xe . . . that's got to be - what - thirty years ago, at least! How do you know he's here?"

"Oh . . . I know. See - after me and Borias split up for good . . . I set Anacreon up in the boat-building business. He had settled here, in Pagasae. I brought him customers from all over the place. And he said to me, 'If you're ever up this way, and you need a boat - come to me. It'll be here - and it'll be on me.' "

"Do you think that will still be true? After all this time? Maybe he's dead."

"Nah - he's too cantankerous to be dead. He'll be here."

"Xena? Remind me later to tell you again how much I love you." And I am rewarded with that surprised, baffled look I love to see - the one that pops out when I say just the opposite of what she's still secretly a tiny bit fearful I will say.

We've come to the end of the steep street that runs down to the harbor. We turn left, and head down the wide dock area - a broad paved thoroughfare with all manner of ship businesses down one side, and short jetties at regular intervals, to which are tied many different kinds of craft, on the other side. The place is a beehive of activity. And, of course, we're the only women in sight. I have a bad feeling about this - but then, haven't I always had a bad feeling in these situations? I take a perverse sense of comfort in that thought. Then I catch up to Xe, who is striding down the long expanse of the wharf, headed for a large building down at the end. And as we go, all manner of catcalls and whistles and rude noises fly at us from the wharf-rats who work on the docks. We both ignore them.

We're almost at the entrance of the building when trouble rears its ugly head. A gang of idlers has decided to follow us, and is now circling us - cutting off our path to the boat builder's shop. We stop, and I automatically turn and cover Xe's back, my staff at the ready.

"Well, now what, Xe?"

"Oh, I think we'll just take the line of least resistance, today." She says, leisurely, as she grins at the leering men - who have become confused by our lack of fear, and are apparently undecided as to their next move.

"Well, boys - what's the problem? Did you forget what you came over here to do? It's only been a couple of minutes! What could you possibly want with us? Do you always go after old women for your fun?" We wait for their response, but they seem even more confused by her words. "Ah, Gabrielle, I think that we just exhausted what little brains they have."

I chuckle at her words. That gets them . . . the most loutish of them suddenly roars, his face turns bright red, and he lunges at Xe, his arms outstretched to grab her. She waits, and as he comes in, at the last minute I shift my position to one side, and she steps back after me. He is suddenly moving past her, and she comes up behind him and shoves him, hard. He goes flying forward - his own momentum causing him to crash into two of the other men. They all three are bowled over into a heap on the dock. Then I go into motion, and go up against two of the others with a series of short double-handed strikes that knock them on either side of the head and render them senseless. Xena moves over between the two remaining men - who are standing gaping at the others - and she throws her arms over their shoulders.

"Well, come on you two - we don't want you to feel left out of anything!" And she brings her arms around their necks, pulls her own self out from between them, and claps their heads together. They fall in a heap at her feet. She looks at me, one eyebrow raised.

"So, you still want to go see that man about a ship?"

"Oh, yeah - I sure do!"

The men are thrashing around, trying to get up and start in again, when a bellow sounds from the direction of

the shop. A bull of a man comes toward the group. He has a huge torso, arms like tree-trunks, and hands the size of hams. A long curly red and grey beard covers his face, and his hair, which is altogether grey, is braided. He is wearing a leather apron, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up. Strange markings are tattooed on his sunburned arms. A glint of gold reveals an earring hanging from one ear.

"What do you scum think you are doing, disturbing my customers like this!" he roars. They cringe and mutter. "I'll make sure you never work on these docks, again!" They shuffle off down the street. He comes up to us, a huge grin on his face.

"Well, I never thought I'd see this day! Word was, you were long ago dead - done away with by Caesar - or was it some heathens to the East? I lose track of all the stories of your deaths." He envelops Xe in a bear-hug.

"Oh, they're all greatly exaggerated, Anacreon!" Xena hugs him back, then steps out of his embrace and turns to me. "And this is my mate - Gabrielle, the Bard of Potedeia, and Queen of the Amazons of Thessaly. Gabrielle, meet Anacreon - Master Shipwright of Pagasae."

I clasp his arm, and he beams at me. I don't think I've seen such a huge man in quite a while.

"Most welcome, you are. I have long wished to meet the famous Gabrielle! Well, well, Xena - you still look a sight for sore eyes - even after all these years!" He winks at me. "I wager you agree? Now, come into my shop. I want you to meet my sons!"

We follow him into the huge structure, inside which there is much busy work going on. The bones of a new boat are evident, its ribs curving up from the floor. Three men are busily at work on it.

"Boys, take a break - I want you to meet someone!" He seems to roar no matter what he is saying. They look up, then drop their tools and swarm down from their perches. Up close, they are all of a kind - cut from the same cloth as their father. They loom over us like Vikings. Indeed, unless I am mistaken, that must be their lineage. All that is lacking are horned helmets - and they could be from Valhalla. I sigh: yet another story there, unless I miss my guess.

"This is Leonidas, Makareus, and Nikias - my sons, all. What do you think of them?"

Xena smiles up at him. "All fine specimens, my old friend. What a proud mother they must have!"

Anacreon groans. "Ah, yes! She passed on, over three years ago. We miss her terribly." They all nod sadly. "They're not nearly as good at the cooking as she. And I haven't managed to get them married off, yet. I need them too much with the boats." He shook his head mournfully. "I tell you, being a father is a hard business! But you're not here for this! Boys, meet the famous Warrior Princess - Xena! And her mate, Gabrielle, the Battling Bard of Potedeia! I told you they are more than just the stuff of a raving father's mind!" With astonished looks, they bashfully clasp arms with us. They seem a wordless lot. Must make up for it in brawn - and talent with hammers and saws.

Xe grins at them all. "Well, I'm sure your father hasn't told you anything about his own swashbuckling days with me - or has he? We'll have to have Gabrielle spin you a yarn before the day is old."

Anacreon pours everyone a mug of watered wine from a cask he has over on one of the workbenches. The "boys" get back to their work, and Anacreon and Xena settle down on a long bench. I sit on the other side of

Xe, and watch them working on the boat, as Xena and Anacreon continue their talk.

"Anacreon, I have come to take you up on that promise you made me, many years ago. Do you remember it?"

"Of course I do, Xena. What do you take me for? I am a man of my word! If I say a thing, it is done!"

I counted on it, my old friend. I told Gabrielle you were just too cantankerous to be dead, yet!"

"You got that right, Xena! I'm coming up on my eighth decade! What do you thing of that?"

"It's a tribute to your clean living, my friend!"

He shouts with laughter, and slaps Xena on the back so hard I think surely her teeth will come out. She just grins.

"Well, let me show you your boat. Then we can sit a spell, and your Gabrielle can tell me a story to satisfy my curiosity, and we'll call it a deal." He looms up, and heads for the back of the building, which stretches along the wharf, and is big enough to hold an entire trireme. At the back end, there is a slope down, and I can see that when the boats are finished, they slide them down into the water, which comes right into the building. The whole back end of the building is open, so that the boats can pass easily into the harbor. Along one side, there is a wooden deck, and a small door at the end of it. We go out this door, and there, sitting as pretty as you please, is a boat .just right for us. Truly, she is a thing of beauty - and I'm not that fond of boats. Xena is beaming - I can tell she's already in love with it. She suddenly looks twenty years younger, and there is a gleam in her eye.

"It's beautiful," I say. "What kind of a boat is it?"

"It's a Roman corbita." Xena says, and her excitement is evident in her voice. "She's smaller than our trireme; but the important thing is, she's fast, and agile, and takes no oars. It's all sail, with tillers for steering. We can handle her, ourselves." She turns, her eyes shining with joy. "Anacreon, my old friend - she's magnificent! How can you have kept this for me, all these years? I might never have come!"

"Ah, well, then - I'd have had a nice little pleasure boat for my old age! But I'm not there, yet - so I figure it is just as well you have shown up!"

"Well, I'll just go ahead and take this off your hands - with pleasure! We've got thirty two Amazons to transport to Lemnos, tomorrow morning, and she is going to be a perfect mother to ferry us across. She's truly fine, my friend. I can send her back to you, if you wish."

"Ah, now, Xena - that would be a problem. I don't plan on doing any pleasure sailing any time soon, so you may as well get some good use out of her, yourselves. I would wager she'll come in handy, once you're across, and settled. . ."

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". . . After a bit of jawing, and a quick story (the one where the boat turned upside down and sank, and Xena had to rescue all of us) - we are on our way back to meet up with the others. Anacreon will make sure the boat is all ready to go, and we will load her early in the morning, from the slip behind his shop. The walk back down the street is peaceful. Word travels fast, I guess. Most of the men are hard at work. They all ignore us. I don't see anything of the bunch that harassed us. They are probably keeping out of Anacreon's sight. As we come up the big hill, and begin looking for the intersection where we parted earlier from our friends, we hear a ruckus. I look at Xena - and she at me.

"Oh, no." We both say, simultaneously. And start running.

As we round the corner of a building, we see a sorry scene ahead. An angry mob of twenty or so citizens have our three hapless Amazons backed up against a wall, and are belaboring them with clubs and staves, and pelting them with stones. Io and Althaia have put Talia behind them, and are trying to protect her and themselves from the assault, but seem to have refrained from using their short swords. Xena and I shove our way through the raucous people. We take up a stance in front of our sisters, and put forth our most commanding presence.

"Hold, citizens of Pagasae! Why are you assaulting these women? What have they done to you?" Xena's fierce scowl and her weaving naked sword give them pause. I have pulled out my sais, and am poised for using them.

I, too, have something to say. "These women are emissaries from the Amazons of Thessaly. By what right do you seek to abuse them?" I am really angry at these people.

They stop their assault, but continue muttering among themselves.

"Well?" Xena thunders. "Who among you takes responsibility for this?" No one answers - they cannot meet our eyes. I suspect some prejudice is at work, here. Finally, a slightly better-dressed individual is pushed forward by the crowd. He nervously clears his throat.

"I do not claim that, for my part! We are only doing what we are expected to do!"

"Expected?!" I explode at him. "Just what does that mean? And WHO says so?"

He flinches, because now I am right up in his face.

"We . . . well, there was a gentleman came through town a few days back . . . with a whole squadron of soldiers. He . . . he said he was the new Military Archon, sent by the Conqueror Alexandros, and he will be governing the town, now - and that they would be replacing our officials with himself and his soldiers, in a day or two. And they said . . . ah, they told us that they had . . . ah . . . burned out a n . . . nest . . . of Amazons, and they were chasing them . . . He said . . . ah . . . that we would be doing them a favor . . . if . . . if we . . . ah . . . saw any of them . . . to . . . to . . ." He trails off, miserably, as he sees us growing even more upset.

Xena comes right up beside me, and he quails at her menacing stance. "If you so much as touch a hair on the head of ANY Amazon you or your people see, at ANY time either now or in the future, you'll have to answer to XENA. Does that name mean anything to you?"

The crowd gasps, and begins to back away, leaving him very exposed. I do believe she is making an impression on them! The man is nodding like a fool. He backs up, trips over his own feet, then turns and runs

behind his rapidly-receding neighbors, and in seconds the street is deserted.

Althaia and Io sheathe their swords, as does Xena. "It's a good thing you came along when you did," Talia sighs. "We were really in for it, there.." She turns a concerned eye on the other two. "Are you all right? Any injuries?"

Io shrugs, and hunches her right shoulder up, holding out her arm and looking at a rapidly darkening bruise covering her shoulder and the upper part of her arm. Althaia is nursing her hand, which looks like it is going to swell up. The knuckles are bloody. Talia immediately fishes - in the pack she always carries on her back, - for supplies to treat their wounds. Xena squats down, her back against the wall, and gestures for all of us to do so.

"Sit, for a few minutes - then we'll have to move." She looks at Io. "So, aside from being ostracized, how did the bargaining go?"

Io looks cheerfully up at Xena, wincing as Talia applies a salve to her shoulder. "Really, Xena - that part went just fine! I guess the word about us hasn't spread so fast, yet. Anyway, we made some good deals, and we'll still be able to trade for what we need. At least, I think we will . . ." she trails off, as the seriousness of the situation begins to dawn on her. "Won't we?"

Xena gazes thoughtfully at the young woman. Then she sighs, and turns to me.

"Gabrielle, take them back to camp. When you get there, you'd better have everyone prepare to move out as soon as I return. They'll have to travel light. We'll bring down the rest of our things in the morning."

"Where are you going, Xe?" I am not happy at the thought of being separated. But I see the wisdom of it.

"I'm going to go back to talk with Anacreon. I'm going to see if he will . . . put us up for a night. We can bring them through the town under cover of darkness, and get them into his shop. He can send his sons in the morning to get the rest of our stuff, and the goat herd, and then get the goods from the merchants for us, and bring them down to the boat."

We stand up, dust ourselves off, and prepare to leave. I go over to her, and she opens her arms and clasps me to her. She whispers in my ear. "I expect to see you there, by the time the moon has risen." Her mouth then seeks my own, and we kiss. "Be safe," she entreats me, her eyes dark with concern.

"I will, my love."

And we stride off, in opposite directions. And I feel the old familiar pain in my guts, as she turns the corner, and is out of my sight.

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Chapter 2: Gabrielle

. . . We have christened our boat the 'Leto' - after Artemis's mother. Xena rightly figured the sail could do

most of the work of getting us across to the island, since none of my Amazons have knowledge of rowing or sailing, and we have no intention of taking any men from the port with us. I must confess that many of the Amazons share their skepticism. I heard some of our older tribeswomen muttering about Amazons doing best on dry land - and it was bad enough they'd had to adapt to horses. They aren't too keen at the idea of all that water. But they don't know what I know - that the Xena of old captained her own boat, in the bad old days. She can teach anyone to handle sails. I have complete confidence in her - and in my Amazons. They'll find their sea legs, and likely she'll figure out who will make the best Amazon sailors under her able command - and I will teach them the pressure point trick to govern their unruly stomachs!

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"Gabrielle?"

I look up from my writing to see Alysia, her tall, spare frame looming above me. She has put aside the customary dark robes of her office, and now wears a long chiton, not unlike the one Xena wore that strange night of the funeral. Her long hair still constantly escapes from the clasp she wears to keep it back, giving her a harried, distracted look. She is such a dear soul! I love her solemn face, and her thoughtful, measured responses to my questions of Amazon law, and protocol. She has carried the burden of command, while Xe and I have recuperated, since Eponin . . . since the Regent's position is again empty . . .

"Yes, Alysia, what is it?"

"My Queen, I have taken the liberty to meet with some of the others on the Council. We have drawn up a sort of order of activity, for the voyage. We have assigned specific tasks to everyone who does not seem to be . . . ah . . . sailor material. That way, we will know who is responsible for keeping order on the boat, and for cooking, and whatever other tasks you think would be appropriate. I must confess - I have never been on the water, myself, so I'm not exactly sure what all we would be doing! Perhaps you or Xena would give us some direction, there . . ." she trailed off, looking discomfited.

"Sure - it's no problem Alysia! I feel that I am causing the Council no end of aggravation, I shouldn't be sitting here, idle, while you all carry on with everything I should be doing!"

Truth be told, I am still surprisingly weary, and this morning I have been having sudden strange bouts of dizziness. They are not bad - just annoying. I haven't told Xe - she'd only worry. It's probably just the stress. It was a jittery night, bringing the women by twos and threes through the silent streets, keeping to the dark patches and avoiding the moonlight.

"No, My Queen - it is never a burden! We were all concerned for both of you! You have endured so much, on our behalf! We want you to look on this voyage as a way to rest, and gain back your strength. Any way we can help with that, we will." She hands me the scroll, and I review it. Meticulous, as ever. She has anticipated what I would have done - to keep as much as possible to normal routines. I smile up at her.

"It is fine, Alysia - just as it is. For now, let's just go with it. I'll talk to Xena, and if she has any other suggestions, she'll let you know." I hand it back to her, grasping her arm as I do so. "Alysia - I can't thank you enough. You are a worthy successor to 'Poni - if you would care to consider that."

She smiles gently, patting my hand, and taking the scroll, she inclines her head. "I will think on it, my Queen." And she walks up the steep incline of the gangplank, onto the boat.

I don't know what made me say that to her. I haven't had the heart to think of who would succeed Eponin as Regent. But the words just seemed to flow into my mind like a river - naturally. I'll have to tell Xe. I know she'll approve.

My thoughts cause me to look back to my journal entry from three days ago, concerning the journey that brought us to this place. The images of this strange time in our lives crowd my head, and the writing of them is the only way I have of getting them out of my mind. I want to think of the future, now - and not so much of the past. Not being able or willing to do the barding has been hard - and I realize how much my storytelling helps me to 'let go'. . .

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On the road to Pagasae:

. . . As we make our way to Pagasae, away to the west we can see the billowing plumes of smoke as the armies of Alexandros sweep over the villages and towns. At times, we can see straggling lines of refugees moving off to the south towards Athens. But for us, it is only, strangely, peaceful. There is a kind of haze all around us, all the time. I suspect that the Old Mother has more than a little to do with this - she is a weird one, and more than once I have heard her muttering in a low undertone, over and over, something just beyond my ability to make out. Some spell, no doubt, to keep us all safe, and hidden. And I, for one, am grateful for the peace . . .

. . . Both Xena and I have been mostly riding silent. The weight of the loss of Eponin and the others has kept our mood somber. I wanted to be enthusiastic about our seeming boundless good fortune in having a place of refuge so easily available to us. I thank the Goddess and the Old Mother that it is so, but my heart is sore, and I know it will be a long while before my fresh load of grief will fade away . . .

. . . We are both also really worried about Io. She has spent most of the journey riding in the wagon with the other few who are injured or sick. Talia has been keeping an eye on her, and reports to Xe and I that she is physically all right - there will be no unwanted child of her ordeal - but she is silent and withdrawn. Paphos often rides next to the wagon, and talks with her, and when we are camped, she keeps her company. But Io grows thin, as she has eaten very little. Talia wants us to try to spend some time with her, to try to draw her out and see if we can get the sorrow (and, I suspect, guilt) to surface and be dealt with. But traveling like this makes it practically impossible. So I will be relieved when we are finally able to get on board the boat, and hopefully do something to help her.

. . As we travel, a kind of order seems to naturally unfold. The Old Mother and her companion the golden-eyed Goat, go at the head of our column, with Xena and me following on our mounts; and then the members of the Council and the rest behind them; and the wagons and our goats bringing up the rear. I could swear that as she walks beside and sometimes rides the Goat, the ground seems to swell up behind them, undulating as they pass, then settling back down by the time Xe and I ride in their wake. I caught Xena's eye the first time I saw this, and she inclined her head a bit to the side and her right eyebrow rose up in that way she has of silently commenting to me - and I grinned, because we both knew each other's thoughts. It is not just my own imagination. She sees it, too . . .

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The hills outside Pagasae: Nightfall.

. . . We make camp. The town is close by, but we will stay here a full day, before going to the docks. We have to arrange for the boat, and get supplies. Xena has built us a campfire, as the night is turning cold. I am busy preparing a stewpot of odds and ends for the two of us. Since our return from the conflagration at the Sacred Grove, the tribe has kindly given us some privacy. They could see how exhausted we were, after the ordeal of the burning. We have again pitched our tent. Out in the darkness, the Elders quietly go about setting up their own shelters, and organizing the camp. There is another, bigger communal campfire nearby, and several of the women are busily preparing food for the rest of the tribe. Xena is leaning up against her saddle, her legs stretched out and her face pensive. The white of her hair still shocks me - truth be told, I suspect my own hair is probably going to show some white, as well, after all we've endured. But her beauty still makes my heart jump, when she looks at me with eyes the color of the sea . . .

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"What?" Xena asks, looking up at me.

"Hmm? Oh - nothing," I answer. "I just need to get used to you all over again - you keep changing on me!"

Xena chuckles. "Ah, well - that keeps us fresh, don'cha think?" She grins at me from across the fire.

I nod. "O, yes, my love . . . that it does. This is about hot enough - are you hungry?" I ladle a big portion out into the waiting bowl, stick a spoon in it and I bring it to her. I hand her the bowl, while I sit down and lean up against her side. She slides her arm around me, and then looks guiltily at the bowl in her other hand.

"Now what am I going to do?" She sighs dramatically.

I shake my head, feigning aggravation, and pick the spoon out of the bowl. I scoop up a good mouthful, and hold it up to her. "Open up!" I scold, and she takes the spoon in her mouth like a greedy child, licking it clean. Then I kiss her - the taste of the stew savory on her lips. I cannot get enough of this, since her return. I am still so hungry for her touch, and her constant attention. It is like a beacon to me - keeping away the dark. She never seems to mind - and I am as smitten with her as ever I was.

"Now, Gabrielle," she drawls. "I'll never get any food in me, at this rate! And neither will you!" She sits the bowl in my lap, and takes away the spoon, and likewise feeds me a measure of the stew. Then she kisses me back. We carry on this way, feeding each other, until it is all gone. I don't care how undignified it must seem, for women of our age to be acting this way; - as Sappho says, "We shall enjoy it. As for him who finds fault, - May silliness and sorrow take him!"

Xena blows out her breath. "Ouff - I'm stuffed! How am I going to manage to get you into my bed, if I'm full of stew? Maybe I should take a quick walk around the perimeter . . . No?" She senses my reluctance to

disturb our cozy communion. "All right, I know better than to cross a Queen when she is well-fed!" I look over my shoulder at her. Her eyes smile at mine, and then she is staring back into the flames again. Her face changes - shadowed - and her eyes grow dark - almost black - as the pupils dilate

"Xe . . ." I call her back. "Xe - where are you?"

She looks back into my eyes. Her pupils contract, and turn blue once more.

"Hmm? . . . I'm here, Gabi."

"Where did you go?" I ask her. I want so much to know what she is thinking, now.

"Nowhere but where you are, too." She pulls me around and kisses me deeply. I sink into us, and yet I know that she is holding something back . . .

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"The weather will be propitious, for our voyage."

Startled, we both look up across the fire, where the figure of the Old Mother looms; the always-unnerving silent Goat at her side.

Xena nods. "Yes, Old Mother - I thought so myself, with the sky so red at the sunsets, these past few days. Please, join us. The night grows chill, and your presence is welcome."

"I shall be glad-hearted to come to our home. It has been ages and ages since I left." She sinks down on her haunches, and the Goat settles, forelegs folded down first, then the back legs, in that strange way they have. She reaches out, feeling for the Goat's horn, then pats its forehead, and it nuzzles her hand.

"Tell us about the island," I urge. My curiosity about it burns in me. My bard's imagination is hungry for details. I look up at Xena. She has that look on her face - one I have seen often, when she watches the blind old woman. It is a mixture of awe, wariness, and affection. I cover her hand, warm where it rests on my thigh, with mine.

"Lemnos - the Island of the Women - the Heart of the Amazons from ages long past." Her face turns toward the heart of the fire, and I can see the reflected glow in her sightless eyes. She holds her hands out to the flames, the fingers splayed as she soaks up the warmth. "It is a goodly land - there are many olives, vines and fruit trees, fertile ground, and some rocky places. There are sacred places there, as well; our Secret spaces, where the Mysteries are protected. You will become the Guardians, when you establish your reign." She nods slowly. "And the legend will be fulfilled."

"Legend?" Xena asks.

"Oye - for many an age, it has been handed down, Mother to Mother, among our tribe on Lemnos. The Legend that the Two Queens would come out of the fire, out of the West, bearing the marks of the Dragon and the Chakram; and they would establish the last haven and refuge for the last of the Amazons. You will see

- when we arrive, all will be there to greet you - all will be celebrating the arrival of the Queens."

We both stare at her. "But I don't understand." I say, mystified, "how will they know we are coming?"

"Because I have sent word," she says, her face wreathed in a smile. The Goat, who has been sleeping all this time, suddenly opens its strange, slotted eyes, and cocks its head at me.

A shiver goes down my back, and I feel the dragon stir. And I suddenly understand completely. I can't think why I didn't all along.

"You have the InSight! You can talk in the mind." I say to her, unable to keep the excitement from my voice. "I know of this! I have seen such, in Egypt!"

The old woman nods, her delight evident from her smile, though her sightless eyes can no longer register emotions. "Yes - yes - that it is it! You used it, yourself, when you talked with the High Priestess of Isis' Temple. Oye - when Xena was within you. You, too, have it - both of you do. Vestigial, yet - still awkward at it, I'll wager - but you'll strengthen, with time."

Suddenly I feel light-headed, as though all this is rushing too quickly. I feel dizzy with the thought of how much this woman knows, of both of us - without being told a word of it. I convulsively grip Xena's hand. Xena hugs me closer. Then she speaks.

"You say 'Queens' . . . but I am no Queen, Old Mother. Gabrielle is the Queen of the Amazons of Thessaly. I am only her Consort. And just where did this prophesy come from? I have traveled far and wide, in my time - we both have - and neither of us has heard of this legend."

The Goat shakes its head, causing the brass bell hanging around its neck to peal. It stares at Xena, now. The Old Mother turns her head towards Xena, and answers. "Oye - you are Consort now - but you are destined to be Queen, as Gabrielle is Queen. Gaia said it would be so. Back when the world was new. It was She who instructed the First Mother, and told her to pass the legend on, down and down the long years, until it should be time for all this to unfold. Time for Xena to be born, and then Gabrielle. Time for the Gods of Olympus to throw the two of you together, to complete the pattern, and discover what you had to learn. Time for you to grow into your new skins, to awaken your InSight, and thereby strengthen your connection. It's all described in the legend. On Lemnos, your story has been told and retold, long before you had even come to be. But we have kept it to ourselves - sacred, it is - and have not cared to share it with the wider world." She nods to herself, and lapses into silence.

I look at Xena. She gazes at the Old Mother with a fixed intensity that I have rarely seen from her. I shiver. Again my dragon flexes. Xena shakes her head, as if she is muzzy-headed, and wants to regain her wits.

"Xe," I whisper.

Those deep blue eyes turn and meet mine. "I know," she says, simply. "It's eerie, isn't it?" She hugs me to her, wrapping both arms around me. I hide my face in her soft white tresses, and breathe into her ear. "We've seen beings more unusual than her, Xe. So why do I feel this way about her?"

"I know," she whispers back, "but it's not a bad feeling, is it?"

I hesitate, trying to figure out exactly what I **am** feeling. "Hmm, that's a good question. I guess I'd have to say

- more like - a combination of sorrow and happiness? Like it's something I seem to have known all along, but couldn't remember. And now that she's said it, it's like it was always there, inside me. With the Olympians, I never felt this way - I was always unhappy with them - felt terrorized by them. And my dragon - since she's been talking - seems to be listening; awake; aware. It's weird. I feel more . . . powerful."

Xena smiles at me, her face close, close. "Yeah - I know. I've been feeling it in my own 'necklace.' "

"Pain?" I ask, dismayed at the thought.

"No, just . . . it tingles - like when my arm goes prickly, when we've gone to sleep in one another's arms." She smiles rakishly at me, with the thought. Gods! Our passion rises in the strangest moments!

I look over once again at the two strange figures across the flames of the fire. The old woman is now asleep. She has subsided against the broad back of the Goat, who chews reflectively as it stares back across at the two of us. I half expect the creature to begin speaking to us - so intelligent it seems. I really dislike that Goat.

"Xe?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think that Goat can talk?"

Xena's shoulders shake in sudden mirth. Her eyes dance as she looks affectionately at me.

"You'd just love that, wouldn't you? It'd make your story of this *really* fascinating." She pauses, thinking. "Well, why not? You could just ask it - maybe it'd answer you . . . you've definitely got the gift of persuasion, my love. If anyone could get it to talk, I wager you could. And if not, you can always put the words in its mouth!"

"My story of this?" I sputter, trying to sound surprised - but I can't hold it to it - she knows me so well. She knows I'm already composing it, in my head.

She hugs me close, again. "Ah, my Bard - I can hardly wait to hear your version of all this . . . it's gonna be a spell-binder!"

I look over at the Goat and its sleeping mistress. I have half a mind to . . . "Oh, please!" I say, giving myself a mental slap for even considering it. "Xena! You always know how to get me going!"

She draws me close, nuzzling her face against my cheek. "In all kinds of ways, my sweet!"

I raise my eyebrows. "Is that an invitation?"

"If you aren't too tired. It *has* been a long day." She runs her hand through my hair, spreading her fingers apart in that way she has that rouses me so quickly. I lay my head back on her shoulder, my eyes closed, and I sigh.

"Never tired of this, my love." I murmur, and I feel her rise up beside me, and she pulls me up and folds me in her long, strong arms, and we are, in two steps, into our tent - leaving the Old Woman and that damned familiar nodding and dreaming by the glowing dying embers of the fire.

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Inside the tent, in the dim, flickering light from the partly-gaping entrance, we strip off the chitons, and embrace, and sink into the warmth of the fur-covered floor and the heat of our own passion. In this, all doubt is gone. All that is in our hearts is expressed. We love as if there was no time, no beginning or end, no boundaries, no world outside our own two burning souls. Can I express the tender agony of release? The ache of a need to merge so great, that we are finding it harder and harder to be two separate people? I think not. There are no more words for this. We will have to be spirits to merge so completely. But in the mean time, we will do our best with the bodies we have.

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Chapter 3; Gabrielle

Pagasae: Mid-morning.

. . . And now it is departure time, and the sun is already warm. We have got all our tribe aboard, in the early light of the dawn, before even the fishermen have stumbled down to their boats. We have seen or heard no commotion, and we were so careful to get all of us quietly through the sleeping town and into the safety of the huge building Anacreon uses for his work. I fret about the safety of this port, as Alexandros is so bent on sweeping over all of Greece, and it is such a tempting target. But Xena seems to think that the port will be left alone - the value of its strategic importance such that even Alexandros can appreciate. It is a major seaport, after all, and also a center of ship-building - which is why he is installing a Military Archon. I suddenly recall that Odysseus' ship was built here. Not to mention my worry about Anacreon and his sons, who have risked everything to get us away safely. Which brings me back full-circle, fearing the danger for our island, should the despot decide to send out a fleet of his own, and take on the islands, as well. I'm suddenly ashamed at having had thoughts that maybe we should disable this place, before we sail. I beat them back down into the darkness - I have had more than enough of the sickness that is unwarranted aggression.

* * * * *

"Hello - o . . . Gabrielle - Are you in there?"

I look up into the laughing face of my Beloved, as she teases me.

"Oh, I was just worrying. Do you think a fleet could sail from here and cause us a major pain in the neck,

sometime soon?" I can't disguise my discomfort at the whole notion - both in its supposition, and in the implicit solution.

"Yeah, I thought of that." She sighs, and sits down next to me on the crate, and wipes the sweat from her brow, and uncorks the water skin hanging from her shoulder. She raises it, and squirts a long stream into her mouth, and then passes it to me. "But if we did anything, we'd be depriving Anacreon and his sons, and all the other fishermen and dock hands of their livelihood, and causing so much difficulty for everyone - and then, what would be difference between us and Alexandros?" She sighs and shakes her head. "I think we'll just have to trust that there will be a solution at our end - and defending Lemnos is more to my liking, anyway. It's cleaner, y'know?"

I nod. 'Yes, it is - but we don't know what we have, there, to defend ourselves with - it feels so uncertain to me. I guess I'm not feeling very powerful as an Amazon Queen, right now. Especially with all our worldly goods piled about us, like so much baggage. And hiding in here, like this, under the very noses of the town. Right now, I just feel like a bruised and battered refugee. And that's another thing - how do we know that the women already living there will greet us as Queens? Maybe they've already got a Queen there. It's been what - a couple hundred years since the Old Mother was there? Why should they want two more?"

Xena strokes my dragon, her cheerful confidence telegraphing to me, and it soothes my fears.

"Well, let me get the rest of *my* worldly goods aboard - and let us be gone to Lemnos! We won't know anything for sure, until we get there. We'll take what comes to us, and we'll figure out something - like we usually do." She stands, and pulls me up after her. I gaze around, and realize that I am the last bit of "worldly goods" waiting on the dock. I must have a foolish look, for she laughs out loud, and wraps her arms around me. "My Queen," she whispers seductively in my ear. "Let me carry you away from all of this."

"With pleasure," I answer. I see that Anacreon and his sons are standing nearby. We go over to them. And I surprise myself by reaching up and hugging that huge hulk of a sweet man as though he were my father. I surprise myself and blink back tears.

"Thank you, Anacreon, for everything you have done - for Xena, and for me and my people."

"Why, Gabrielle - the pleasure has always been mine! I owe this woman my life. It is the least I can do for her - and for you and your women. Go safely, and go now." And he gives another bear hug to Xena. And we stride up the gangplank, Xena shouting for us to get underway. Amazons swarm. And the boat slowly glides away from the dock. The four men stare after us. I dearly hope they will come to no harm.

* * * * *

Evening: Aboard the "Leto." Passing the northern tip of Euboea. Aegea's Sea fills the horizon. Alexandros and his horrid mess recede with the shoreline. . .

. . . And it is, indeed, a glorious voyage. I am even at a point in my life, thankfully, where I can enjoy the sea. Memories of my first voyage with Xena rise up, unbidden, and I grin at my vision of myself, young, and so

terribly seasick - then eating those abominable sea creatures like some demented witless creature! I must have been delirious. I know I was madly in love . . .

After coming on board, I inspect the boat, Xena showing me how cunningly she has organized everything. I speak with everyone, to make sure they are all as comfortable as possible, given the crowded nature of thirty-two women on one small craft! It will not be a pleasure trip, but they are all so good-hearted. I think they are mostly relieved to be away from all the trouble, and even the prospect of twelve or so days and nights on the unfamiliar sea is less daunting than what they've been through in the past. They will put up with almost anything. Xena is at the tiller, until we are past the Euboean headlands and out onto the Sea, so I spend most my time perched up on the stern balustrade - just behind where she stands - soaking up the sun. I can lean back against the beautifully carved neck and head of a swan, which arcs above my head. She will start teaching the young Amazons the craft of sailing shortly after that. And then, maybe, I'll get some time alone with her, all to myself. So greedy . . .

I keep my thoughts fixed on our island homecoming, and the future. The unwanted sadness of the past is fading slowly; leaving only the sweet times, and the joy, and my reclaimed appreciation of the woman I so passionately love. . .

* * * * *

"I'm wondering about something," Xena says.

"What's that?" I ask. I put down my scroll and move over to her side. She has a hand on each tiller - there are two, one for each side of the boat. In front of the tiller position is the roof of the small cabin that protects the ladder down to the hold. The person working the tillers stands behind this cabin, and a bit above it, so they have an unobstructed line of sight to the front of the boat, and the sea ahead. The main mast rises from the center of the deck, and the sail billows above. It takes considerable strength to keep the boat pointed in the right direction. I can see the muscles standing out on her forearms and biceps. I think she will have sore arms, tonight, and I will need to apply some of my soothing balm.

"When you were telling the tribe about Egypt - that night, in the village, while we were waiting after the scouting parties left - why didn't you tell them the whole of the story?"

I turn my gaze out to the sea, watching the swells. A dolphin leaps from the water, beside us - keeping with us, as we sail along. A group of them have been with us since we left the harbor: friendly, and curious - an escort? I wonder . . . but my mind goes back to Xena's question.

"I don't know - I guess I thought it would keep. Save it for another time, when we were through all the mess - when I would feel more like a Bard, again." I sigh, as a corner of my mind cracks open, revealing the darkness that still threatens me. It's the place where my well of sorrow still holds its last measure of tears. I must look sad, because the sadness on Xena's face is mirroring mine.

"I don't mean to call up the ghosts."

"It's all right," I lean my cheek on my hand, propping my arm on the top of the cabin roof in front of us. 'I know I am healing, every day. I think you are, too - aren't you?

She nods. "Maybe you can begin again, here, while we are crossing Aegea's Sea. That would help pass the time, and maybe help to calm those who are sea sick. Soon we will be home - really home - and you can take up the old habit, and tell all the tales. You still have to get Paphos trained, and begin your project, and record all the stories. You'll have a whole new group of women to try them out on, after all - a whole island full. One thing I can always count on - that you love a good audience!"

"O, yes! I confess - I'm just an actor, at heart! Anyway, I'll try the rest of the Egypt story. I could start it tonight,"

Xena nods again, content with my response. Gently, gently, she works to heal my heart.

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. . . I know that Xena knows 'the rest of the Egypt story' - because she lived it with me, inside of me, as I struggled to find my way back to health, and happiness, and home - after Jappa. I have not thought much about my own adventure, out there in the wilds of the Egyptian desert. But I guess it is part of the story of Gabrielle the Queen, now - and needs to be told . . .

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And so, that evening, we gather all the tribe on the deck after we have eaten, for my attempt to call up the barding way from the depths into which I cast it, after Jappa. For, in truth, my Judgment ordeal was the first time I had spoken in oratory, in a public way, in a long time. And then the telling of my journey home, after Xe had come back to me. But that was a pretty barebones, dry telling. I could feel the inertia in me, fighting against my need. So I am curious how this will be. I look out over the group. They are curled up in various states of comfort, and they are ready for a good story . . . Althaia is at the tiller, and Xena is reclining by my side, curled round me, leaning on a pile of cushions. She rests her hand lightly on my thigh. I want my voice back - just for her.

* * * * *

"Now I sing of Gabrielle - and of the truth of her sojourn in the land of Pharaoh.

. . . When last I spoke of my time in Egypt, I told of how I had lost my voice, and been taken in and sheltered by the High Priestess of Isis. And I said how I had worked in the House of Healing.

I told you how I had taught myself a way of speaking with my hands, to overcome my loss of voice. But that was not the only reason I did this. For I did not tell you that in Thebes, I learned that it was a common practice that the houses of Pharaoh's family members all had servants who worked for them.

These servants were slaves - and they were all women. In Egypt, there is much jealous and secret maneuvering among the high priests, the petty palace officials, and the relatives of Pharaoh - and it is all for power. They are quick to use the ways of poison, and deadly serpent bites, and assassins in the nighttime, to

try to shorten the reign of the most puissant Lord of the Two Lands. They have a long history of it.

These young women - many of them strikingly beautiful, are brought in tribute to Egypt from many lands - and are enslaved. And the first thing that is done to them is that the hair of their heads is shaved completely. Now this is not such a strange thing, for in Egypt it is always hot - very hot, and most everyone shaves their heads - men and women alike. They wear elaborate plaited wigs, if they have to attend formal events.

The second thing is that they are forced to walk naked at all times. It is a sign, and a mark, that they are not free. Even the lowliest of peasants and serfs who work in the fields and in the huge worker villages that surround the temples and monuments to Pharaoh and the Gods of Egypt, are clothed - even if only in rags. But these slave women must walk among their Egyptian masters in the abject humiliation of constant nakedness. And they are treated as if they do not exist. The Egyptians look right through them - as if they were ghosts.

And the third thing that is done is that their tongues are cut out and their ears are filled with molten gold. . . And thus they are rendered silent, so as to ensure that no secrets are told to Pharaoh."

I stop, as the whole tribe gasps in consternation at this barbarism. Xena grips my knee, sharing the memories this telling has evoked.

". . They are then sold to the families, in the slave markets of Thebes, and taken to work in these houses. And Pharaoh has five brothers and sisters, and three cousins, and each residence has five of these slave women. And they serve until death. And thus the plotters and schemers feel safe that their secrets cannot get back to Pharaoh."

"O, my sisters, I learned that there is much in Egypt that is beautiful, and much that is cruel!"



Chapter 4: Gabrielle

Aboard the 'Leto': Two days out from sight of land.

. . . Xena has tied a colorful folded cloth around her head, to keep the hair from blowing in her face in the stiff breeze that swells our sail. She smiles almost all the time, now. It warms my heart. I am discovering how much she has changed, since her return. I realize I am seeing her with my adult eyes, and liking the changes I see. More thoughtful than I remember her - much more "wordy" than she was when we were young. I was always the chatterbox - she the silent one. Now, she is easier about sharing her thoughts with me, unbidden, and in what she says, I see deep wells of wisdom; - hard-earned wisdom. I was always aware of her knowledge and skill in military things. Now I find that has translated into a natural teaching ability, which she uses with the young Amazons. She is constantly assessing their individual skills, and fostering them. And I can see her figuring out which of them will be good as defenders, which as sailors, which as artisans. She is filling the hole left by Eponin's death. She is their hero. They will do anything for her. And that will make her role as a Queen so easy . . .

. . . Most of the women take turns spending time above deck, during the day. Below deck, we have a pen at the farthest end for the goats, and forward there is a partitioned area for the sick among us -for there are a few that Talia is looking after - who can't seem to shake the sea-sickness. We have hung hammocks in the main compartment, for those who wish to sleep or rest below. Xena and I sleep up on deck, under the stars - as we always have preferred . . .

* * * * *

"This is the best time I have had in ages." Xena says, after she drinks from her water skin. I admire the way her back and arm muscles ripple.

"I know," I answer, smiling back at her. "You should have lived on the sea all your life. - you're a natural."

"Ah, but then I wouldn't have met you, my love." She shakes her head, "And that would never have done!"

"That is so." I say.

"Your story goes well." She says.

I am silent. I am still shaken by the power of my own feelings, as I recounted the plight of those women. The tribe was spellbound. The Bard has returned. I am not altogether sure I want this - it is painful. She tilts my chin up with her hand, a gentle concern showing on her face. "It will be all right, " she says, her voice low. "I am here - even more than I was there." I pull my head away, closing my eyes against the sadness. She strokes my cheek, and I feel the tears burning in my eyes. One slips out, and trickles down, and she wipes it gently away.

"I know, Xe. It's just a story, now . . . it's over, and done."

"Yes it is. But it is also one of Gabrielle's triumphs. Don't count that cheap, my Bard." And she gives me a kiss, and my head sinks down on her shoulder. And I let the pain roll over me . . . and then it is gone.

* * * * *

. . . Xena stretches her arms above her head. I get up, and massage her shoulders, and she gives me a grateful look. The planks of the balustrade are hard, so I have brought up a cushion of sheepskin, to make a soft place to sit. The sea breeze makes me sleepy, so I am happy to intersperse my writing with conversation, to help Xe keep awake. I know she needs to stay alert, in case there is any difficulty with the boat. We have to keep on course, as she calls it. But so far, we have had no problem. Another nod must go to the Old Mother, who seems to be the hidden hand behind our perfect sailing weather . . .

. . . All of our talk reassures me that we have regained the level of intimacy and camaraderie that we once had

as second-nature, and which seems to be returning whole-cloth. I want dearly to get back to the easy banter that used to be our everyday habit - and which I think I missed more than almost anything (except the lovemaking!) . . .

. . . I still am having slight dizziness. I know it isn't from being at sea. The only thing I can figure out is that it seems to happen when I'm not in view of Xena. I just get this weird pressure in my temples, and feel wobbly, all of a sudden. Then it stops. It reminds me of the pain in the gut that we both got, for a short time, after Xe came back to me, and that, too, only happened when we were out of each other's sight. But it faded away, pretty quickly, as our normal 'connection' got re-established. Maybe it's just another passing phase, like that. Fortunately, it's a small boat, so we don't get very far from one another!

* * * * *

"Xe, now that we are under way, I am going to go down and see if I can get Io and Paphos to come up and spend some time with us. You know as well as I do how easy it is to hold all the hard things back, and stuff them down inside. I think we should have them come up and sit with us for a while. I'll go see if I can talk them into helping me bring you some food. We can all eat together."

"That's a good idea! Send Althaia up to me, and I'll get her to take over here. I'll meet you by our bedrolls. We can sit there."

I duck through the doorway of the cabin, and climb down the ladder into the hold. It is fairly dark, down here. There are some oil lamps flickering, but mostly it is dim, and the motion of the boat on the waves is much more pronounced. I apply pressure to my wrist and immediately feel better. One of the things for which I'll be eternally grateful to Xena! I start searching for the two familiar figures. Hammocks sway around me, each holding a dozing Amazon or two, and from behind me I can hear the bleating of the goats. It smells a bit goat-like, as well. I shake my head in wonderment at why people don't just go up and out into the glorious sun and sea, and enjoy this! I think they'd feel a whole lot better. But there is no accounting for human nature - especially when it is Amazon nature! . . . Contrary, in a word.

First I look for Althaia. She is over to one side of the boat, in conversation with Alysia and Ikthenia. I thread my way through the hammocks,

"Althaia, can you spell Xena for a shift? I need to get her something to eat, and she needs to rest."

"Certainly I will, my Queen. I'll talk more with you, Alysia and Ikthenia - later." She heads toward the ladder to the deck.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted your conversation."

Ikthenia smiles, "It is a reasonable request, Gabrielle. We all think you and Xena take on too much. We are all earth-bound, but many of the women are doing quite well, for being new to this! I am impressed with how they have risen to the challenge, And we are particularly impressed with how they take to Xena's instruction. She is a magnificent teacher! It makes me hope for a good future for them, my Queen!"

Alysia nods her agreement. "I am sure of it."

"I am pleased, too," I pause, pitching my voice lower. "But I have another motive - Xena and I need to help Io. She is still suffering from the aftershock of her ordeal. You may have noticed."

Alysia nods again, and Ikthenia echoes her concern. "We have seen. She needs some comforting, Gabrielle - and the two of you are the best for that job, I think." I thank them for their concern; and turn to look for her . . .

I catch sight of her, sitting on a pile of rope, and fiddling with something. Paphos isn't with her. I make my way over to her.

"Hola, Io," She looks up at me and I smile and sink down next to her.

"Oh," her voice dull, listless. "Oh, I'm sorry, my Queen . . . do you need something?"

"I need to know if you are busy, and where Paphos has got to, and whether the two of you can help me get some food together, and if you will both join Xena and I up on deck for our meal, and spend some time with us before we sleep. How is that for my needs?"

Io shrugs and leans back against some of the bundles of our belongings that line the sides of the hold. "I'm not busy - just fiddling around with the knots Xena has been teaching us. Paphos is in the galley. They've got a big pot of something simmering away." A look of revulsion crosses her face. "I - I'm not really hungry, but I expect Paphos can get you some . . . and we . . . we can join you."

I reach out and brush some stray curls out of her eyes. She needs a trim, I think, absently. She flinches at my fleeting touch.

I'm sorry," I say. "I should have asked you if it was all right to touch your hair, like that."

"Oh! No . . . n-no . . . it's really all right!" She faltered, with a look of quiet despair.

"Ah, well - Paphos is turning out to be a good stew cook, so maybe you'll try to eat a little, to please her . . . Otherwise, how are you feeling?"

Io looks down at her hands, where I see she is working with a length of rope, making knots. Her face is hidden in the dimness.

"I - I'm all right . . . mostly . . ." Her voice wobbles. I lift her chin in my hand, so I can see her eyes - so much sadness.

"I'm sorry, Io, that Xe and I have been so busy, since - well, on the journey to Pagasae. I have missed you, and Paphos. And maybe Xena and I have been too much concerned with our own state of mind. And we none of us have had much time, yet, to heal from all we have suffered. Do you mind if we selfishly ask you to indulge us, a bit?"

A faint glimmer of the old Io flits through her eyes, and I can tell that I've hit the mark. Good job, Gabrielle - you can still tell what's happening inside. And it needs to be attended to.

A lilting voice floats toward us from the narrow passageway. Paphos.

"Hola, my Queen! Io - are you getting hungry, at all? You've eaten like a sparrow for too long, now. The

soup will be delicious - I promise!" She comes up to us, and sits unceremoniously in Io's lap. Io, startled, looks guiltily at me - then flashes an adoring look at Paphos. I beam at both of them like an idiot.

Paphos ruffles Io's hair affectionately. "Well, you are going to eat, even if I have to force-feed you, my love. She says she likes this sailing, my Queen, but she has no appetite - so I doubt her sincerity! You can't be a good sailor and not eat! As for me - I'm going to be just fine back on dry land, thank you very much!" Her tone is bantering, but I detect an underlying concern that is anything but light-hearted. O yes, I think a heart-to-heart is in order.

"Well, let's see about that, shall we? Paphos, I've asked Io and you to join Xena and me on deck."

"Of course, my Queen - maybe Xena can get this one to eat something - for I've got nowhere with her! It wouldn't be so bad, but her stomach growls at me all the time! It is hardly romantic!"

Io blushes a bright red - even down in the dim light of this place I can see it. I put my hand on her shoulder and give it a friendly shake.

"Don't let her get away with that, Io! She'll tease you again, you know!"

Io nods self-consciously. I can see that she wants like anything to please her friend. And I think that is maybe the best motivation for clearing away the darkness that is still plaguing her. We get up, and trail after Paphos, who heads for the galley.

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Late the same evening.

. . . I am writing this by the light of an oil lamp, here on the deck next to our sleeping pallet. I can smell the faint odor of the balm I applied to Xe's shoulders, back and arms, to relieve the soreness. She is sound asleep, her arm snug around me.

As it turned out, Althaia ended up taking over the tiller from Xena, and we had quite a time with Io and Paphos, after our meal together. Paphos insisted upon getting Io to eat more than she would have otherwise, I suspect. And then we just let Io know that we would listen, if she needed to say anything at all to us that would help relieve her suffering. Slowly, painfully, it began to come out . . .

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"Io," I say, quietly, "I know it is difficult for you to talk about what happened at the inn in Amphipolis. Both Xe and I have had the same difficulty, in our lives. That is why we acted as we did, after we got you out of there." I take her hand in mine. We are all sitting on Xena's and my pallet, Paphos has her arm around Io, and Xe is sitting cross-legged on the other side. I continue, even though she is clearly looking scared. "But all we

could do then was to treat your physical pain. And make it so that you could heal from that as soon as possible. But we all know - and so do you - that you got hurt more inside - in your heart, and in your mind - by what you went through. And now it is time to start healing that, too."

Xena smiles gently at Io, and speaks next. "Io - I once found myself in the same predicament as you. I was about your age, too. And I went many long years being the stoic about it, because I wasn't lucky enough to have someone like Paphos by my side, to help me heal. Some things - maybe even the hardest things - didn't really ever heal for me until Gabrielle came along. That's a long time to keep silent - and I lost a lot of myself along the way. You know Paphos loves you, don't you?"

Io nods, the tears beginning to course down her cheeks. Paphos hugs her, and Io's head falls back on Paphos' shoulder. Paphos whispers to her.

"Io, dearest . . . tell me. It's all right - just tell me what is still happening to you. It won't hurt me, and it won't make me go away from you. I swear on Eponin's grave!"

Xena and I look at one another. Powerful bonds, they have.

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. . . Then Io just broke down, and wept, and Paphos - the tears of sympathy streaming down her own face - held her friend. It turns out Io is still troubled by nightmares - of the men who abused her at the inn. And guilt - just what I felt, after Dahok . . .

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"I think the worst thing is how much guilt I feel!" Io wailed. "I should have died - not Eponin! I should have had enough sense to follow your orders - to come back, like you told us to! I disobeyed you, my Queen! And for that, I got what I deserved!"

"NO!" I shook my head, emphatically. I put my hand to her cheek, stroking it softly. 'No, Io . . . there is nothing so terrible that deserves the violation of your body - nothing! Do you suppose I would have sentenced you to such treatment? I survived being raped by Dahok, Io - a Monster God! And I, too, felt guilt, and remorse - that I should have listened to Xena. But I beg you - do not carry that guilt and remorse any longer! You were trying your best to help all of us, just as I was trying to help the people I thought were in danger! You were being brave - not foolish. You were being heroic. And you suffered for that bravery and that heroism. And now, you deserve to understand that, deep inside you, and take it in, and accept it, and let go of the guilt and the shame."

I look up at Xena, and she is staring at me - a burning look of fierce compassion that heals a last tiny bit of my own deep wounds. I tear my eyes from Xena's, and turn back to Io, who is staring through her tears, back and forth between Xe and me - with a look as though a lamp has been lit inside her, again.

Xena reaches out to Io, and she lurches into Xena's arms. Xena hugs her close. And she whispers in Io's ear. 'It really is just that, Io - you are forgiven, and you are blessed. We know how much you suffered, and how much brave spirit it took for you to endure everything, for the sake of your Tribe."

Io settles back next to Paphos. "I . . . I guess I can let that go, now. Do you think I'll stop having the nightmares?"

I nod. "Yes, I do. It may take a while - it did for me - but this will make a difference, Io. Believe me!"

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. . Then, maybe even scarier to her, was that she was having feelings of inadequacy, and was being very afraid that she couldn't enjoy intimacy with Paphos . . .

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Io wipes her face with her sleeve. She shyly takes Paphos' hand once more. Paphos, her own cheeks tear-streaked, strokes Io's head, murmuring soft endearments and words of comfort. Io speaks again.

"I-I don't want to do anything to disappoint you, Paphi,' - you've been so good to me, and I've been just rotten to you. I . . . I wouldn't blame you, if you just gave up . . ." She looks away, afraid to see what she fears is in Paphos' face.

Paphos shakes her head, and answers Io's fear.

"Oh no! You and I have grown up together, Io. We go back so far we can't even remember a time when we weren't best friends! Do you think for one minute that I would walk away from you now? I love you, Io . . . and I will love you every bit as much as I would have, if none of this had ever happened."

And with that, she promptly gives Io the biggest kiss even I've seen - and that's saying something, because Xe and I are no slouches, in that department! Xe and I politely avert our eyes. And then she keeps right on, as if the Amazon Queen and her Consort weren't anywhere nearby.

"Io," she says. "We will take this slowly and tenderly - and do only what you will be comfortable with, all right?" And Io nods, and cries once more. But they are tears of relief, no longer of sorrow.

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. . . Xena and I sat close by, and did what we could to help the grief be released. And I know that between the two of us, we managed to say the right things - but it was a hard thing too, because both of us have realized, now, that we feel toward these two youngsters as though they are our own flesh and blood. Gods! I can't believe that after all that has happened to both of us, we might still get the chance to be parents, of a sort. And after what has happened to Io, I am not so sure I am up to it. There is still a part of me that is the same bruised and brutalized young child, inside; who knows Io's pain, and wants to hide from it. Maybe she got some healing, out of this - as well. . .

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"Gabrielle? Are you going to get some sleep, love?" Xena pulls me closer against her, and is tenderly rubbing my midriff.

"Just a bit more, I want to finish this. I need to write down what happened tonight. Somehow, it helps me let go of that slave-driver inside who thinks I could have prevented all that from happening to her, somehow." I turn and look deep into the eyes that gaze at me with so much love in them, I can hardly breathe. "Tell me, Xe!" I cannot keep the anguish from my voice. "What more could I - could we - have done?"

Xena pulls me to her, and I find my own tears falling, now, on the soft cheek next to mine. And her voice, soothing, whispers in my ear. "Gabi, love - we all have to have our terrors and our heartaches between birth and death. We cannot protect them from life - even when it is those we love most. We could endlessly replay everything, and try to imagine other choices - but believe me, there is no guarantee that things wouldn't have come out even worse that they did." She hugs me tight, and I know, in my heart, she is right. And so I roll up the scroll, secure my pen, blow out the lamp, and let her soothe me into sleep.

And I drowsily think, as she holds me tenderly, and I float off into sleep, "How kind - how very kind - she has become the gentle one."

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Chapter 5: Gabrielle

Aegea's Sea: Four suns out from Euboea. Morning.

. . . Well, I begin to trust the power of the Old Mother! She has spent every day at the prow of the boat, along with her familiar, the two of them just standing, facing towards the featureless horizon. The winds have held, and the "Leto" has moved swiftly, cutting through the waves with grace and unbelievable speed. The sun shines, and we see nothing but dolphins and sea birds, and no ships of any kind, and the chaos and violence recede behind us, as we sail on towards our destination . . .

. . . Xena has corrected our direction each night, by reckoning the stars. She has sent one of the younger Amazons up the mast, and she is hanging off the yard like a monkey - looks as if she was born to the sailing life, after only four days! Almost all of the others have come out on deck, as well. Talia insisted that all of them come up, to get good air, and sun, in the hopes that they can overcome their sea sickness. . .

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That evening, I continue my story, as the whole tribe sits under the moon and stars, rocked in the gentle waves. Even the least seaworthy are up on deck, now, to hear this tale. . .

". . . I first noticed the silent women in Isis' Temple, shortly after I had been given sanctuary there. They

accompanied their mistresses, when Pharaoh's sisters and sisters-in-law would make their periodic visits to the Temple, to worship. They were unobtrusive - like I said, they were ignored by everyone. But I - being who I am - tried to interact with them. I would make hand signals, faces - anything to get a response from them. But to no avail. I decided they must just be forbidden to talk to strangers. And from past visits to Egypt, with Xena, I had learned that the slaves were treated as property - they had no existence, outside of their duties to their owners. I did not want to anger my hosts. I think it was nearing the end of my fourth season in the main Temple when one of the minor priestesses caught me trying yet again, and she chastised me - all the while acting very frightened that she would be overheard.

'NO!' she said to me, 'Golden-Haired One! You must not speak to such non-persons! It is forbidden! And besides, they cannot speak or hear you, anyway!'

I made my usual croaking sound - all I could get my poor voice to do - and she told me, in hushed tones, what I told you. I was shocked - and angry. And that very moment, I decided to find out all I could about them.

This was not as easy as you would think. But I was determined. I think, now, that Someone's voice was giving me something outside of myself - to draw me away from my despair and sorrow. Something to do: a project - a cause. . . ." And I look deep into Xena's face, where she lays next to me, her fist propping up her head, and her face bathed in the glow of the moonlight. And a slight, secret smile appears there.

The tribe murmurs their agreement with my assessment. They are rapt, waiting for what comes next.

"And so I determined then and there that I would figure out some way to communicate with them, using hand signals modified out of the hunting and defensive hand parlay that Amazons have used for ages. I worked out a basic vocabulary - words and ideas that could be understood easily. I practiced every day. And each day, I tried to think of a way I could gain better access to them. It took an entire season to perfect my hand language, and to become adept at it. I practiced with one of the young novices, who liked to walk with me, in the cool of the evenings after the broiling sun had set. She wanted to learn to be a storyteller, like I had been. I often wonder what became of her . . . And, in the quiet hours of the evenings, I would mull over in my mind all that I hoped to do, all the while conscious that my Xena was listening, and whatever would well up in aid of my ideas, I would attribute to her.

At any rate, after another long, impatient time, the way became clear to me. I had been working for most of my fifth season in Egypt as a helper in the Temple of Healing. I had learned quite a bit, through observation, and by practice of what I saw, and they were indulgent with me and allowed me to continue. And gradually, I thought of a plan that just might work.

To that end, I went one day to the priestess who oversaw the Temple of Healing. I took with me the young novice with whom I had practiced my hand language, so that she could translate for me to the priestess. I told the priestess that I had been thinking hard about what I wanted to do -how I wished to continue to be of service, to enable me to continue to live in Egypt, at the pleasure of the High Priestess of Isis. She nodded, and I could see that she was pleased that I was taking it upon myself to maintain my usefulness to them. I said that I had noticed that a lot of the women slaves, from the homes of Pharaoh's relatives, were coming to the Temple of Healing for their illnesses and injuries, but were not getting cared for, because Egyptians seemed to believe it was beneath their dignity to do so. 'After all,' I said, 'they're just slaves, and hardly worth the effort.' But, I pointed out that they represented a considerable financial investment, and served an important function in those places, and should be kept in reasonably good health. I proposed, therefore, that she allow me to treat these women.

And to my surprise, she agreed. As you can imagine, none of the Egyptians would even dream of accompanying me, as I visited each place where the slave women were kept. So I became a familiar, slightly unusual sight - for my short golden hair always caused their heads to turn. But they soon ignored me, because I was, of course, only there to treat the 'non-persons' - something I counted on. And so, gradually, cautiously, secretly, I began to teach them all the hand language. I also taught them to watch people's mouths, and so be able to tell what they were speaking.

I don't know what possessed me to do this - except I know I raged against my own speechlessness, and so I think identified with their plight. I didn't think it right that someone should be violently *forced* to lose their speech and hearing. I also think I felt guilt - for my own speechlessness was not a physical maiming, but a muting of my spirit. I knew, somehow, that I would someday get it back. But they could not. And so I felt I had to help them. I never dreamed it would take the direction that it did, no matter how dangerous a game I was beginning to play. I went on with it, and was able, over time, to learn much from these women, concerning their individual stories and their situations of servitude under their Egyptian masters.

I know now, that the spirit of a certain Warrior Princess was also fretting at the knowledge that these women were in such bondage, and so helpless., and was urging me on , , ,"

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Late Afternoon: the next day.

. . . I have now learned that it is not good to become complacent about the mysterious ways of Gaia. The weather is stronger in its power than even our blind "seer" - for after the sun reached its zenith, this day, the winds suddenly died. The heat has increased, and we are practically motionless in the water. The surface of the sea is flat - no waves. The tribe is getting restless, so I ask Xena to explain the situation to all of us. She makes a face and groans, muttering something about my expecting her to somehow fix this, but I don't think she is that talented, and I tell her so. Then we burst out laughing, and, in truth, I confess we seem to have regained the banter between us that I love so much!

And then, of course, because she is Xena, and will always gamely try to make the best of a bad situation, she calls all the tribe to hear her, and she does a pretty good job of explaining it, anyway. Something about the 'solar wind.' I pitch in with an anecdote about when Hercules and Iolus got stuck because the winds died on them, and how it was that they returned. And then Xe - in her inimitable fashion - winds it all up by inviting everyone to take advantage of the 'calm' weather and go for a swim in 'the emerald sea!' Then she pulls the unexpected - she steps to the rail, strips off her chiton, and does a perfect dive into the water below! Everyone gapes. I can't let that go by, so I imitate her, and find myself swimming around in the altogether with her. It is glorious. And all around us, I can hear the sounds of splashing and whooping Amazons, overcoming their inhibitions of the sea, and joining us in the delicious cool water.

The next thing, I am aware that the dolphins - who have accompanied us since we left the harbor - are around us in the water; and after some initial trepidation, we see that they are just playful creatures, and want to treat us like they do each other! One in particular keeps circling around Xe and me, and making these strange clicking noises. Xena startles me - for as it comes close by her, she grabs the fin on its back, and it takes off - dragging her along with it! My heart leaps into my throat: will she get too far away from the boat? It is so

powerful and moving so fast, that I fear she will be dragged away entirely. But I see her laughing and really enjoying the ride - and sure enough, the dolphin circles around, and comes back in, and Xe lets go as it passes by me, and she seizes me around the waist and, laughing still, kisses me with abandon, as I struggle to keep afloat. I have to hang on to her broad shoulders. I shall never forget this day, as long as I live!

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That evening, again we are all out on deck, much more cheerful after our day of frolicking with the dolphins, and refreshed from the exercise and the water. And I take up my Egyptian tale for the third time.

". . . And then, one day, I was visiting the house of Sem, the Lord Overseer of Thebes, who had his own stately mansion in the city, close to the Temple of Isis. He was one of Pharaoh's brothers - the next eldest - and Pharaoh always insisted that he live in his own quarters, so that he would not be in the Palace of the Pharaoh, unless Pharaoh **wanted** him there.

I had just entered the walled courtyard, and was headed for the covered colonnade that led to the servants' quarters, when one of the slave women darted out from behind one of the painted columns, and grabbed my hand. She began to sign to me very rapidly. She was agitated, and frightened almost out of her wits. I got her calmed down enough to make sense of her flashing fingers. And I could hardly countenance what she said. It seemed that the Lord Sem was about to murder Pharaoh.

I pulled the chakram out of my pack, and signed to her that she should take me to where he was. She was terrified - kept shaking her head no, but I signed to her that I would protect her - indeed, that I would get her away from there, to safety, as soon as I had dealt with him. She led me back across the courtyard, to the other side, where another covered colonnade led to the family's quarters. We silently entered the cool, dim hall, which proceeded from the courtyard. It was quiet - all were obviously sleeping through the afternoon heat. She grabbed my arm, and pointed at a doorway near the end of the hall. I gathered he was there, making ready to do his deed. I motioned her back, and treading lightly in my bare feet, I came up on the entrance. I peered cautiously around the edge of the opening. I saw him, his back to me, and he was in the act of sticking a long, wicked-looking knife into the waistband of his linen kilt. I stepped into the room.

He turned, and caught sight of me. I had the chakram out, and I was about to throw it at him, when I felt a hand on my arm. It was the slave woman! I signed to her to get back, out of the room, but it was too late. The sound of the knife entering her chest will stay with me to the end of my days. I was then dangerously close to being sick, from the sound, as her body slumped behind me.

"How dare you enter my home and threaten me!" He hissed at me. "And you have corrupted my body slave, and caused me to have to kill it! I will have you arrested, and executed immediately!"

I raised my hand, motioning him to stop, and made a cross-the-throat gesture with the chakram, so he could see that he should not move. He didn't seem to understand. He lunged for me, and I released the chakram. It cut into his throat, and the bright blood sprayed out across the floor, and barely missed me, as his heart pumped out the liquid of life. He raised his hands, as if to stop it, but it was too quick, and he sank to his knees, and toppled over in death. The chakram spun back, and I caught it, and absently wiped it across my kilt. Then I turned, and melted back out into the hall, walked quickly down it, and out under the eaves and across the courtyard as calmly as I could manage, considering I had just murdered the brother of Pharaoh . . .

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". . . I made my way back to the temple, and washed myself in the temple pool. All was quiet - no one was stirring from their afternoon sleep. It was strange, how in the calm of that place it seemed as if nothing had happened. But everything for me had changed with that act. I paced up and down, as my body dried in the heat, and then I went to my own cubicle, I threw on a clean kilt and tunic, and packed my meager possessions in my pack. I was going to have to run, and soon. It didn't matter that we had saved Pharaoh's life. As soon as they found the bodies, they would assume that the slave woman had been his attacker. And that meant that they would instantly suspect all the slave women in that household, And likely it would spread to all the others, as well. Because they would feel that they could no longer trust them, as they had done. And with the Egyptians, retribution is swift, and merciless. I felt certain they would have all the women put to death. I couldn't see how my presence would jeopardize my own safety, because I wasn't seen. But inevitably, sooner or later, they would wonder, and I would come under scrutiny. I had been expected there, that afternoon. Easy enough to scapegoat the foreign woman - the strange one with the golden hair, who had the speechlessness in common with the slave women.

I had to **think!** What to do? I suddenly felt this strong pressure in my head, and stopped dead in my tracks. Xena! I was SURE it was Xena - somehow, somehow, she was trying to speak to me. I sank down on my knees, the feeling so strong of her inside me that I was speechless with the sudden flood of love washing over me in wave after wave of emotion. And with each wave, there came a rush of words, as if she was speaking to me, right there, in the room! And she laid it all out - what to do, where to go, and I was right with her, and nodding my head - saying 'Yes! Yes! That's the answer!'

I raced out into the corridor outside my room, and went to the small cell where the same novice I had worked with in the past was sleeping. I shook her, and when she awoke, I signed her to silence, and quickly sketched out what had happened. She was scared, but looked determined when I asked if she would risk helping me, and the slave women, to attempt to escape. She agreed. I signed for her to run quickly to each of the houses, and get word to one of the women in each place. These women would then have to sign the instructions to the others. Then they would have to take their courage in their hands, and manage to steal some cloth for each of them - something to cover their nakedness. And then, even more would be asked of them - for they would have to find a way to slip away from their assigned house, and make their way to the Temple of Isis, as soon as they could - instantly, in fact! Any who wanted to attempt to escape and had the courage to get that far, I would take with me out of Egypt and into freedom. And she got up, and went on her appointed rounds. And I never saw her again, and I owe her a great debt of gratitude - for what she did that day. . ."

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Chapter 6: Xena

"Old Mother," I say, approaching the woman where she sits with the Goat, in the bow of The Leto. She has made a kind of a bed for herself, with some of the skins we brought along, and she sits on it, gazing sightlessly forward. I wonder if she is still with us, her figure is so silent, and unmoving. It would be terrible if she were to die out here, away from her beloved Lemnos.

It has been four days, now, since we were becalmed. We do not seem to be moving at all - although the

currents must be moving us, somehow. It is hard to tell, because everything looks the same. The sail is slack, and the heat is increasing. I have decided to appeal to her, since I do not have a ready solution for this situation. We are beginning to worry about our supply of fresh water.

"Old Mother," I repeat, as I sink down. I bow my head to the deck, and stay that way, in supplication.

Gabrielle stands mute, surprised at my action. She has not seen me bow to anyone since that terrible night when the chakram fused with my living skin. She is uneasy at this -she wonders what I can be after. I wait. A long moment passes. Nothing. The Goat, however, has swiveled its head and is staring for all it is worth at me.

Then there is a long, gusty sigh, and the woman bows her head down to the bed, as if she is paying homage to some unseen force. She straightens up again, and slowly turns so that she faces me, as I quietly kneel before her.

"You are a mighty warrior, Xena, and a brave woman. It is usually hard for you to wait, when you have such a need for action and movement. But this is dangerous, and you know it. A small corner of your Soul still wants schooling, I think. How long do you think these women can wait for your indecision?" The Old Mother's face is kind, but her words are stern.

I feel myself rear back, my body stiffening, and I am angered by the words. I start to speak, but then I stop, and I think about it. I throw a look at Gabrielle, as she stands nearby. She is clearly shocked, and puzzled.

"I accept your reproof, Old Mother." I say.

I am humble in my acceptance. Gabrielle looks stunned, again - she has only ever heard that tone from me when it is between us. More than that, I know she is at a complete loss to understand what we are talking about. But then, I see her anger rise.

"Old Mother, Xena has no cause to be criticized by you! She has done everything she can to bring us home to safety. Why can't you just advise us, and we will do whatever you think is best? You talk as if this is all her fault!"

Those brown and empty eyes turn Gabrielle's way. So does the Goat's. She is getting even more upset. Understandably, as the animal seems to mimic the old woman.

"What more do you want from her? What impossible thing must she do, now?" my sweet defender asks, "And why is it always on her shoulders? I am Queen: it should be **me** you are putting to the test. Why can't she just have some small measure of time when she can just let things be, and not always have to fix everything?" She cannot keep the anguish out of her voice. I know she is so tired of all the ordeals. More than enough for one lifetime. And if we are to live as long as it seems we will, I am suddenly sick at the thought of endless years of this kind of suffering for her.

The Old Mother's voice turns gentle. "Gabrielle, be at peace. I am not testing your Xena. Gaia is."

"Well, Gaia, be damned!" she says. "I cannot bear allegiance to a Goddess who needs so much testing. We have been doing her bidding, it seems, our whole lives. Are you saying that we are becalmed, here, because we have stopped doing her bidding?"

And I send my voice into her head, clear as a bell, strong as if I were talking out loud. She raises her hands

up to her temples as she searches my face with her eyes.

"Gabrielle - no! It is all right - really . . . don't be angry at her. There is something . . . that has been happening to me, and this is all part of it!"

She lowers her hands, as the sensation passes. And then she looks about in wonder. Everything is still. Completely still. The water, the boat, - everything. Her eyes stray to the deck behind us, and she sees that even the figures of the Amazons are arrested in suspended form. A gull, frozen in mid-air, its wings outstretched - its beak open with a soundless cry. Then there is a queer, muffled pressure. She looks at me, then at the Old Mother - who is waiting. Her thoughts back to me are incoherent.

"What. . . is this, Xe? What is happening?"

"I've been having visions, and voices - in my mind. They started after I came back to you - and they've been getting stronger and clearer all the time. I don't know how to stop them, and I don't know what to do about them! And I think I must be going mad, from it - because I can't turn them off. . ."

She turns to the old woman - her thoughts blazing - and I can hear her, too. *"If you can explain this, or do anything about it, I beg you to do so - now!"*

The crone turns her head, slightly, and she sounds again, in our heads.

*"There is no need, for Xena is coming into her birthright; as you have come into yours. Xena is the Mover. She is the new Maker. My time is passing. Prophecy must be fulfilled. The Wheel turns. All is as it must be. Xena must **decide**."*

I look at the Old Mother in pure astonishment. I hear Gabrielle's response: *"No kidding. I'm astonished! I wish someone would explain why we look so astonished. I think maybe **I'm** going to go mad, if I don't find out pretty quick! What does she mean, Xe?"*

I shake my head, slowly, as I begin to understand . . . and my voice in my own head sounds: *"OH . . . Oh - I see . . . Oh - how incredible . . ."*

And I can feel my face change again: as I stand in absolute wonderment, and then all I can do is break into a glorious smile, and a feeling of such calm that it takes my breath away. The peacefulness seems to radiate from my chest - settling down like a blanket around us, as we wait suspended in this strange interlude. Then, another feeling as if there is no air to breathe; then a sudden rush, as a strong wind sweeps over us - and everything is in motion, again. Sounds, again. The gull cries out, and beats its wings strongly as it moves with the breeze. The women on the deck are moving, the boat is rocking, the water is beginning to swell beneath the hull, and a dolphin breaks the surface in a graceful leap. The sail bellies out, as it catches the breeze. There is a buzz from the decks, as the tribe senses its return.

Gabrielle looks at me. I look back at her, then down at my own body, and it seems etched in sharp relief. Everything about me suddenly seems more vivid, colorful, like the world looks after a spring rain - washed clean and glowing in the light. Like a God looks. Ares . . . all of them from Olympus . . . had this same look about them. A sudden sick feeling washes over me.

*"What does this mean? What's going **on**, here, Xe?"* She whispers, a chill causing the hairs on my arms to stand up. She cannot stop herself, and I know, suddenly, clearly, that she is speaking her deepest fear. *"Has it*

come to this, after all? Are you finally an Immortal, now?"

I stand; in one long step I have her in my arms.

"No, Gabrielle . . . Don't be frightened! Sweetheart!" I murmur.

"Oh? Why not?" She cries, in anguish. Her discomfort is obvious. She pushes me away from her. "I don't know what to feel. Am I to lose you to the Gods, after all? What difference, Ares or Gaia? It is all the same! Why haven't you **told** me?" I see a sudden image of her crashing into the Abyss, once more.

I grab her warding hands, and pull her to me anyway. She lets them fall limp at her sides. She looks so tired. So tired of the uncertainty . . . I take her face in both my hands, sure my own face is showing a lightning range of emotions. My eyes must be mirroring her distraught look back to her.

"My dearest - it isn't what you think. This is a great gift, and it will help us immeasurably! And it isn't at all about immortality. Or loss. This is something I have had only the barest inkling of, since Artemis saw fit to help me return to you. But now it is as if I am opening up inside, and seeing everything that has been there, all along. Don't you feel that, when you think of our link, and how much it has grown stronger in us? Now we will be much more connected! It is something we will come to **share**, Gabrielle. Please, don't be afraid! I couldn't bear for you to push me away!"

I look deep, deep into the face of my Beloved. I see all the tenderness and sorrow, the joy and pain that lives in us, now. I see the fierce determination, the strength, the passion, and the strong will that has connected us one to another throughout all our trials and triumphs. How can she be afraid of me? It is like fearing love itself. I would have no heart for such a life. I am awash in her incredible beauty - the beauty of the spirit that is Gabrielle - the beauty of her heart. She cannot fear me. Surely she will love whatever and whoever I am. She is my whole life. She is my hope. She is **my** Gabrielle.

Our lips meet in a kiss so deep I think we both must want to die and stay there. Eventually, I feel her return, her knees like water, and I find I must hold her up, so limp she has gone while in that safe place. And I realize that the entire tribe, practically, is watching this spectacle -their faces showing their concern. I manage a salute, and they break out in cheers and laughter. They have no idea.

And the Old Mother smiles her toothless grin, and promptly falls asleep. And the Goat chews its long lip, its chin whiskers sprouting out like an old woman's beard, and damned if it doesn't look like it's smiling, too!

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Chapter 7: Xena

"Well?" Gabi asks me, impatient for understanding. After the strange event of the afternoon, the voyage continues. We have corrected our position, turned sharply northeast, and I suspect we will be within sight of Lemnos in three more days. We are sitting on our sleeping pallet. Gabrielle will not let me do one more thing until I have explained this to her. She sits head down, cross-legged, staring at the grain of the wood in the planks of the deck. I sit beside her, my knees up, my arms folded around them. She is not happy with me.

"Gabrielle, it's not so strange, really . . ." The look she throws at me would have been unthinkable in her youth. "Oh, all right - it is!" I duck my head and sigh. "All right! I will try to explain. For some reason I don't understand, I have this ability now to see what is coming. It isn't completely controllable, yet. I could only watch, before, and stand by helplessly, as my visions happened; but I'm learning now that when they come, I can act on them, and change the outcome." A note of pleading comes into my voice. "You don't begrudge that, surely? Think how useful this will be to us, as we build our new settlements, and figure out how to defend them! Think about that fleet of ships you were so worried about - we'll have a formidable advantage against any who try to invade our island."

She looks at me. "Uh-huh," she says, dryly. "And you'll just conjure up a convenient storm - or better yet, take away all their wind, and then freeze them in some kind of suspended state?"

"Well," I dither, "I don't know about *that* - but I guess it is some kind of side effect that I seem to have acquired, too . . . and if I can stop wind, surely I can bring a little rain . . . it'll be good for our gardens, anyway , , ." I trail off with a note of wistful reproach. "I didn't ask for this, Gabi - at least, not as far as I can remember!"

She sighs, and reaching over, she takes my hands in hers. She runs her thumbs over my knuckles, and then brings them to her lips. "I'm sorry, Xe - It's just hard to get used to this. I feel . . . like the balance has shifted, again - when we used to be such partners. It took losing you to understand how I had become your equal. I was just beginning to feel that we had finally become two whole beings, joined. Now . . . I just don't know . . ."

"I know, love," I answer. "But please listen, because I think we can get back there - if you trust me. I've been fighting this whole thing, inside myself, since right after I came back. I was afraid of it. I was reluctant to even examine my feelings about it. And it wouldn't go away. And I didn't know how to tell you. So I did my usual tight-lipped warrior thing, and hoped it would just stop. But then the firestorm happened, and I tried to think it was just a freak thing that we were unharmed. And that the changes to your dragon were a fluke. Never mind the whole chakram thing!"

"You mean - it was **all** you - all of it? You made those changes happen - to both of us?" She stops, a sudden thought obviously coming to her. "Xe - I've been having these weird dizzy spells - usually when we are apart and out of sight of each other. Like the gut pain, remember? Only this is different - a pressure in my temples. Here" - she puts her fingertips to the place on each side of her head, beside her eyes - "and then it stops. It happened again, when everything stopped. So is this you, as well?"

I nod - my face sags with sadness. She pulls me closer to her, wrapping her arms around me. I whisper to her, "I don't want it to be uncomfortable to you, Gabi - it's just that it is so strong, between us, and we're not used to it, yet."

"Oh, well - I don't mind the pressure thing - that's just another way of being together, when we can't be. I heard you, clearly - just like I did that time, in Egypt . . . And I'm sure we'll get better at this, just like we have with everything else. But, I don't understand the rest of it. Why weren't you able to change things for 'Poni, and the others? Or stop the burning of the village, and the Sacred Grove?"

I bow my head, and I can feel the tears start from my eyes. "Because I was afraid - afraid of the power. Because . . . I saw how everything would change - for the worse - if I tried to save them. I'm sorry, Gabrielle! I'd give it all up, now, if it meant I could bring them back!"

"Xe - don't be sorry. You saved **us**! You saved everything you could. Don't forget that they made their own brave choices, too. Their free will gave those choices meaning, and dignity, and honor! Do you think I haven't accepted that with all my heart?"

"But I'm getting so strange, now. Don't you see that?" I can't make my voice above a whisper.

She laughs shakily. "O, my love! You've been strange from the beginning! And so have I! It cannot get any odder than it already is! So all that business of the boat being becalmed. Why now?"

"Because, unless I accept my ability we will not fulfill our destiny. And for you to become fully tuned to me, I have to stop fearing it. The prophesy reveals us coming to Lemnos as fully empowered Amazon Queens. Everything came to a dead halt because I was at a dead stop - inside myself. I was trying to deny myself. I couldn't see how I could merit such power and be accepted as a Queen, like you. Especially because I could not lift a finger to save us all from our terrible loss. Do you see?"

She nods. "Yes, I do see. What I don't see is how we are to get you to the point of being accepted as Co-Regent, with me. What do *you* think we should do about it?"

"I think" I answer slowly, "that we should ask the tribe what **they** think about **all** of it. Gaia knows - maybe they'll forgive us, and decide to follow both of us."

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Chapter 8: Gabrielle

The following morning, early light. On the deck of the "Leto."

. . . We have assembled everyone on deck. Only the tribe's goats remain below. The Old Mother is standing between Xena and me. The Elders are ranged at the front of the group, for I have declared that this is a formal session of the Council. Whatever is said here, and decided, will be written down for the record of the Last Nation of the Amazons. I feel light-headed. I try to keep my senses, but this is clearly, in my mind, another one of those 'hardest-things-we-will-ever-have-to-do' situations, and I don't relish it. But I will do it anyway. It's just one more strange adventure with Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazons. They'll probably throw us both overboard, when we get done trying to explain all of this. The last strange story by the Bard and her odd companion, Xena - former Destroyer of Nations - now turned into some kind of supernatural powerful Beings . . . Afterwards, they can sail to Lemnos with the Old Mother, and her Goat will dance, and they'll all sing a hymn to Gaia for saving them from these two raving lunatic women . . .

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I step forward, and a hush falls over the assembled women.

"My Amazons, I have called this meeting of the High Council, to discuss with you the events that have catapulted us into this strange voyage, bound for a new and unknown homeland. I do not promise that you will understand all of it, when we are done, because I myself do not understand everything."

I pause, and in that interval, Alysia the Lawgiver stands forth, and raises her hand, cupped palm extended, in the sign for permission to be heard. I bow my head, acknowledging her.

"My Queen!" She begins. "Before you begin this no-doubt wondrous tale, we have a request of you."

I am taken by surprise. "Of course, Alysia. What is it?"

"We have had much discussion, among ourselves, since the night of our flight from the village, and all through our long journey. We have talked - and **all** have spoken, giving their opinions, and **all** have been heard. And now, we have reached a unanimous decision. And we beg you to heed the wisdom of our words, and grant this request."

I am puzzled. I look over to Xena, to see if by her face I can tell what is coming. She is as calm and blank as a fresh sheet of papyrus. I holler at her in my head - *"O, what fresh thing is this? Doesn't this count? What is coming, Xena?"*

Her face impassive, her voice sounds clear in my mind. *"Hold fast! You won't be disappointed!"*

I nod my head. "Continue. Give voice to your request."

Alysia smiles. "My Queen, the Last Tribe of the Amazons of Thessaly asks that you agree to let Xena rule as your Co-Regent. We want both of you as our Queens!"

There is a breathless silence, as all wait to see what I will do. I am stuck dumb! I look at Xena in absolute amazement. She has a slight smile on her face. I stare at them. My face no doubt reflects my astonishment.

"I am speechless, my Sisters. I had no idea you felt so strongly about this! But before I can consider your request, tell me this: do you **truly** feel that you can trust us both to lead you - even after all that we **failed** to do? Think carefully about this - for I would think that you would bear some anger, for all that we could not change." I look gravely at their faces. I want them to be absolutely sure.

They stand firm. Not a face twitches; not an eye fails to meet mine.

"Surely you must hold sorrow and sadness at the loss of our Sisters!"

Silence.

"You do not blame us, then, for the deaths of Eponin, and Kythereia, Dika and Ephegnia?"

Silence.

"And what if we had known, in advance, that they would be taken, and did not move to change that outcome? Would you still be here, asking this thing of me?"

They are thinking about that one, I can see it clearly in their faces. I look at Xena. She stands, head held high.

Then I scan each face. Not a flinch. No flicker of doubt.

"Then, my Sisters! I cannot conceive of resisting your will in this matter. I humbly bow to you, and beg you to receive Xena and myself as your Queens." And my actions suit my words. I go down on one knee, my head bowed, and my fist across my chest. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Xena doing the same.

The tribe roars its approval. I hear a drumming sound, and realize that they have been waiting for this, to throw a long-overdue Amazon celebration. I rise up, and Xena comes to my side, and we stand amazed at the gyrating, ululating frenzy that has erupted on the deck. Amazons are snake-dancing around the mast, and wine skins are being passed from hand to mouth. Even the Old Mother is beating time on the deck with her staff, and the Goat is shaking its horns, the bell around its neck sounding in counterpoint to the drums.

I whisper in my head to Xena. *"Why didn't you tell me?"*

"Would you have believed me, if I had?"

"Then why that long discussion all night long? I'm exhausted!"

She grinned at me. *"Want to adjourn to the hold? It'd just be you, me and the goats!"*

I make a face at her. *"What about our wondrous tale?"*

She arches her brow, in that oh-so-Xena way. *"Amazons will always be ready for a good story from you, my Bard! No doubt this one will get told - when they are good and ready for it!"*

* * * * *

It is the last day. Xena insists we will see land before sunset.

. . . I blush to say that Xe and I did disappear, after a while, from the celebrations of yesterday, and found a corner (not quiet!) where we could - as Sappho would say - 'raise high the roof beams' (not to mention shaking a good bit of the dust out of the sheepskin on which we lay!) And then, noise or not, we both slept soundly, through the whole night. I think the tribe must have tip-toed around us like ghosts, for we neither stirred nor wakened until this morning. Many of them are still asleep - too much wine, no doubt!

. . . We come up on deck, after having some food; and to Xena's relief, see that Althaia is stoically tending to the tillers. When I ask if she has had any relief, she nods, and says that Io and Paphos have come and gone; and before them, the best of the young sailor Amazons had competently taken turns spelling one another, throughout the night - working the tillers and adjusting the sail. And yes, we are still on the course Queen Xena had set . . . Throughout this long day, they take their turns once again, and Xena is so proud of them, she can hardly speak. And so am I . . . I decide to finish the tale of Egypt, before our own voyage comes to an end . . .

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I call them all around me, and ask if they are ready for more of my story. They are eager, for when I left it last, I had just murdered the Lord Sem, and I am sure they want to find out all that happened after . . .

". . . I had then to do my own brave thing. I was certain - from the communication I had from Xe - that the High Priestess would know what was happening in my head. She proved that when I had first come there, and I knew that I would never be able to get out of Egypt - let alone get those women out with me - if I did not somehow make her an ally - or, at least, not an enemy. The thing was to take the bull by the horns - as the old Cretan saying goes. So my next action was to go directly to her.

I knew from experience that she was well-guarded in her own quarters, but I had learned a thing or two about invisibility from the oh-so-good teacher I had - and besides, I just followed her voice in my head, as it directed me past the drowsing attendants, and into the inner chambers. I found her resting on a couch, languidly looking over some scrolls. But as soon as I had sidled up beside a pillar, she looked up and right at where I was concealed, and calmly suggested I take a seat and be comfortable.

"You are in deadly peril," she said to me. I looked at her, and nodded yes. "What do you want of me?" she asked me, pointedly.

"It is time for me to tell you that I have need of these women, and I intend to take them out now, and I expect you to help me get them out safely." I said all this to her, of course, in my head. And then I continued. "When I first came to you, I did not understand why I was in Egypt. All I had to go on was the somewhat cryptic remark to me, by my Xena, that you had need of "a warrior with a chakram." It has taken me this long to see the design behind it. Pharaoh is safe from assassination, this day, because of me and my Xena, and because of the silent slave women who serve in your city. Without us, he would surely have been sent to the Land of the Dead. And now, I see that it is my destiny to take these women with me, out of Egypt, and that is what I intend to do. I cannot take all of them, as you well know. And so I wish to know what you will do, in aid of my need."

"Ah, I had thought you must be other than who you seemed to be. And where is your Xena? I seem to remember that you said she died, in the Land of the Rising Sun. I have yet to see her in this place, although you refer to her as if she were here, - and I would wish to meet her."

"I hold her here, in my heart - where she sits on the right hand of Horus - and she waits for the time when He shall weigh my heart, to see if I am a righteous soul, and so be able to join her in the Blessed Land. And she is my Guardian Spirit, now, in all that I do."

She looked long in my face, and then she nodded, once, sharply, and answered my need.

"I can see that you have been sent by the Gods. Pharaoh sometimes needs protection in strange ways, and from unseen directions. I am not going to question that. I confess, I do not fathom this need of yours for the not-persons. You foreigners have strange tastes, I must say. But I do not presume to judge. The desert will be their judge - and yours." She waved her hand languorously. "Go - take them where you will. You will find no opposition from this temple, or any of the others. I cannot control the royal family, however, so you will have to deal with them yourself."

I nodded, and she went on. "It has been most instructive to have had you among us, Amazon Queen - and

your Xena, as well. I did not think it possible, that such as my self would live and have power in other lands than this Egypt! Live long, and may Isis guide you through the perilous desert . . . and may your heart be judged light as the feather, Gabrielle - for I think it may be so, already. . ."

"I bowed, and left her with one more comment. *'Maybe the not-persons who are left could be better employed here, in the Temple of Isis. Think what good acolytes they would make. If I were you, I would think Isis would intervene, on their behalf.'* I looked deep into her eyes, and I knew she took my meaning."

And so, I left the High Priestess, and shouldering my pack, my staff in my hand, the chakram on my belt, and my sais on my boots, I made my way to the outer courtyard before the Temple, to see if any of the women had been able to make their way there. I knew I could not afford to wait long, for I expected the personal soldiers assigned to guard each of the royal families to be out hunting for the renegade women - and, for me, as well. I paced up and down the courtyard, impatient and anxious. And soon enough, some of them began to arrive - their faces petrified under the draped cloths, but ready to take the plunge for freedom. In the end, there were only ten of them who had managed to do what I had asked. That was a small handful, compared to the number I knew to be still enslaved, but it was at least what I thought I could save. Maybe the High Priestess would decide to intervene for the rest. But for these few, I had to get them out of the city, quickly, without attracting attention from the city guards and the military patrols. Somehow, after that, we had to make our way through the desert to the north. And all this with no money, no transportation, no food, and no water. . ."

I smile at the tribe, who are shaking their heads in disbelief. "So, it sounds like a normal, usual Xena-type adventure, doesn't it?" They all laugh, and I turn and look fondly at Xena, who grins and ruffles my hair with her hand. 'Ah, sure - piece of nut-bread!' she chuckles. "No problem!"

". . .As we made our way, single file, through Thebes, I led them by the secondary streets, to stay away from the ways frequented by the guards and soldiers and rich citizens. We stayed in the area that was for the poor of the city - and there was much of it. Vast stretches of simple, mud brick hovels, where the poorest of Egyptians eked out a living as laborers for the building of the great temples and tombs. Along the way, I passed a poor merchant, whose wares were laid out on cloth on the ground in front of him. I needed a covering for myself, and I saw that he had a djellaba - a long robe with sleeves and a hood, I signed for the cluster of women to stop, and I squatted down in front of his wares, and I made signs to say I wanted the robe. He understood, and I offered him a gold piece - one of the few I had kept, from my journey south. He looked at me in wonder, but I was impatient, and I grabbed the robe, quickly threw it over my head, and pulled it down over me, and was about to move off, when he pulled at my arm. In a thick tongue, he told me that I had overpaid, and the Gods would not permit him to accept that much money from me. He wanted to give me other things, for my gold. I didn't have time for this, but a sudden thought struck me. I squatted down next to him, and taking a sai out of my boot, I scratched in the dirt before us a picture of a camel. I drew a circle around the camel. I then drew a row of camels, and a line moving off to the North. He nodded his head excitedly - he took my meaning. For I was asking if he could show me where the camel caravans were quartered, on the outskirts of Thebes.

My plan, you see, was for the group of us to join one of the caravans, headed north from Thebes. I had an idea I would pose as a holy woman, with her group of novices, and say we were on our way north to a new temple complex. I hoped to thereby get us through the worst of the journey in a way that would be less of a hardship for all of us.

The merchant began to wrap up his goods in the cloth on which they were laid, and all the time he was talking at me, gabbling on about the good fortune I was bringing him with my gold-piece, and that the Gods were looking down on him that day, and on and on - and meanwhile, I was getting frantic at the delay. The women were milling about, wheeling like a flock of restless birds. I signed for them to keep calm, and finally he was done, and had slung the cloth, rolled up and tied with a piece of rope, over his shoulder, and was calling for me to follow him. He set off at a trot, and we were right behind him. . . "

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"So, how does it feel, hearing them call you 'Queen'?" I tease Xe in a low voice, as we move to the balustrade - after sharing round the fish stew they have cooked up for everyone in the galley - and sit up behind Althaia. Xena looks at me, makes a funny cross-eyed face, and answers me in my head.

"Not nearly as strange as hearing the things you called me last night . . ."

I grab her in her most ticklish spot, and she retaliates by capturing my hands, and swooping in for another sweet kiss. Althaia keeps her eyes to the front, careful not to be disturbed by the scuffle erupting behind her.

Most of the tribe is up on deck, now, as we all sense the nearness of our destination, and want to be present to see it. Some are napping; some talking quietly; and the sounds of a set of Pan Pipes trills from where Io and Paphos are sitting, on a big coil of rope. It is Io playing. I smile fondly at them, and they wave. I sigh, and then I hear Xe's voice again, private in my head.

"We are more than all right, my love. We are happy."

I lean back into the warmth of her, and her arms come around me, and we sit in peace.

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Althaia calls us back from our reverie, by insisting that I get back to telling them the end of the story.

"Queen Gabrielle, please! It makes the voyage go more quickly, with you telling us the tale - will you finish it for us, before we sight our new homeland?"

I grin at her. "Of course, Althaia - it is just reward for all your long hours at the tiller. You have more than proved yourself as a seaworthy Amazon, this voyage - hasn't she, Xena?"

"O, yes - I have been noting her as an able sailor. I have an idea she will make an excellent instructor, when we get our fleet build and equipped!"

"Our . . . our . . . fleet?" Althaia stutters. I look at Xe myself in some astonishment.

"O, yes!" she laughs at our faces. "I have a plan, for that!" And she winks at me mischievously. "Carry on, my Bard . . . they're all hanging on the outcome of this one."

So I move down to the center of the deck, and call them around me, and Xena, ever near, sits down behind me, and I lean back and close my eyes, to conjure up that last, journey into the deadly sand . . .

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". . . We arrived at the place where the camel caravans were assembled, after having taken a felucca across the Nile. Thebes is on the western bank, and the camel yards were on the eastern shore. The place smelled strongly of the beasts - it is a rank odor, and some of the women covered their mouths and noses. The sound of them was also everywhere: that unique harsh, complaining voice that only camels can speak. They are truly the most mournful and querulous of beasts! They complain about everything, - but they do have beautiful eyelashes!

Anyway, we were brought to a man, dressed in Bedouin style with a turban and a swarthy face, pointed beard and the longest mustache I ever saw. The merchant said that he was a cousin of his, and would surely undertake to transport us for the value of a gold coin. And thus they reckon they will be doubly blessed by the Gods. He took the man off to one side, and a convoluted exchange ensued. I waited - signing to the women to be calm, that all would be well. After a bit, they came back to me, and they said it was all arranged. The caravan leader wanted to see my gold, and wanted to know where I and my slaves wished to be transported. I revealed a flash of a second gold coin, then hid it away again in my belt. He would get it at the end of the journey - not before. Then I motioned for him to squat down in the sand next to me, as I once more removed my sai and began to draw a map in the dust at our feet. His attention at first was drawn to the sai, and I noticed a look of sober respect that I would have such a thing, and that I seemed perfectly comfortable using it - which was exactly the point I wanted to make. . . ."

I pause, and ask a question of my audience. "Do you think he was only what the merchant suggested - a 'cousin' who would graciously take care of me and my 'slaves'? Don't you believe it - and neither did I. I figured he was going to take us just far enough out of the city to be free of the roaming city guards, and just far enough beyond that to avoid the squads of Egyptian soldiers who kept the outskirts of the great city safe from any intrusion. And there, he and his camel herders would probably set upon us, and murder us all for the gold he knew I carried. The desert was a perfect ally - it would cover our bodies, until the scavengers had picked them clean, and the bones had bleached themselves white in the sun."

The caravan left Thebes, and set out in a northern direction, along the river to Kuff, where it would turn due east, and head across the desert, through the Wadi Foakhir Hammamat, for about thirty-five leagues. This would bring us to the shores of the large sea that separates Egypt from Sinai. If, then, we could get passage on a boat going north another seventy leagues, we would make our way to Pelusium, in the delta region, east of Heropolis, close to the Mediterranean Sea. From there, we would attempt to take ship to Greece.

In the desert, all these distances are monumental, because of the torturous heat. Everything is more difficult. You may ask - why did we not just take passage on a boat going down the Nile? It would have been so much easier. The problem was, that way would be watched. And with my golden hair, and ten mute companions, it would have been impossible.

We were not more than ten leagues north out of the city, when the caravan leader, who had been riding at the back of the line, came galloping up to me. He hollered something, and gestured off to the southwest. I looked back, and saw several black figures against the golden sand. He wanted to know who they were. I shook my head - I had no idea. So we watched, and as they came closer, I began to make out that it was some kind of

official procession, because it looked as though there was a covered palanquin slung between two of the camels, and a phalanx of guards, in formation, running alongside. I couldn't believe my eyes. The standard they were carrying was that of the High Priestess of Isis. As they drew up next to us, all the men in the caravan fell to their knees, their faces in the dust. They abased themselves, wailing that they were innocent, and should be spared punishment.

I sat astride my camel, and gestured that the other women should stay where they were, on their mounts, as well. The camels with the palanquin stopped, and two servants ran up and kneeled below it. From out of the palanquin, the High Priestess herself stepped out onto their broad backs, and down into the sand. They immediately sprang up, and two others brought up a cloth attached to four poles, which they then held up, to shade the Priestess from the sun. She stood looking at me, utterly ignoring the camel drivers.

I tapped my crop against the camel's neck, and it obligingly, if vocally, kneeled down. I slid off the saddle, and came before her. I bowed, and then I spoke in my mind to her.

"It is a hot day, O Mouth of Isis, to be out in this place. What brings you to us?"

She looked down at me from her considerable height. She had a ceremonial leopard skin draped across her shoulder, and was wearing her tall, canonical headdress. She lazily flicked a fly-whisk back and forth, to keep the insects at bay.

"You seem to be determined to take the worst possible road back to your homeland, Amazon. Why is this so?"

"I wasn't aware that I had any choice in this."

"Well, that is true. But not for the reasons you assume. For I have had a conversation, this day, with Pharaoh. And you and your . . . handmaidens . . . are commanded to return to Thebes, immediately. There, you are to be honored by Pharaoh Himself. His Majesty wishes to bestow upon you the Gold Torque of Honor, and restore all your . . . handmaidens . . . to you. And then you will be escorted - all of you - to the Delta, and will take ship to Greece."

I looked at her in astonishment. I could not believe this was happening.

"It is not just an excuse to execute us?"

"Indeed not! Do you doubt the might of Isis, when she is aroused? She was apparently so incensed at the attempt on Pharaoh's life, that she caused the deaths this day of all of his relations! So you see - it would be wise for you to do as she commands, and not risk her wrath, for she can be fearsome, when she chooses."

I bowed my head. *"It shall be as you command."* And I signed to my companions -explaining all that had been told to me. They gaped at the Priestess, in awe. The caravan men were still groveling in the dust at our feet. The Priestess waved her hand, and one of her retainers threw a pouch, clinking with the sound of coins, at them, It landed at the head of the leader, who still was terrified enough not to try to look up.

She then ascended to her palanquin, and the camels were turned, and headed back to Thebes. And I and my ten companions took our camels, and followed after.

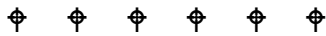
And so, my sisters, you have heard the true story of Queen Gabrielle in the land of Egypt. And you now know the whole of it."

The women were silent, musing on all that I had said. Then a small voice, off to one side, ventured a question. It was Iokaste, one of the youngest Amazons,

"My, , , my Queen . . . wha . . . what happened t . . . to the mute women?"

I looked out over the sea. "Ah," I said. "Well, they have been taken in - all forty of them, I might add - by some of the best healers in Athens, and are being sheltered, and treated for their injuries, and taught. That is the power of one Egyptian Gold Torque of Honor, in Greek dinars. And when they are done, Anacreon will fetch them from Athens, and bring them over to us, on Lemnos. They cannot speak, it is true, and will never hear the sweet sound of Xena's singing, but they will be free Amazons! What think you, of this?"

And they all roared their approval.



PART II: HOMECOMING

Chapter 9: Gabrielle

"OYE! OYE!" The Old Mother is waving her arms above her head, and the Goat has begun bleating in a loud voice. The tribe stirs, and Xena hollers up to the young woman on the yard, high above the deck.

'Hola - Iokaste! Do you see anything?"

The sun is sinking behind us, and we all hope to see land before it is gone.

The young woman is silent a long moment, then she does a good imitation of a Xena yell.

"Aaaaaiiiiiyyiiieeee! I see it! I see it! Lemnos! Lemnos!" She is so excited I fear she will lose her grip - but she is hanging on well with her one arm wrapped around the mast, and pointing ahead with the other.

All the tribe is clustering along the ship rail, craning to see something of our new home. I, too, am more excited than I can stand. I have my arm around Xena's waist.

"Hold her steady, Io - you can take her in." Io grins in delight, ignoring the sweat on her face.

Xena and I move forward, past the tribe lined up now on both sides, and come up to the foredeck, to stand with the Old Mother and the Goat.

"OYE," she says again, in a booming voice I could scarce believe could come out of such an old woman. "BEHOLD - LEMNOS!" Her finger points unerringly at the island that looms before us. 'How does she do it, Xe?' I whisper.

"She can smell it." Xena says, quietly. And she speaks true, for I see the Old Mother lift her head, and take a deep breath, and then she hugs the Goat fiercely, and her sightless eyes are weeping.

"Old Mother," Xena speaks softly to the woman. "We have brought you home. But you need to tell us where we can make safe landfall."

The old woman wipes her face, and sighs.

"Yes, yes. It is good. The best place for landfall is approaching. There is a natural harbor on the southwest coast. There is a small settlement there, women who have made their way to the island over the years. I do not think it has grown, much, in my absence. They do some fishing, so they may have some small boats, by now."

Xena thanks her. She calls one of the youngsters to her, and in a low tone she communicates the old woman's directions, and sends her back to tell Io. And then we both just watch, as the welcome sight fills our eyes. We can see now there is at least one tall mountain on the island. And much green. I feel my joy welling up, unbound. Xena turns to look at me, and I reach up, pulling her head down, and our lips meet, I want to devour her, where we stand. She has brought us safely home.

I turn, then, and raise my arm in the Amazon salute. The tribe goes quiet, and I speak to them.

"Sisters! Thanks to the wise and capable efforts of Xena and the crew of the 'Leto,' we have been delivered in safety to our new home. Behold - Lemnos! Last Best Refuge of the Great Amazon Nation! "

Their voices rise in a great cheering. Then Xena and I go down on one knee before them. They are silent in sudden surprise. And Xena speaks:

"My Sisters. We humbly seek your forgiveness, for having to endure terrible hardship, and terrible loss, in the faith that Gabrielle and I - your two Queens - could bring you all to safety and to a new home. We humbly ask for your favor, to bless our arrival. With new hope: that with your help and hard work, and your support, we will do our best to make this our true home. And that you will give us your wise council, so that we may be welcomed, and be able to join peacefully with our sisters ashore - who even now await our arrival."

Again they voice their approval. We arise, and cross our hearts with our fists in their honor. Then I speak again.

"My Amazons! Now show your deepest fealty to the One whose intervention has made the way smooth, and the voyage safe, and who even now longs for her feet to walk in the dust of her homeland!" And I turn, and gesture toward the Old Mother, and her Goat. They turn, and face the Tribe. And all of us go down on one knee, our heads bowed to them both.

Standing once more, we look with all our focus at the approaching sight. And as we watch, we can see small objects, bobbing in the water; and these resolve themselves eventually, into small boats - coming out to shepherd us home.



Chapter 10: Xena

The gaggle of small fishing boats comes out of the harbor, and swiftly approaches the 'Leto', as we make our way toward landfall. Io is doing a perfect job of steering, and Iokaste and the others are at the ropes, and up in the rigging, awaiting the signal to collapse the sail. As our escorts draw closer, we can see that the boats - packed with women - bear a pennant that flutters from each masthead. It is a black field, emblazoned with a gold-and-silver chakram, in the center of which is a red field with a black dragon. I feel a chill wash through me. It is all well and good to hear the Old Mother speak of this, but it is another thing to see it approaching, unbidden. I keep my arms around Gabrielle. I can hear her sharp intake of breath, as she spots them.

"Xe - look!" she says, her voice hushed.

"Yeah, I see."

What I don't tell her - yet - is that they've been **singing** to me, since the island came into view. Or, not exactly singing - although that's what my mind wants to call it - but more like a chanting, or a really long poem, with lots of rhyming parts. Maybe it's because I can carry a tune, myself, pretty fairly - so that's what I compare it to. Whatever - I can understand the words. In my head. Because when they draw close enough, it is really obvious that they aren't a typical Greek chorus! Not a single mouth open, not a single breath pushing song out into the air. It gives me the shudders. I grip Gabi's shoulders. She looks up at me, instantly aware that I am moved by strong emotion.

"What is it, Xe?"

"Can you hear them?" I ask, my voice barely audible. She looks puzzled, then turns and gazes at the crowded deck of the closest vessel.

"Hear wha . . .?" she starts - then her voice catches, and she gasps. "O, it is so . . . beautiful!" Her eyes are starry green emeralds. "Can you understand it?" she whispers to me.

"O, yes," I answer. "They are welcoming home the Queens."

"Can the others . . .?" She quickly glances around at our companions on the deck.

"No. Only the Old Mother . . . and, just possibly, the Goat . . ." I can't disguise the smile in my voice.

"Don't start that with the Goat Xena! You know I don't like that creature!"

"Aw," I tease her, "You'll get to like Amalthea- just give her time!"

She punches me lightly on the arm. "O? I don't **think** so! I'm not planning on spending any more time around that -thing - than I absolutely have to!"

Then a look of absolute terror crosses her face, and she turns and grabs me and hugs me to her. From under my chin, I hear a muffled, panicky voice.

"Xena . . . the old woman said you were taking her place. That doesn't mean you have to go . . . blind . . . or. . . or . . . take up with that Goat, does it?"

I hug her as tight as I can, because I know that sometimes it is the only reassurance she will trust. Then I whisper. "Nope - I think that only applies after I've made it through the second hundred year's birthday party, and only then if everyone else is so dead, old, or blind themselves that they no longer care if I've taken up with a Goat."

She makes that scrunched-up-nose face that I love so dearly, and then she rewards me for giving the right answer. When my own legs stop trembling at the giant surge of passion **that** causes, I laugh shakily, and wonder how long we'll have to wait -through all of the ceremony of the docking, and all the greeting and flourishing and pageantry and general carryings on that are sure to come- 'til we can get off alone, by ourselves, and really celebrate!

Well, that will just have to wait until later. Now, we have to do our Queen thing. I've hardly got the hang of this - but I'll just follow Gabrielle's lead. She's the 'old hand' at this ritual stuff.

The 'Leto' gradually comes abreast of the escort boats, and there is an imposing figure of a woman on the lead boat who seems to be in charge of the reception committee. She's directing them to position their craft so they can board us. I move forward with Gabi. The woman waits until the sides of the boats are close enough, then lifts her head and casts an enquiring look our way.

"Come forth, and be welcome." Gabrielle says to her. The woman hesitates - then steps aboard. A retinue of three other women accompanies her, and they follow her onto our deck. They are wearing simple white chitons, like ours, but they each have a sash that is draped over one shoulder. The ends hang down, and are held in place by a simple leather girdle, circling their waists. Each sash is a different color, and I think these must denote their rank or position. The first woman's sash is purple. The others are red, gold, and brown. They all are a bit older - maybe thirty seasons, or so. They are tall and have classic Greek coloring - most of the women in the boats are black-headed. No one has my Gabi's hair. Nor any red-heads, like our Amazon sisters from Gaul and Britannia.

The purple-clad woman now speaks. The 'singing' from the other women in the boats stops, the instant she opens her mouth. She bows her head, and the other three immediately go down on their knees, their heads touching their crossed hands on the deck.

"O Great Queens of Gaia's Legend, Lemnos and your subjects welcome you home! The Great Prophecy has been fulfilled! The Chakram and the Dragon have come! We welcome you, and swear our fealty to you! All Hail, Gabrielle and Xena! All Hail, Queens of the Last Amazons! All Hail and Welcome!" Her speaking voice is pleasant, but sounds a bit rustic. They have different inflections, but it is still easily understood as Greek.

The Old Mother and the Goat have moved up and are now standing next to us. There is a deep silence that falls over everyone assembled. The Goat walks forward, and lowers its head, as if it is bowing to the prostrated women. In a thin, reedy voice - strong, for all its great age - the Old Mother speaks:

"OYE! I am the Old Mother who set out from this island ages on ages ago, to be the beacon and the watch

for the coming of the Queens. I have fulfilled the sacred obligation entrusted to me, and I have returned with your Queens. I ask leave of the Amazons of Lemnos to relieve me of my burden, so that I may relinquish the Power, and go to my rest."

The woman raises her head, and nods, once. Then she reaches out, and takes the bell that hangs on its knotted cord around the Goat's neck, and lifts it over the horns. She holds it aloft, and speaks her response:

"Arise, Amalthea. You have served the Amazons well, over the eons. You have steadfastly acted as the eyes and guide for each generation of our Old Mothers, and have guarded them all well. We thank you for your support, and wish you a swift return to your home!"

The Goat raises its head, and looks deeply into the eyes of the speaker. Then it turns, and walks back to the old woman, who stands leaning on her staff next to Gabrielle and me. The Goat butts the old woman - almost affectionately, it seems to me - and for her part, she strokes the spot between Amalthea's eyes. I can see tears beginning to trickle down the Old Mother's face, and I realize that she is going to miss that creature. The next thing, Amalthea steps up to Gabrielle, and gives her the strangest look, almost like it is smiling at her. Then, of course, the Godly thing happens. It just disappears. Our women gasp, as they watch from the deck behind us. The others - the Lemnos women - seem completely unfazed by this. Must be an everyday thing, I guess. Ho, hum. Easy come, easy go.

And then, the Old Woman turns to me. She puts out her hand, reaching out her arm because of the difference in our heights, and she puts her index finger against my forehead, between my eyes. I have to fight a moment of complete panic - which is rare, for me - and I hear Gabi's sharp intake of breath, on the other side of me, and feel her hand clutch my arm. Then the Old Mother mutters something under her breath - I can't make it out - and there is this instant of searing pain, deep inside my head, where her finger meets my skin. I almost black out, it is so strong. I feel this dizziness - then it stops, and the best I can describe of what comes next is this: I feel this 'space' open up inside my mind. And I know, without a doubt, that I will be able to use the InSight for conversations - with Gabi and with the women of Lemnos. The whole Mind of the Tribe is open to me. And I understand what being a "Maker" and a "Mover" really means. For I can give this gift to others. To Gabi. To the women who have come across the sea with us. And to our descendants. It will be a way to keep us safe, and whole; a way for us to keep perfectly in tune with one another; and maybe even a way of peace.

The Old Mother smiles her sightless smile, then comes closer, and kisses me on the spot she touched, then on each cheek. Then she turns and kisses Gabrielle the same.

And then, she suddenly collapses onto the deck. Gabrielle and I kneel instantly on either side of her - and try to help - but she is gone. Gone to her rest - as she called it.

Gabrielle looks across the still form at me, the tears streaming down her own cheeks. I shed a few tears, as well - although I don't really feel sorrow. I guess my conflicted feelings around the Old Mother kept me wary about her. I knew, deep down, that I was facing an exchange of energy with her - but I didn't know how, or when. But I am glad she can be at rest, for she waited a very long time, and it must have been a weary vigil.

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The woman in purple doesn't bat an eyelid at the old woman's death. Her face is impassive. She hangs the Goat's bell around her own neck; then gestures again - and a phalanx of women comes off their boat. They move in to the old woman's body. Gabrielle stands, looking angry. I guess I better sort this out, so we don't get into antagonistic exchanges right off. I put out a warding hand to the woman.

"Wait," I command. I might as well be queenly. And let's face it - I need to be in charge, here. Old Warrior Princess Habits die hard - which may be a good thing, come to think of it. "We wish to know who you are." Gabrielle wipes her tears with her forearm, and gives me a grateful look. She needs to regain her queenly composure.

The woman inclines her head to me, and speaks.

"Rightfully so, my Queen," she replies. "I am Galateia. I am the High Priestess of Lemnos. I hold the Secrets, until the arrival of the Queens, and the Tribe is made whole. I am responsible for the stewardship of our traditions." She pauses, a proud look on her face. "I hope that what I do meets with your approval." And she bows her head, and waits for my answer.

I look at Gabrielle, and she nods her head a fraction, and makes hand signals to tell me she is right with me. We both know, now, that this woman is a power here, and may not be as - accommodating, shall I call it? - as she appears. And communicating in our heads is not a good idea, when it appears that everyone here can do it. We will need to talk about this in private, and figure out how to shield our thoughts.

I nod, and give my answer. "Galateia, both Queen Gabrielle and I are pleased that you have fulfilled the requirements of your office. Please do proceed with the bearing of the Old Mother to shore, so that she may be fittingly prepared for her final rest, and so that the ceremonies for that may be carried out in their proper manner. Gabrielle and I will, of course, preside over her funeral rites. I would assume the next soonest propitious day will be chosen?"

She eyes me speculatively. I think she is figuring it out, now. She'd better have.

"Of course, my Queens. We live to serve you." And with that, she gestures, and the women lift the Old Mother's body, and carry it onto the small boat.

Gabrielle has regained her composure, and she speaks up. "Galateia, please - will you stay on board, with your Acolytes, and come into the harbor with us? The other boat may return now with the Old Mother, so that they may do what must be done."

Galateia nods her head, and the small boat is cast off from our side, and begins to maneuver itself for the return to the harbor.

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As we approach the inner harbor, I run down my list of questions for Galateia.

"What is the town called?"

"It is called Myrina."

"Are there other towns on Lemnos?"

"No, my Queen. We have talked of establishing others, but we have not enough women, yet, to sustain such growth. Many of our women are scattered across the island on farms and vineyards, and some are nomads, moving with the goat herds. Perhaps, now . . ." she trails off.

"Perhaps," I nod, smiling. "We hope our small band of warriors and craftswomen will bring new energy to the island. We also expect about forty more, who are now in Athens, and who will be coming to us as soon as they are able. We are happy just to have survived all that has been endured, and look forward to making new homes for ourselves, here. We bring a good range of skills, though our number is few. Those we lost in the getting here would have added more."

"I am sorry to hear of their loss, My Queen. You will tell us of your journey?"

'Certainly. Gabrielle counts among her titles that of Chief Bard of the Academy of Athens. She will have **many** tales to tell you all. As I am sure you will have your own tales to tell to all of us." She inclines her head in agreement. Good. I get back to my other questions. "How many of you are there, on the island?"

"Some three hundred, my Queen."

"Ah," I nod. "That is a goodly number. Have you a defensive organization?"

She looks oddly at me, and shakes her head slowly from side to side. "There has been little need, my Queen."

"Little need?" I raise my eyebrows at that statement! There is much we need to learn about this place. I am not easy at my ignorance of it. I am not sure it feels comforting, to be the Queens of all we survey, when we have no idea of any of it.

"Are there maps of the island? I would like to see them."

"We have had no need for such maps, my Queen."

"I see, " I reply. "Well - it looks as though there is much to learn - and much to accomplish."

She is silent. I can see that although she has answered my questions - marginally - she is not forthcoming with details. Not comfortable with how much to reveal, yet.

Gabrielle is stoically quiet. She has not participated in this conversation. I think she is probably close to her limit. I can see the tension lines around her eyes, and the weariness there, as well. It has been an emotional upheaval - the whole time since her return, and mine, to the Tribe. Life does not seem to have any rest in it, for us. I make a swift decision, and act on it. The 'Leto' is coming up on the docks, and we will be soon at the end of the journey.

"Galatea, I will direct our companions for the off-loading of our goods and livestock. When we arrive, where will all of them be quartered? I want to get them instructed, now. And also, where will I and Queen Gabrielle, and our Council of Elders, be staying for the time being?"

The woman looks momentarily startled, and responds. "Oh, my Queens - we had thought that you would be coming alone . . . we had not understood there would be so many of you . . . but we will arrange it so that your tribeswomen can board with women of the town, temporarily, until you all decide where you want to live, permanently. As for the Council - how many are there?"

Gabrielle answers - her lips in a thin line. I need to get her settled . . . she's definitely getting out of patience with Galateia . . . something about this woman is bothering my Soulmate, and I really want to know what it is.

"There is four of the Council left. The rest were killed, in our escape from Thessaly. We also have our two wards," she pauses, and gestures toward Io and Paphos, "who accompany Xena and me wherever we go."

Galateia quickly responds. "Of course, Queen Gabrielle. There is a large residence, about halfway up the hill of the town, where there will be adequate rooms for you and all of your retinue. We will gladly show you there, when you are ready. We have not had the confidence to rise up a residence fit for our Queens." And the woman bows her head to both of us, and waits. I am quick to answer that fear, for I see it rising in her eyes. They did not have quite as much faith in the legend as it appears. "I am sure, Galateia, we will be perfectly comfortable in this place you describe, and if it is not owned by any other, we will gladly make a home there." She looks up at me, startled.

Gabrielle motions to Alysia, who comes up next to us. She looks her long in the face, a quick and complex look - and Alysia nods, briefly. I know what this is about.

"This is Alysia - our Regent. She is in charge of getting all of the women who came with us settled in, and will be the person with whom you will coordinate, in this and in all things." Gabrielle and I watch as the two women size each other up. Alysia makes the first move. She brings her arm up in the Amazon salute.

"I am honored to meet you, Galateia. I will be happy to have your assistance, in making sure our women are settled in with their hosts on shore. I look forward to a long and favorable relationship with you."

Galateia returns the salute. "And I am pleased to serve by working with you. If you will excuse us both, my Queens?" she turns an enquiring eye to us. "We can get everything sorted out."

We both nod at them. Then Galateia turns back. "I will have these Acolytes show you and your wards to your quarters. There will be no further festivities or ceremonies until you command them."

I respond. "We thank you for your efforts, and we are glad, truly, to be home. We are all weary, and sore at heart. It will be good to rest and refresh ourselves. We will request your presence in four dawns' time, at our residence, and we will then meet and plan the formal events to come."

Gabi, Io, Paphos, and I follow the Acolytes off the 'Leto.' I manage to have a quiet word with Talia, Ikthenia, Alysia and Eusta, telling them to organize the unloading of the boat, and get everyone settled, after which they can join us at the residence. Then we start up the road from the docks, which winds up the hill between several houses. It is getting dark, and we are all very tired.

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PART III: INSIGHT

Chapter 11: Xena

The residence we are shown into is, in truth, very nice. It reminds me of my mother's inn, in size. There is a large common room, where a fair number of people can gather, a large kitchen off the back of it, and stone stairs leading up to a second floor, where the bedrooms are located. There is also a large bathing room, off the kitchen, which is accessible from a second set of stairs that also connect with the bedroom floor. The rest of the grounds are in darkness. We will explore tomorrow. It is all very comfortable. The Acolytes are silent. Gabrielle thanks them, and they depart. We all stand in the common area, and look at one another.

Gabrielle is the first to speak.

"Well, I don't know about you all, but I am exhausted. I'm going to bed." She stalks off toward the steps.

Io and Paphos look startled; then they both blush simultaneously. I give them a conspiratorial grin.

"I expect you'll be able to find a room to your liking, won't you? If you are hungry, there are probably foodstuffs in the kitchen. If you don't mind, can you settle down here until the others get here?"

They both nod at me. I ruffle Io's hair, and give Paphos a hug. Then I follow my heart up the stairs.

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Up the broad flagstone steps, a long corridor with rooms, and I see one door ajar, and I enter. Gabrielle is standing, looking down at the bed - which looks wonderful, about now! I move up behind her, and she turns and wraps her arms around me. The warmth between us feels good in the chill of the room. I hold her, silently, and we just stand that way for a long moment. Then she sighs.

"Xe?" she whispers. "Are we really home?"

"Uh-huh." I answer. But I know it isn't enough. Not even a beginning. I feel about as 'home' as a fish out of water. "Before we go to sleep, I need you to tell me what your impressions are of Galateia."

"I think she is a very powerful woman, who has been the only leader the tribe has had in a very long time. She pauses.

"And . . ." I said.

"And I think she is passionately protective of this island and all of its inhabitants, and she wants to make damned sure we are the Genuine Article. And she's not above some testing of us, I would guess. And," she adds, after a pensive moment of nibbling on her lower lip, "I think she would like very much to keep hold of all the power she has, if she can get away with it."

"Ah - what a canny judge of character you have become."

She looks at me, trying to figure if I am teasing or serious. I look back at her with my best furrowed eyebrows and intensely serious face. She frowns as she continues her lip-nibbling. The sun is setting, bathing us and everything around us in its orange light.

"The question is - is there a legitimate place for her to exercise her power in such a way that it supports us -

and not force her to be a rival? And more to the point - how much control does she exert on the women of the island? And what role do the rituals of the Goddess play here? And will our Thracian Amazons be welcome here - truly - not just because of some legend, but because they really do want us to live here, and prosper?"

"All very good questions, my love," I say. "Ones we'll have to start answering, and soon.

She sighs again, and then: "Xe?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Will you do whatever it is that needs doing, with that finger-to-the-forehead thing, before we go to bed? I'd like to get it over with, so I don't have to stay up any more tonight wondering about it." She looks up at me with a longing that makes my heart skip a beat.

I look a timeless moment into those wonderful green eyes. "You trust me, don't you?" I ask - knowing full well that she does.

She nods, never taking her eyes off mine. We close for the kiss. It is full, and deep, and our tongues do the dance of communion. I want her to receive this gift in love. She pulls away, and searches my face, her eyes moving rapidly back and forth.

"Does it hurt, much?"

"Only a brief instant, but it is powerful," I say - my voice low and calm.

She swallows convulsively, and I am caught by the loveliness of her throat - so vulnerable with its hollows. I see her looking at my own etched circlet.

"Are you ready?" I ask.

She nods, once. I put my arm around her, steadying her, and bring my index finger up to her brow. I hesitate - then touch the tip to the place between her eyebrows. I feel the surge of power through my arm and hand. She goes rigid, and her eyes close, and she swoons. I have her, though, and hold her up, as her head falls forward, and then she gasps again, her head rears back, and I wrap my arms around her, and hug her close.

And I wait - for the moment next, when her mind door opens, and she sees what I see.

And it comes.

"O, Xena - this is incredible!"

"Yes - I know. Take it slow, love . . . it can be overwhelming, otherwise."

"But, how do you - we - shut it off? Or, rather, dim it down? I don't think I can bear this intensity. It's like standing inside a room full of people who are constantly talking!" She looks panicky. "Xe - help me!" I know how sensitive she always is, to people - especially their moods.

'Listen to me, Gabi. All you have to do is turn your attention away. As if you were staring at a tree, and then you turn your head and your eyes move away from the tree, and you can't see it anymore. Try it, love."

Gabrielle nods, then closes her eyes, and turns her head, slightly, to one side. A look of relief comes over her, and she opens her eyes again, and looks at me.

"Oh. All right. That's . . . better."

"You'll get used to it. At first you will be over-sensitive to the sounds and images, but pretty soon, you won't hear them at all, unless you choose to." I say. "You know - familiarity makes you jaded, so your attention begins to wander away from most of it; at least, I **think** that's how it works."

And now, now that my Love has come fully into her InSight, I have to ask her something again.

"Gabi, love . . . now I want you to think on Galateia again, and tell me what you See."

She looks curiously at me, but readily casts her mind to the woman, and as she does so, I can see the look of startled surprise on her face, followed by rapt attention to that which is playing out across her inner vision. Finally, she turns to me in amazement.

"Xena -this is . . . very odd!"

I nod. Now she sees what I see. "What do you think of her, now?" I ask.

"She is amazing! She has held these women together for years. And I could not see how emotional she is about you and me. Oh, - that is very strange to see! I don't think I've ever quite been . . . worshipped, before. Makes me **very** uncomfortable! Are they all going to be like her, Xe? Because I don't think I will like that, much. . . Oh, no - we're going to have to do something about **that**, right away!"

I laugh - my Gabrielle is so refreshingly unaffected! "I'm sure we can, love. Although - I wouldn't entirely discount your earlier assessment of her, either. I suspect much of what you sensed before is also true."

* * * * *

It is definitely time for sleep. We are both rocked by exhaustion. I am so weary I find myself staggering, as I move to the bench at the foot of the bed, and sit down to take off my chiton and sandals. Gabrielle sinks down next to me, and yawns. I turn, and undo the tabs at each shoulder, and she unfastens the girdle, and her chiton drops to the floor. She kicks off her sandals. She smiles sadly at me.

"Xe - if I had as much energy as would fit on the tip of my little finger, I would dive into love with you, this night."

"How about we just dive into sleep, my sweet?" I take her hand, and opening the palm, I kiss it tenderly.

"Gladly," she murmurs, and I can see her doing so before she finishes the word. I catch her as she droops, and I lay her on the bed. I pull down the covers, move her gently to the side, and cover her. Then with my own jaw-cracking yawn, I crawl in next to her. I have just enough left to drape my arm over her side, grasp her firmly around her middle, and I am following after.

* * * * *

It is late the next afternoon. Gabrielle and I are still in the bed - we have slept almost all this time. We are in our usual comfortable positions - I on my back, half leaning up against several bolsters, and Gabrielle lying on her stomach, one leg and her arm over my legs and torso, her head on my breast. I am stroking the dragon on her back. I can feel the sinuous curves of it, faintly, under my fingertips. She is making small noises that tell me the sensitive nerves under her skin are thrilling to my touch. I am already very aroused from her easy enjoyment of this attention. She is whispering something I can't catch.

"What?"

"Not yet . . . I want to try something . . ."

"Are you all right?" I ask, becoming alarmed. "I mean - after the touch? You seemed all right last night . . . any after-effects?"

"No - I'm fine. I'm not . . . as uncomfortable as I was, at first. I just feel like there's a new room, inside my head, and I'd like to . . . explore it . . . a little."

"Like - how do you mean, explore?"

"Well, have you figured out how to - open the door? I mean, the imaginary door that gives you access to the voices and images?"

"Yeah - I have."

"Well - I'd like to 'open the doors' when we do this . . ." She demonstrates, putting her hand on my breast, her thumb lightly circling my nipple. I feel myself react quickly, but she grabs my other hand with hers, and keeps me from going where I want to be.

"Not yet, Xe - I want to be as aware of you as I can be - like this - with our new minds, before we go any further."

Her voice sounds in my head, and I realize she is taking this new sense of ours to an even more fantastic place, with this impending act of love.

"All right. We might as well see what we can really do."

She looks up at me, her face so full of sweetness it brings the tears immediately to my eyes. Then a look of caution.

"But will this be private, Xe? Since it seems everyone here can do this?"

I shake my head. Goddess, I don't want her to stop! *"We don't know how much it is shared, or by whom, yet. I wouldn't assume anyone's tuned in, love. Please - don't hold back."*

She releases my hand, and then trails her fingers down the full length of me, starting at my breast, running down my ribs and belly to my own curls. I gasp, as I see in my mind's eye the energy current running from the

uncurling dragon on her back, up over her shoulder, down her arm and out through her fingers, and my whole body arches up seeking her hand, and I see vivid swirls of colors, like the sky-arches after it rains, as I suck in a huge lungful of breath, and I nearly swoon with the power of my need.

'Gabrielle . . .'

"Yes, my love - soon . . . My fingers will dance the dance of ecstasy, and I will bring you closer to me than you have ever been -even beyond the world, even between the worlds where we have been."

And her hand dives in, sliding though the heat and wet, and her agile fingers take up their joyous twirling stroking of my swollen sex, and I feel my eyes roll up, and I am in a place of such exquisite sensation, swirling from my mind to my sex and back through my heart, that I can hardly breathe from the awesome, blinding brilliance of the light that blazes through her fingertips into my sex, then up, up through my body into my head, where it explodes across my inner vision. I am barely aware of the long, shuddering gasps, and I spend long moments completely unaware of being physical at all - just riding the sensations of her fingers on that sweet place, as they circle over and over its surface, and I could have that feeling go on forever, and never have enough. And I am suddenly aware that with each pass, I see these glorious patterns of colors, pulsing up the path she has made, through to my inner vision, as they move in rhythm with each stroke. But it will not last, for I am aware now of needing my release, and my breath comes in faster and faster gasps, as it builds and builds to the climax. And then I am crashing down through it, panting in deep bursts of air, feeling the gush of my own nectar surging over her fingers. And as I break through, I follow a golden arc of light that illuminates my entire body, as it surges from me back into her. She is pressed up tight against my side, and over and over I can hear her sweet voice there, too, in my mind.

"My Xena, my Xena, my own. . ."

I am sweating freely, and the bed is soaked beneath us, where my passion has seeped into the sheets. I kiss her over and over, thanking her for everything - for being my own Gabrielle - for not ever leaving me - for never giving up on me - for letting me stay with her through everything. In short, I am incoherent. The power of the InSight is so awesome that I am sobered at the thought of what it might do - and mean - for us.

But that is only a passing flicker - for I am aware now of her need. I surge up, turning her over, and come up on top, straddling her hips. I am leaning on my hands, my hair a white halo over her face. She looks up at me with such joy that I am once again feeling my tears welling up and dropping on her face. I lean in, and take her mouth with mine, and I send my tongue deep into her, making it fill her, as I will soon do to her other sweet mouth. Her eyes close in abandon. And I speak in her mind, as she did to me.

"I will take you far, far through that golden door in your mind, my sweet woman. I will take you through the golden door, through the waves of colors, into the light of Life."

I leave her mouth, reluctantly - I have more places to visit. I trail my tongue down her chin, then her throat, then down between her breasts - making a side trip to each engorged nipple - long enough to make sure they are standing to attention - and then trailing down her midriff to the pool of her belly. Down, down I go. My fingers find her golden curls, wet as mine were, and they dip down to open the floodgates of her own sweet nectar. And again, I see the energy as it swirls around the pattern on my neck, then it, too, travels down my arm, through my hand, and I whisper to her with my mind:

"My tongue is a bee, coming home to sip the golden honey, to bathe in the nectar of my own golden goddess. Then it will wash your golden skin, and lick you dry."

She rises up beneath me, as her passion mounts, and she is transformed. Her face is ecstatic. Her skin is glowing with the energy of her arousal. I plunge my tongue deep inside her, and find the tender bud of her sex, now swollen with her desire. I circle it with my tongue; then grasp it gently between my lips, and I suck. With each gently repeated sucking, she moans, and her hands convulsively grasp my head. She is very close, now, to her release. I plunge in past her sex, and her flood is released, and she arches up and is silent, as her ecstasy reaches its climax. The flood of her nectar pulses, and I lower my lips to her again, and take it into my mouth. Then I slowly lick the skin of her belly; then all over her breasts, and she arches again, as she climaxes a second time. I make my tongue like a cat's, and lick the love nectar, and the sweat - and the taste of her is sweet in my mouth.

She shivers all over. And I reach down, and pull up the cover that has slid down half off the bed. I cover us both, and nestle down next to her - holding her cradled in my arms. She is still regaining her breath. I am silent. I am content. I hold my world in my arms. I am home, here - no matter what awaits us outside the door.

* * * * *

We sleep yet again, after our passion is spent. When I wake once more, I turn onto my back, and find her stretched out on her side next to me, her warmth pressed up against mine. I trace the line of her ear with my finger and she stretches, and yawns, and her sleepy face turns from nestling in my shoulder. Her eyes open and she smiles at me.

"Good morning, Queen Xena." She says - her voice low with passion.

"Good evening, Queen Gabrielle!" I reply, with a grin.

She starts, and then sits up, her hair standing all awry. "No - really?" she says, and I reach out and stroke her back, and she suddenly falls over sideways onto my stomach with a giggle that is straight out of her youth. But I look at her strong, wiry torso, and I'm glad she's a woman grown.

"Ha! I wonder where everyone else is?" She pushes up on her hands, and looks down at me. "Do you think there is any food? I'm starving!"

"Undoubtedly - and I would guess the others are doing the same as us."

"You don't really think . . .!" she says - and looks scandalized.

I amend my statement. "I mean, they are probably getting caught up on their sleep!" Gabrielle arches her eyebrow, and I throw up my arms in exasperation. "Oh, all right!"

She grins at me, and we wrap our arms around one another.

* * * * *

It is a bit later, and we have managed to get dressed in fresh clothes, and are sitting on the window sill of our room, which overlooks a beautiful small walled courtyard below, and beyond, the harbor. We can see the 'Leto' as she floats on her hawser. She must have been unloaded, as she is riding high in the water. I turn my head back to look at my lover's profile.

"Well? What now?" I ask her - for we are getting up when we would normally be finishing a long day of activity.

"I'd like to see if the others are here, and maybe take a look at this courtyard."

I agree. "Sure, that sounds good. But right now, let's find some food. Hard work deserves a reward!"

"Hard work!" she huffs, a look of mock outrage on her face. "Just what do you mean by hard work?" She goes for my ticklish spot, and I am hard pressed to wriggle out of her grasp, as we head for the kitchen.

"Mighty deeds?" I ask, as we bound down the stone steps, "Heroic actions?" "

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Chapter 12: Xena

We walk through the kitchen and then out into the common room. Paphos and Io are sitting close together on a low bench covered with a colorful woven cloth. Their heads are close together, and they are whispering to one another and smiling. Over on the other side of the room, at the long table, Talia, Alysia, Eusta, and Ikthenia - the last of the High Council of Amazons - are seated, partaking of fresh bread, goat cheese, mounded plates of green and red grapes, bowls of olives, and flagons of wine.

Gabrielle walks over to Io and Paphos, and gives them both a hug. They smile up at her, and even from where I stand by the table, I can see that the interval since our arrival was good for them, as well. They look rested, and happy. Gabi talks with them for a moment; then joins me, and we sit down with the others. They pass the food, and we eat like ravenous creatures that have been starved for days. While our hunger and thirst are appeased, they sit in silence, waiting for us.

"Well," I finally say. "How did everyone spend the day? Are you all feeling more rested? Is everything satisfactory with your rooms?"

"Oh, they are very comfortable, Xena." Talia answers. The others nod in agreement. "I have to confess, my Queen, that I am surprised at the buildings in Myrina. They are very solid, and well-constructed. They are beautifully made. They seem to prefer stone. These must be very talented craftswomen. We have a lot to learn from them."

Alysia looks troubled. Gabrielle sees, and looks questioningly at her. "Yes, Alysia?"

"Gabrielle - I can see how our Amazons may have a strange time here - at least until we have all settled in, somewhat. Do you have any notion of how we should . . . counsel them? It is a shock - with everything so different - so new. I, for one, scarcely know where to begin. I feel like the bumpkin from the hill country who just walked into Athens for the first time. And I haven't even been to Athens!"

Gabrielle looks pensive, and she casts her look to me. I nod. *"You know what to say, - just do what you do best."* She is still the best for words - and I confess, I still yearn for action.

"We need a long and honest discussion of everything. As usual, I am going to ask that all of you give us the benefit of your full, frank, and considered opinions. We have a big job ahead of us, and the voices of the all the Amazons of Thessaly will be needed, to decide how we are to proceed." She turns, and beckons. "Io, Paphos - please join us." The two youngsters look surprised, but they rise and come over to the table, and sit next to us.

"I want first of all for Xena to tell you what has occurred since her return to the Tribe, and then when the Old Mother joined us on our journey to Pagasae, and our experience while at sea, our arrival here, and the subsequent events of the past day and night. I apologize for seeming to avoid your question, Talia - but in order to get to the answer; we must first take a different, more winding path than you might think."

I confess my jaw drops - I did not expect that I should have to share the last part with anyone but her! But I can see her point. I can also see that I am likely to get very thirsty! I ask for the flagon, and pour myself a large cup of wine. Then I do my damndest to tell everything as Gabrielle would say it . . . but, then, I'm Xena, so it's probably hopeless! I'll try, though - mostly because I know Gabi will add the little details and embellishments that she can't resist!

"Well, to start with, you should know that the thing where my chakram got transformed into this" . . . I stop and touch the circlet of raised and patterned scarring around the base of my neck . . . "was not done by Artemis or any other Olympian. Before I came out and began to sing that night, I was visited by the spirit of my future self - the Xena who sits before you now. I looked - in that vision - just as I do now. This future Xena gave me the white chiton, and said that I would have to transform the chakram, if it was to be separated from the power of Ares, forever. The power of mindless violence lived on in it, you see. And Ares still had a link to it and - through it - to me. That Xena also told me that by the time I dressed in the chiton, I would have the power to make that transformation happen. So I put on the chiton, and in that instant, the white-haired vision of me stretched out her hand, and touched me on the shoulder. Then she waved her hand, and the chakram lifted off of the peg on which it hung, and floated over to me as I stood there - and I can tell you, my mouth hung open like a door with a broken hinge! Then the white-haired Xena gestured with her hand towards me, and the chakram positioned itself over my head."

I stop and take another long drink of the wine. I look around, and every one of them is sitting silent, and they're hanging on every word - even Gabrielle! I give myself a little mental pat on the back. Who's a bard? Huh!

"Then what happened?" Io asks, in a tiny little voice.

I look at her. I swallow on a suddenly-dry throat, that can't even manage enough spit to un-stick my tongue. Because the vision I've called up is with me, now, and I am feeling all the terror and pain all over again. Some bard, after all. Best leave it to the expert.

And Gabrielle's voice answers, as she looks at me with all her love and pain in her eyes. "The chakram

changed shape - the dark and the light halves merged, and the center became open once more, as it had been before India, and widened itself just enough - and dropped down over Xena's head. And as it came to rest at the place where her neck meets her shoulders . . ." She reaches over and gently her fingertips brush the hollow at the base of my throat, and I shiver at her touch. ". . . It became one with her. Wherever its surface touched her skin, it attached itself, and transformed, and regained the old pattern that it once bore. But this time, it was a pattern in her living flesh."

The whole group is silent.

I sigh. "But that isn't all . . . because as we were trying to find out what had happened to the other Amazons, see how things fared in Amphipolis, and discover what changes had come to the wide world while we had been gone - I began to see visions - possible truths and realities that I was not happy to see - for they all foretold ill for the Amazons, and for Gabi, and for myself. I was afraid, because I did not know how to tell **if** they were truth - and **which** - or if they were only my crazy hallucinations."

I bow my head. This is the really hard part. This is where I tell them about Eponin. Take a deep breath, Xena. Take it slow. They are your friends, after all. But my tongue is stuck, again. And, worse - I feel tears roll down my face! I chide myself - this is not the Warrior Princess image, Xena.

Ikthenia, the quietest of the Council, the Mistress of Harvest, raises her hand in obvious protest. She turns to Gabi, who sits with her hand reassuring on my back.

"Can't we just take it on faith that neither of you could do anything to change the outcome? We know what happened. We may not have known the exact 'how' of it - but we **do** know how desperately you tried to do the best for all of us. We don't ever expect that you can be Goddesses, my Queens. We're just happy that you are our leaders."

Gabrielle nods. "I know, Ikthenia."

"And please," Ikthenia continues, now turning to me. "Don't carry guilt for this, Xena! I think all of us have seen our own deaths, in some way - but we don't expect to avoid them. Seen one another's deaths too - or, at least, a foreboding of them. Ask Talia."

Talia leans across the table, and takes my hand in hers.

"Xena - look at me."

I raise my eyes to them, my misery plain.

"Xena - no one in this tribe blames you for Eponin's death. Not one of us! Especially, I do not blame you."

"But I knew it would happen, Talia - before 'Poni left the village! And I didn't call her back. I didn't forbid her to go. I didn't warn her."

Talia smiled. "As long as I knew my 'Poni, Xena, I knew that she always understood the risks of being an Amazon. It was a matter of pride with her, that she would bravely go and do what was necessary - always, she was like that. Do you think she would have heeded your warning? Think again. Eponin, too, had the 'Greater Good' in mind - and she lived by it - and died by it."

Gabrielle strokes my arm. "Xena, I don't think any of the Council is unhappy with the fact that you have these abilities. And I also don't think they are expecting you to have mastered them instantly! You have had to feel your way forward in the midst of a huge upheaval - with all kinds of things happening at once. You need to give yourself credit for steering us to a path that took us where we needed to go. And if some of us chose to leave this life, or stay behind - those choices helped to get us here, too."

I will accept their judgment. I know I will have to grow more adept at these new senses and abilities I have acquired. I will not again go down the long path of remorse and redemption. That has already passed.

"Well, thank you - all of you." I pass my hands over my face. "Well, then - to go on - it was me, again, who got us all through the firestorm. Although - to be fair - Gabrielle had more to do with it than she knows. . ." I look apologetically at her.

"I did?" she gapes at me.

"O, yes, my love . . . you underestimate your own power. The power of the Dragon is not ever dissipated. Akemi should have told you, but there was not a lot of time, then - and so she concentrated on the part you would need to know for your own defense, in Jappa. The Dragon was a Fire Dragon - and they fight fire, as well as lightning bolts and power surges from Gods and Demons. And if they are called out - as yours was called out in the firestorm - to sacrifice itself in such a battle, it is transmuted into a Water Dragon. That is what you have, now. It has a different kind of power. The kind of power you will need for this new life on Lemnos."

Gabrielle is taking it all in. "So what was your part?"

"Well, I was the one who called out your Dragon. I knew that you and I would never survive, unless it could spread itself over us, to protect us from the horrific heat. So I called it out. I just opened my mind, and the word of Summoning came."

Alysia speaks up. Her strong features have been expressing deep feelings, though she has been quiet, until now.

"Did you know about the Old Mother, before Althaia returned to tell us of her?"

I nod yes. All right, I will have to explain this, as well. I need another drink. Too bad there is no port. I don't think I want to be sober, at the end of all this talking. It's not my nature, to be so wordy!

"Yes, I did. I began hearing her voice in my head, when we were coming back from Amphipolis."

They look at me, then at each other. I look at Gabrielle. I am shamelessly hoping that she will rescue me, now, and take up the tale. I am so unused to this! All I want is to go back upstairs and burrow into the blankets, and stay there for at least another night and day! Then I think maybe that would mean more time alone with Gabrielle, and so maybe I should tell the rest, or we'll be here for hours - the way she likes to spellbind her audiences!

Gabrielle looks sympathetically at me - I know she hears me, in her head - and she knows I get so twitchy! I sigh, and push myself up off the bench.

"All right, that's enough for one sitting!" I growl. "You all know me - I have to take a walk, or something! I

can't talk for so long. I get crazy!"

They laugh, and shake their heads. They do know.

Gabrielle speaks. "All right, everyone. Let's take a break from this. We'll resume the council tomorrow - at the morning meal."

And she puts her arm though mine, and walks me out the back archway, that leads to that nice little low-walled garden with a great view of the stars. My woman knows what I need. Oh yes she does.

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Chapter 13: Gabrielle

As the two of us stroll out into the courtyard, I can tell that Xena is relieved. She has talked more in the past candle-mark or so than she has in a long time. It takes it out of her. As long as I've known her, she has always been a woman of action, and few words. My new Xena is surprising me. She jokes about the need to move - but I think it isn't so much that as a need for some deep quiet, and space inside her head, to keep going with the story, and think how to say it all.

We sit on a stone seat, between two currant bushes. They are heavy with their fruit, and I strip off a couple of small bunches of the sweet/tart little red globes, and hold up one bunch for her. She takes them between her teeth, right from my fingers. I eat my bunch. The sharp explosion of juice is good. I take her hand: something as simple as this. What a long, terrible lifetime it has been, just to have a place to sit, in quiet, together. Xena leans back, and looks up at the starry sky. It is good. The silence is comfortable. I know she will speak only when she desires.

I ponder the wonder of this new sense she has awakened in me. We can sit, now in perfect silence - and have endless conversation without moving our mouths or making a sound. And if we don't want to speak thus, we can 'cloak' ourselves, so that our thoughts are our own.

I think about what she said, about the Dragon . . . a Water Dragon. I have not actually seen it, since the firestorm. Xe has described it to me, but I would dearly love to have a view of it. Possibly I can ask Io to draw it for me. She is good with that . . . then I think of Io, and I hope that she is as happy as she seemed, tonight. I think maybe Paphos is as good a healer as Talia, in her own way. A healer of the heart. . . .

Xena puts her arm around my shoulders, and pulls me close. Our two heads are touching. I turn my head, letting her incredibly soft hair brush against my cheek. It is wavier, now, too, since the change. I wonder if mine is going white. It is too short for me to tell. I'll have to ask Xe . . .

"Thanks for the quiet." Xena says - her voice low, and soft.

"You know I love it, too." I answer. "I'm not always into telling stories."

"Ah . . . but you are often thinking about them!" she teases me. And I realize that she can hear that, too, if she chooses. 'You are going to have a lot of telling to do. These women don't know our history, Gabrielle - only

their version of our legend. You'd better take out those tales and brush them off . . . because I would wager they are going to want to hear them. And not just your stories of me . . . you'll have to tell your own, as well."

I sigh. She's right, of course . . . and then I am suddenly awash with a surge of energy that sets me reeling, and leaves me panting for breath. Xena sit up in alarm and takes my face in her hands.

"What is it, Gabi? What's wrong?"

I look at her, speechless. All I can do is shake my head. The new sense is astounding. If this is what it is going to feel like all the time, I don't know if I'm going to like it. . .

"No, Xe - it's all right. I . . . I think I just had another one of those vision things. . . I'll be all right."

She looks at me curiously. "Tell me about it - what was it like?"

"Well, I suddenly saw the whole thing . . . as if someone had just described it all to me. Or like I was reading a scroll and the scene unfolded in front of my eyes. I . . . it's all figured out! I know what to do! I mean, about Galateia."

"Well, are you going to tell me?" She smiles, and leans in real close, her hands still cupping my face. "Or do I have to tease it out of you?" And her lips cover mine, and I can taste the currant on them.

"Oh, sure - why not?" I murmur, unwilling to stop for words.

"All right," Xena's voice suddenly sounds in my head, as she continues to kiss me. *"How about having your nut bread and eating it too?"* She pulls back, and grins mischievously at me.

"Oh, no - Xe - I'm not ready for that! I can't concentrate and make any sense while kissing passionately, and have a conversation at the same time! I don't care if it's out loud or in my head!"

She does a mock-growl. "Oh, have it your own way. Tell me straight out, and I'll be good . . . for a while. . ."

"It's going to be simple. We just take turns exchanging stories. I mean, we have a new ritual - we'll set it up so it happens regularly - say, at each full moon, or something auspicious like that. And we take turns. I tell the story of Xena and Gabrielle, and the Amazons and the Romans, and everything - and they tell us their history. It'll take a while, but it will be worth the time. They'll get to know us - and we'll know them. And it will bond us like nothing else could!" I ponder what I've described . . . and so does she.

"You know - that's a good idea!"

"Uh huh . . . I wonder if Galateia is much for the telling . . . or maybe they have a chief bard. Anyway, it'll be good for Paphos, too - she can write the stories down, as they are told. She'll get really good practice." And then my mind is off - thinking about how to organize this new ritual - and where to have it, and when to start. .

"Are you going to get it all figured out tonight, or can you take some time to sleep, occasionally?" Xena's drawl jolts me out of my busy planning. I sink back next to her on the bench, and look up at the starry night. The sound of the sea murmurs in the distance.

"Oh, I guess I let some of it wait until tomorrow." I glance sideways at her. "You know, you aren't half-bad as

a Bard, yourself . . . when you are cornered and can't get out of it!"

She smiles ruefully. "Oh yeah - just what I like to do! Talk a lot." She shakes her head. "Well, tomorrow, after more of that, I want to get out and do some exploring around the town. I also think maybe we should talk to the Council and Galateia and her brood about organizing some kind of a 'royal progress' - you know, a procession around the island, so we can meet the rest of the women we are supposed to be governing, and so I can assess the state of things, and we can see where the Sacred sites are located, and how they are cared for."

"Oh, that's good! And it makes sense, because then the women of Lemnos don't have to come to us - we can go to them. They won't have their normal routines disrupted on account of us." I am really pleased at this idea.

Xena nods. "Oh, yeah - I also want to have a closer conversation with Galateia about defense. When I asked her about that, she just gave me a strange look and said that they didn't have much call for it. I want to know exactly what that means." She looks skeptical. So must I. It is hard to conceive of a place anywhere in the Known World that has little need of defense!

"Well, my love - tomorrow will be another long day. Do you think we can retire, now, and try to get some sleep?" I give her hand a little shake.

She looks at me fondly. "I can't think of anything I like doing better with you - except making love and being awake with you!"

And we exit the peaceful courtyard, and go to our bed.

* * * * *

The next morning we are back at the table with the Council. Io and Paphos, too, are back. They are eager for more - and I am again sorry that we have so little time to spend with them. Probably even less, as we get deeper into governing, here.

And Xena is in fine form! She seems more relaxed in her telling. Of course, it helps that I have promised her that when we are done talking, we will go out into the town, and finally see some of our new environment!

"You all know what happened when we were at sea, and the winds died, and we were becalmed." Xena squirmed a bit on the bench, and then looked up ruefully at everyone.

"Well, that was my doing, too."

Eusta's voice rises in protest. "Oh, please, Xena! You are trying to tell us that you can stop the winds?" Xena hunches her shoulders, pulling her head down into her neck. She has a pained expression. "Eusta, I'm not **trying** to tell you - I **am** telling you! That's why the Old Mother was so put out with me, there on the deck. You saw that exchange between us. You probably even heard what she said! Did you think she was just a raving senile old woman?"

Eusta gapes at Xena. Ikthenia, her quiet hazel eyes flashing something close to anger, remonstrates with her before I can get my own mouth open.

"Eusta - You need to remember that we have all seen the ways of the Goddess, in the days of Artemis, Why shouldn't Xena have received some of that power, once it was loosed from the grip of the Olympians? And if Gaia has been guiding her, and Gabrielle, from their birth - do you think the ways of Gaia are any less potent, or less available to us all? I have been Mistress of the Harvest for long enough in our own Amazon territory, to have seen much that I would call strange. But I never doubted what I saw!"

Eusta lashes back. "Very well; I accept what you are saying, Xena. But you must forgive me! I have only known one Goddess - Artemis - and I never tried to mind much of the foolishness I heard about the other Olympians. My allegiance was to Her. And now, she has deserted me, and I hardly know what use I am to be, in this new place, and everything so strange and unsettling!" And she runs her fingers distractedly through her short grey locks, causing them to go all awry. She looks tired and careworn.

I reach out and put my hands over hers, on the table. She keeps her hands still, but I can feel her stiffen against the unaccustomed contact.

"Look . . . I know how you are feeling. I am sad, too, at all that has been swept away from us. But Xena and I will find a way for all of us to grow comfortable here, in this new place. We will help everyone. We will help you. You are our Guardian of the Mysteries. That has not changed. Those mysteries are still revered, and sacred to us. And we will honor them all our days." I look around at all of these courageous, capable women, who have worked so hard all their lives to make a Tribe of Amazons that would live in legends - and I am thankful yet again that I have been chosen to lead such as these.

"I know this is hard - because you have all held positions of responsibility for our Tribe in Thessaly, and now we are in a strange place, and there are already women here who seem to do what you did, back home. I think maybe you are worried that Xena and I may not have any use for you, here, - being afraid maybe that we would want changes because we are now Queens of this entire island, and all the Amazons living here. Maybe you are wondering if we will change, and grow away from you and the others. You never had us for very long, back home, anyway. Am I being too direct? Are my words frightening you?"

I seek out each face - each staunch friend we have learned to love and respect. I hold their attention, and I reach out with my mind, and listen as they respond. And I can see that the love and the fear are equally strong, in their hearts. Love for us - that was not won without cost. Fear that events will spin us away from them - and stubborn determination that they would not have it so. And I am filled with love for them, all over again. I look at Xena, and the question flies between us. *"Xe? Are they ready for this? Can you give them the gift, too?"*

"Only if they choose it, Gabrielle. They must have the freedom to say no. And not suffer for either the gaining or the loss of it."

I nod, once. And then I go on - for we must go on, and walk fearlessly over the edge - and find out what holds us up, in the end.

"Then let us tell them, Xe. Tell them, and let them choose." And I keep on with the telling.

"My sisters - on the 'Leto,' when the Old Mother rebuked Xena, she was bringing her back to the fact that she had been given a gift. It was a gift of power that would make a difference for all of us, eventually. And it was a gift that Xena was not ready to accept - especially after the murder of Eponin and Io's ordeal at Amphipolis. But the power is very like Pandora's Box - it is not easily avoided, once it has been used. And

she would have been going against the very thing we were trying to accomplish - to get us all safely to Lemnos, and to make a life for ourselves, here - if she were to turn away from it. And so her dilemma became our own, as we sat motionless in the Aegean, and waited for Xena to choose. To choose to embrace this, or reject it."

I look at Xena, and her face has a look of passion, and pain. And now she speaks to them.

"What Gabrielle is trying to say is that it is more than just my power. Once I surrendered to the power inside me, and made it my own, the wind freshened, and our ship carried us swiftly here. And as we came into view of the island, I became aware of the Song of Lemnos - the silent voices of the women here, who were calling out to us as we came closer and closer to land. You could not hear them, but I could - and I could understand their song - for it was sent from their minds to mine. And they sang of the legend of the Two Queens - of the Chakram and the Dragon - and of their joy that we were finally to come home to them. Once we got close enough, we found that Gabrielle could hear them - although she couldn't understand the words. They sang us all the way into the harbor."

They sit, silent, listening. I can feel their wonder, and their unease. I want them to not be afraid. I want their strength to prevail. And then I speak.

"All of you saw the encounter between Xena and the Old Mother, just before she passed on . . . You saw the effect it had on Xena. Did you wonder what was happening? Did you understand any of it?"

Alysia's calm voice responds. "Well, my dear - I thought it must be some kind of ritual - for it very much looked to me like a passing on of some aspect of her self. Am I right?"

Xena nods. "Mostly . . . what she shared - or, rather, what she gave me - was the ability to empower others with the InSight." She leans forward, her voice taking on an intensity that causes them all to stiffen. "Now here it is. I will not hide this from you, because it is your rightful heritage and birthright - although you do not know this is so. This InSight is given to every Amazon who is born of Lemnos. It is passed on, in their girl children. It is how they live their lives, here, and how they do so peacefully. And it is open to all of you, as well. It is only for you to say, if you will trust that it is good, and that it can be borne without harm to you. It is only for you to say, if you will choose it, as I chose it. I would have you all think about it, and let me know your decisions. There is no dishonor in living without this ability, if choose to reject it, You will be loved, and honored, and respected, and continue to guide us in your capacities - even as you do now." And she sits back, quiet, and waits.

Talia is the first to respond. I have been wondering how she will take this. Now I will know.

"Well, my Queens, you have indeed given us something to think about! But I, for one, do not expect to think long. I am eager to gain a sense that will help me as a healer, and I would welcome the depth of understanding it seems to give all who have use of it. You are our best and first examples of what it can mean. And I will gladly submit."

I can see Alysia has been deep in thought. She listens to Talia, and then she sits back on the bench and speaks.

"I have thought that what you are being asked to accomplish as the Queens of all the women of Lemnos - ourselves included - is a large undertaking for even the most gifted of women - which you surely are! But you will need our help. Three and a half hundreds of women are a handful. And if the majority of them are already able to use this power, and do well by it, then I say let the rest of us gain it, as well. Why should we be at any

disadvantage in coming here? We have much to learn, from them, and will have our own knowledge and skills to impart - and I say let us do so with every bit as much talent and understanding and ability as have those who are already here. So let me echo Talia. I am ready."

Eusta is looking glum. She is shaking her head, and sighing a lot as the others speak. I think I know what her choice will be, even without using the InSight.

"My Queens," she begins. "I am sorrier than I can say, about all that has befallen us since Artemis left us. It has left the only home I have known a smoking ruin. It has torn from me many of the friends I have grown up with, and loved. It has brought nothing but change; some possibly good change - as you yourselves represent. Unwelcome change - such as the uprooting of us all, and this untried and untested new life upon this sea-surrounded island. I am numbed and grief-stricken. I am disoriented. I am confounded. I have lost my place, my function, and my good sense. I am hard-put to use what little I have left of my own poor wits, let alone adding more layers to my confusion. I will respectfully decline to submit to any change of consciousness for myself. I am suddenly an old woman, past her prime, and the future does not seem happy to me."

I am saddened beyond measure by her words. I feel the tears prick in my eyes, and I look at her with a feeling of remorse. Have we brought her to this? And how many others of our own, silent for now, have we brought along with the same unhappiness?

I feel I must ask her pardon.

"Eusta, I am deeply sorry that you are in such a state. I beg your forgiveness for any part I have played in causing you this pain."

She looks at me with weary eyes. "It is not your fault - nor is it Xena's. Our lives are meant to run a course, and many of us never see the outcome, or expect to know what is best for us. We just live, from day to day, and try to do our best with what we are given. I have come with you to this place, because it did not seem to be my time. I hope that I will grow to love it here, as I did our village and the Sacred Grove - because it would be good to grow old, and die, in a place that feels like home."

Xena's voice, husky with emotion, speaks up. "Eusta, we will do all in our power to have it be so - for you, and for all of us who have come here. I pledge it to you." I look over at her, and she is giving Eusta the Amazon salute. And her face is grave.

Ikthenia heaves a sigh. "Well, my Queens, and others of this Council have spoken, and spoken well and true. I must say that in my years as the Mistress of the Harvest, I have seen more seasons of growth and fruition, rest and decay - for that is part of the cycle created by Gaia, and acted out by Demeter and Persephone of the Olympians. And it has always been a sacred mystery to me, and one that I have always been happy to honor. There is much deep wisdom and knowledge in what I must do, every season, to ensure the fruitful bearing of the vines, and the food that we gather and harvest for our tables. And I know the deep knowledge that I already possess would only be enhanced by the addition of such InSight as you may give me, Xena. I am sad for Eusta, because I know how deeply she has revered and taken as her duty the worship of our late Goddess Artemis. I, for one, bear some anger at the Goddess, for not giving us enough wisdom of the Secrets of Gaia to permit us to embrace Her in the same way. Maybe this is what we will gain, by coming here. I hope it is so. I will do my best to help Eusta and any others who feel at a loss, so that we can grow peaceful and comfortable here."

Xena now turns her eyes to Io and Paphos, who are sitting at the end of the table, and who have been listening to their Elders with quiet respect. And mine follow hers.

"Io? Paphos? What are your wishes?"

They look at us, then at each other. They are hesitant to speak. They are not often taken into the high council of the Amazons, and asked for their opinion. They will learn.

"I . . . I am not used to speaking in this way, among you Counselors. I am just a young woman, and I have not learned near enough to feel like I am wise about anything. But, O, Xena! I do so want to be wiser, and understand much of life that I do not! I want to be brave, and unafraid of life! I want to feel that I have my own power, inside me, that I can depend on to help me to learn about life! And most of all - I want to be like you! I will gladly learn anything you want to teach me, and I will place myself under your hands, always!"

Io's passionate outburst brings a smile to my face, and I can see Xena is taken aback by it, too. The Councilwomen's faces break into grins, too - even Eusta. The exuberance of youth is a tonic for us all. Io's face is flushed scarlet, but she looks determined. Good for her!

Paphos hugs her sweetheart; then she looks up shyly at all of us, who are waiting for her reply.

"I am not as confident as Io. Maybe it's because I . . . well, I am not as quick with words as I would like to be. But I want so much to do what Queen Gabrielle has promised! To learn the barding way, and to record the history of our Tribe, and of the Amazons - in this place, too . . . O, if they haven't already done so! . . . Well, anyway - I like how it has made Queen Gabrielle even wiser than she seemed to be - when she came back to the Tribe. And, honestly? I am so tired of battle, and fighting, and having to defend ourselves all the time! And I'm not even that old, to have seen so much of that! If knowing this kind of way will mean that we can all get along better, and not have to fight, I will happily let Xena do whatever it is she does, to give me a peaceful and happy life - especially if I can share it with Io!"

I think - if these are representative of all our Amazons, we will have done well. I pour out wine for all around the table, and I raise my cup to them.

"My wise Council - I drink to you - to your courage, to your need to speak your minds freely, and to the choices you have made. I have faith that the rest of our Tribe will do so, as well, and with the same dignity and passion as you have exhibited. Xena and I will abide by your decisions." And I drain my cup. What a story this will be, someday!

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Chapter 14: Xena

Well, that's done it. I am sobered by the answers they have given us. I have a nest of small birds fluttering about in my guts, too. I still feel uneasy with this new power, and I am astonished at the speed with which everything seems to be unfolding, here. I look at Gabrielle, hoping for some understanding to come from her, because right now, all I can think is that I want some space, before I have to do this finger-to-the-forehead thing. I don't even know if it will work with them! Except, in my heart, I do know. So what am I afraid of, exactly?

Gabrielle turns her head sharply, and her emerald eyes find mine, and she understands. I can see it - instantly. She kindly suggests that we all take a break. I lurch up out of my seat, and head for the courtyard. I can hear

her voice, behind me, talking in low tones to the others. Making apologies, I shouldn't wonder. Gods! I can be so abrupt! I stalk over to the low wall opposite the arch, and stand, looking out over the hillside below, and the roofs of the houses, and the harbor - so brilliant blue and serene, beyond. I wish I felt as calm. A nagging anxiety tugs at me. I must discover what it is, before we go any further . . .

I feel a warm hand on my back, and she is by my side. She looks out over the harbor. She is silent. I thank her, in my mind, and her response is instant.

"I understand . . . it is strange. It is new. It is powerful."

I stand as if carved from stone.

Her voice, low and soft, caresses my ear. "This is a good spot, I think. We'll have a statue of Eponin, here. Looking out over the harbor. Does that seem good, to you?"

I turn, and my eyes must seem strange. I can't get my face to work right - it feels stiff, like a mask. Like a statue's . . . She looks up at me, so much compassion in her . . . she reaches up her hand to my cheek. And my eyes are suddenly full of tears. And she kisses me, softly.

"This is our destiny, Xe. It is all we are meant to do. We can but go on, into the future, and see what it will bring."

"But what if it is too much, for some of them? I don't want to make any mistakes, with this! I couldn't bear it, if anyone would find it too much, and have it be too late . . . and no way to take it back!" There it is - part of what has frightened me.

She waits. She knows there is more.

"And I don't know how this will go - this, now, with them. I have only done this once, Gabi. With you - last night. I don't know what it might do . . . to me. Over and over, and each time, the surge of power, and the after-shock." There, it is all said. I am ashamed. I look away. The great Xena - afraid of a little power surge. It is not as much as some of the worst I've endured - torture, wounds, death, and the torment of the Gods . . . but this is more a fear of **being** god-like.

She twines her arm around my waist, and rests her head on my shoulder.

"I know, love." And her mind caresses my mind, and soothes it. *"It is just energy, Xe. We all have it. You are just showing them the path that is already waiting, inside each of them. It is not energy that is lost to you, by giving it to them. It is not you, having more energy than they have, and bestowing it upon them, like some Olympian. You are making the connection, and helping them see their door. That is all. Your finger is pointing the way. The pain is because the door is stiff, from not having been used. That is all. It really is a simple thing."*

I wipe the tears from my eyes, and my smile comes back. She is my anchor. She is my calm Aegean Sea.

"Shall we go in?" I say. And we do.

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In the end, it is a simple thing. Each of them comes over to me, in an alcove off the main room, and I explain to them exactly what will happen - how it will feel, and what they will experience, and how they will feel afterwards. I also give them a word of advice about the effect it can have on - certain other activities! And then I gently touch my finger to their foreheads, and the same reaction that I felt, and that I saw in Gabrielle, happens to each of them. And they are astonished, and exhilarated, and amazed.

And while all that is happening, Gabrielle is sitting out in the courtyard with Eusta, deep in conversation, and with part of my InSight, I am monitoring them - relieved to know that Gabrielle is being a good friend, a good Queen, and a healer, too.

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After, when all have returned to their private selves, Gabrielle and I go out, and have a stroll around the town, and see all that there is to see. I haven't given up my accustomed need to scope out any new territory, and my eye still assesses in terms of fortification, defensibility, and strategic places. Old habits die hard. And it is, in truth, a goodly settlement. And I think it **will** be home. We walk the pitched streets - some so steep they have to zigzag in order to get up the sides of the hill. It feels good to get out and stretch our legs. There are cats everywhere, basking in the sunlight, lying about on the walls. Many pots of brilliant flowers grow amidst the white walls and doorways, deep embrasures, and secluded archways. Many homes have gnarled old grapevines growing up the sides of the buildings, and the vines arch over the streets, and large bunches of the fruit hang above our heads, as we walk underneath their cool green canopies. These help to naturally shade the streets from the heat of the sun. We also notice that the doors have all been stained a deep blue color, and each has a small sheaf of wheat stalks, tied in a small bundle, hanging from a spike in the wood. Most of the faces we see are open, and friendly - lots of shy smiles from them. I would guess that they know who we are, by now. News travels faster even than usual - when all minds are attuned to one another, as theirs must be. Some seem startled. Perhaps they never expect to see such legends walking around like ordinary women. I like that - and decide that this is how we always should be, to them: neighbors, family, someone to stop in on and ask for advice, someone to help raise a roof, or bring a child into life.

My Gabrielle is radiant, in the sunshine. She has the old spring in her step, and the buoyant optimism seems to be coming back to her. I am thankful that she is in such good health - that we both are, really. And even though I can see in this bright sun that her hair has changed to a kind of silvery white-gold color, she looks tanned and fit.

The trials of the past month have been endured. And overcome. I suddenly find happiness surging up inside of me. My face must have a huge, silly grin - because Gabi stops, and looks long in my face, and her eyes crinkle with her own smile.

"Well, I can't say the old 'dinar for your thoughts' anymore, can I? I already know them!"

"Hmmm . . . do they have money in this place, I wonder? How do you suppose they count wealth? Or trade for goods and services? Do they even need to?"

"No idea." She smiles even more. "What a delight it will be - to find out! But you haven't really answered my question."

"No?"

"No. You are deflecting me." She stops, patient for my answer.

I look searchingly into her face. And I whisper, "I am deliriously happy - for only the second time in my life."

"And when was the first?" She whispers back, her face intense and joyous.

"When you first said to me that you loved me."

"Ah, yes."

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Chapter 15: Gabrielle

When we return from our walk, the day is waning. Paphos and Alysia are in the kitchen, preparing the meal. I smell the delicious odor of some good fish. I forgot that they would eat a lot of the bounty of the sea, here. The others are resting, they tell us. Paphos gives us each a cup, and urges us to drink. A sparkle is in her eyes.

"What is it?" Xena asks, sniffing at hers. Paphos grins. "Just try it - tell me what you think!"

Xena drinks, thirstily. She licks her lips, and breaks out in a huge smile. "Lemons!" she says. "I haven't tasted them in a long time!"

I take a deep drink of mine. Lemons, yes - and honey, too. Oh, it is good, and cold. I drain the cup, and hold it out for more. Paphos obliges. We sit at the table where they are chopping some vegetables.

"Paphos, does Io know where all the rest of our women are staying, around the town?" I ask. She nods. "How about you find her, and ask her to go and tell all of them to come here, after the evening meal, for a meeting."

"Certainly, my Queen." She finishes chopping the last few bits, wipes her hands, and turns to Alysia. "Will you finish these, then? I'll be right back."

"Go on: off with you!" Alysia smiles.

"Oh, and Paphos?" I call to her.

"Yes, my Queen?" She turns at the doorway.

"It's Gabrielle and Xena, all right? No more of this 'My Queen' thing . . . you're family, now, to us. Both you and Io. Tell her!"

Paphos blushes up to her hair, and the look of joy on her face is so intense I almost lose it, right there. Xe's hand is on my shoulder. "*Oh, my love! Yes!*"

I look up to find Alysia looking at both of us with thoughtful intensity.

"It's been coming, Alysia - since almost right after my return. Remember their escapade before the Judging?"

Alysia smiles at both of us. "Oh yes, my Queen. I remember well. I thought you'd probably end up with two daughters, out of that one!" I grin at Xena, and we both must look like we've won a great prize. And, in fact, we have.

Now, Alysia, what can we do to help with the cooking?" And we settle happily into the domestic routine of the evening meal. The others wander down from their rooms, and Paphos returns to tell us, shyly, that Io has gone to do our bidding.

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The common room is full of Amazons. They are abuzz with conversation, as they tell of their first two days living with the women of Myrina. Xena and I allow this to go on for some time, because we both feel that the sharing will help all to adjust to the new surroundings more readily. The Council is seated with us at the long table, across one end of the room. Io and Paphos are with their friends, in the larger group.

"Alysia, will you start by introducing yourself in your new role as Regent?" I ask her, mentally.

"With pleasure, my Queens!" She stands up, and waits. Within moments, the group is quieting down, and finding seats on the floor and side benches.

"Amazons! Late of Thessaly and now of Myrina and Lemnos! I greet you in this, the new home of our Queens Gabrielle and Xena! I greet you - as your new Regent. Will you accept me in this way, to be a Steward to you?" She looks at them calmly, and waits for their response.

"OYE!" They acclaim with one voice. And she bows her head, and gives them the Amazon salute. Then she turns, and gestures toward us.

"So be it," she says. "And now, your Queens have much to share with you!" And she sits back down at the table.

'Xe - I'll take the lead, if it's all right with you.'

She nods, and I get up, walk around the table, and move down into the group of women. I sit cross-legged on a low cushion, so that they are all around me.

"I would guess that you are all full of things you want to tell us, too. Suppose we take turns - because I confess, I am very curious about our new sisters, and how things have fared for you all. Who wants to begin?"

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Myrina, Day 3. The meeting with our Amazons of Thessaly.

. . . What is revealed, over the next candle mark or two, is an interesting mixture of sights, sounds and impressions. On the whole, they have found their Lemnos counterparts to be open, friendly, and eager to get to know them. There has already been much exchanging of stories and information. They seem quick to laughter, and are a talented people. Our Amazons seem relieved to be in a place where it is peaceful - indeed, they can't seem to get over how calm and quiet it is in the town. They note that there is little evidence of weapons, or defensive structures or activities. No one seems to have duties that would generally be associated with defense or warrior skills.

Another thing is that many of them remark on how their hosts 'seem to know what we are going to say, before we say it.' They have noticed that their needs are anticipated uncannily; that they 'hardly have to say anything.' Xena, the Council, and I exchange mental notes, at this. But the tribeswomen are innocent of the cause, and it is a source of quiet pleasure to us that they seem to accept it naturally.

Xena then leads the conversation in another direction, asking about the work that the women do, and if any of them have found kinship with their own skills and abilities. There is a new rush of enthusiastic conversation, as they reveal that there is, indeed, much crossover - and several are curious about some of the Myrinian skills of sailing, fishing, stonemasonry, weaving, pottery, pedagogy, and the religious Mysteries of Gaia. So it looks like there are pathways for them, after all. And that is good. I don't want them to feel useless, or as if their old skills - woodcraft, leatherwork, horse wrangling, Artemis-worship, and hunting - cannot translate to some new ones. They can focus on learning new skills, and building new lives for themselves on Lemnos. . .

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My mind is racing, as I listen to their excited and happy voices. And it looks like they will have willing teachers. And if we can get them to accept the InSight, that process may not take as long as it would, otherwise. For I wonder at how fast they could assimilate new ideas and methods by tapping into the group InSight. It is exciting to think about.

"Whoa, there, Partner!" I see Xena looking at me with deep amusement.

"What? Just because I'm excited at the possibilities?" I answer her in my head.

"No, love - but wouldn't it be simpler just to get on with it?" Her eyebrows lift, and I get that lopsided grin of hers. I love the way her eyebrows arch, when she does that. . Whoa, Gabrielle. Keep your mind where it needs to be . . . Okay, I mean keep your mind on the Amazons. I bob my head in agreement. *"Well, it's your turn, now . . ."*

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. . . Xe manages the entire thing with something approaching the kind of stamina and flair that I used to see in her when directing townspeople in their defense, or planning the strategy before a battle. The anxiety about

being seen as immortal, or 'of the gods' is gone - and they have accepted her explanation. I am awed at the trust they have in her. After all the hard times and the uncertainties of her past relationship with the Amazons, this must seem like almost a miracle to her. And I am sure that it is mostly because of the way her soul, and her great love, shines through her for all to see and to feel. Not just me, only. They have come to love her, too. And I am humbled before them, once again.

In her infinite care, Xena has told them that each of them who chose to gain their InSight should come to her in the next few days, before the moon wanes, and she will help them open their inner door, and gain the newly-awakened capability. In this way, those who choose not to do so will not feel singled out, or excluded, or be in any way felt to be 'outsiders.' I am touched at her concern for their state of mind, and their status with their sisters. As it is, I think that only a handful will decline. And I have asked Alysia to work with Eusta and the others - whoever they may turn out to be - so that they continue to feel valued and useful . . .

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The next morning, I awake to the sound of a lovely bird, who has alighted on the sill of the open window overlooking the courtyard, as it sings a never-repeated song to the dawn. I wonder what it is called. It has a reddish brown head, and patches on its breast. The rest is grey, with brown wings. I'll have to remember to ask Galatea. I turn my head, and see Xe, completely relaxed, her eyes looking up at the ceiling above us, and a smile that softens her face, and makes her look as she once was - long ago in a stable, as a young girl pleaded with her. . .

"Big doings today?" I whisper.

She turns her head, the dreamy look still in her face. "Big, big doings." She whispers back. Then she shifts, and turns on her side facing me, and her lips are right up against my ear. She licks it - her warm tongue tracing the curves of it, spiraling inward to the center. My body responds immediately - the arousal flashing through me like a current of lightning from Aphrodite . . . and I turn in to her, and we are once again, welcoming the day with love.

PART 1V: THE COMMINGLING

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Chapter 16: Xena

Although I want more than anything to stay the day in bed with Gabrielle, we both know that we have to begin to build the momentum that will be necessary to bring our small band of Amazon exiles into the weave of this island, and help them get settled wherever they may wish to be. Also, we have said to Galatea that we must meet with her and the others of her stewards, to determine how best to proceed with the over-all integration of our rule. And she is expected this morning. So we avail ourselves of the bath, and are seated in the courtyard, eating some delicious fruit and goat cheese, and having some of Gabrielle's mint tea.

"Well, shall we summon Galateia?"

"Sure. Let's send her a mental message. Give her a little nudge. What do you say?"

She grins at me. Oh, this could be fun, I think.

"Fine by me," she answers.

So we both 'put our heads together' (Oh, Xena, you can't resist a joke, can you?) and do the Queens' duet version of "*Galateia, come here, we need you!*" And then sit back to see what happens next.

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We don't have to wait very long. By the time we finish with our meal, Io comes wandering out to the courtyard, to tell us that there are six women at the entrance, seeking an 'audience' with the Queens.

"They seem kind of excited, Xena," she says, her voice breaking awkwardly on my name. I give her a genial hug.

"Io - many thanks . . . how about you show them out here, and then you and Paphos can bring out some wine for everyone. Oh, and please tell the Council that we will want them to join us, as soon as possible." She nods, and turns away. "And Io - you and Paphos should stay, as well. It'll be good for you to watch the proceedings. Can you spare us the time?"

She hastily masks her astonishment. "Of . . . of course we can, Xena!" And she hurries into the house.

Gabrielle gives me a very satisfied smile. "You know, if you had an idea about making them our heirs, you certainly are doing all the right things."

I run my fingers through her short mane. "Oh dear - here I am, caught in the act!" She throws her head back, enjoying the feeling. "You can catch me, any time," I offer, generously. She rolls her head around, like a cat begging for more strokes.

"All right," she answers. "As soon as we get done, here - you can count on it."

Io and Paphos return, followed by Galateia and **her** coterie of Amazons; and behind them, **our** coterie of Amazons. This is getting complicated. And I do **so** hate rivalries. We have to get this sorted out, so there isn't a constant irritation underlying everything we attempt to do.

Our council sits themselves down comfortably on the low benches that frame the walls of the courtyard. Galateia and her women, meanwhile, stand before Gabrielle and me, their heads bowed. We **definitely** have to get them over this. Io and Paphos go to the kitchen, and within moments, they have returned with a tray, and cups, and a flagon of wine. They set these on a side, and begin to pour out the cups.

"Galateia," Gabrielle speaks - her voice low. "Would you and your sister Amazons care to join us in a drink?" She stands and walks over to the table, and picks up two of the cups of wine. Then she takes them over to

the women, and serves them. "Please, sit, all of you." They look around, as if they think to sink down on the flagstones where they stand. "Please - sisters - make yourselves comfortable on the benches." She gestures at the remaining seats.

I go over to the table, and do the same, giving the cups to two of the other women. And Gabrielle returns yet again with the last two cups. Then we ask Io and Paphos' help, and they serve Alysia, Eusta, Ikthenia, and Talia. Then Xena and I pour two cups more, and serve Io and Paphos, and then we get our own, and sit back down on our stone bench.

"Well, now, this is much better," Gabrielle says, conversationally. She is really enjoying the deliberate demystification process- they look very startled and uncertain of themselves. Good. Let's get these legend-besotted women back to some semblance of reality! Not to mention getting our own overblown image back down to a manageable size!

"Galateia," Gabrielle continues - her voice warm and comforting. "We know that you must feel - unsure of us. We need to get to a place where you are able to deal with us as the two women that we are - rather than your ideal image of us that you have from the legends, and from the heritage of Gaia's message. We don't mean to belittle those legends, or that heritage; but we are, after all, mortal women - Amazons - who breathe, and walk, and love, and work at what we do - just like you. For our part, we will try to live up to the promise of the legend, and uphold Gaia's heritage, and help in every way that we can to bring the things foretold to pass. And the prophesy will then show itself true, and good - for all of us."

Now it's my turn. I smile, take a big gulp of the wine, and lean back on the bench. "So, here is how it is, with us. We don't do the 'bow down before the high and mighty terrible Queens of the Amazons' thing. We **do** command, but only after we have consulted with our tribeswomen, and held our councils, and talked out all the possibilities. Unless there is clear and imminent danger to the tribe - in which case we **lead** our sisters because we have the experience and the wisdom to do so, and because we have earned the hard-won trust of the Amazons, by our words and our deeds. We **do** want to have the good council of the women who have, by virtue of their wisdom in various areas, earned the respect of their sister tribeswomen, and can therefore be stewards for the tribe. Those among us are counted as treasures, because they hold the accumulated wisdom of their particular crafts, and are charged with handing down that knowledge to the younger generations. We do honor the beliefs and traditions of the tribe. But we have had a very different history, in Thessaly, from that of your history, here on Lemnos. You have been dealing with Gaia, all this time. We, on the other hand, have had to cope with the Pantheon of Olympus for long years - a relationship that was hardly ever advantageous to the Amazons of Greece and Macedonia, and which we have finally outlived. Gabrielle will have much to relate to you, concerning those affairs."

Galateia sips her wine, as she listens to my long speech - her face unreadable. I am curious what she thinks. *Oh, right - Xena, you can know . . . just a little turn . . . Ah, yes ...* and I do the InSight. . .

". . . O, they are everything Gaia promised! But can we trust them? Will they think as highly of us as they do of their own women, who have come out of the fire with them? We have had such a sheltered life, here - and our TribeMind has been our protection and our secret for so long . . . and now they have it, too! We feel so vulnerable to them - and yet, I cannot help but adore them! They are so beautiful, and so strong!"

I turn and look sidelong at Gabi, who has her head tilted in that sweet listening pose she gets into, when she is

absorbed. She looks back at me out of the corner of her eye, and I can tell she's 'overheard' that admission, too.

Then Galatea speaks. "My Queens, you would have me say plainly, and so I shall - though I fear what you may think. I apologize, in advance, if I offend. We are somewhat at a loss in how to be, with you and the others who have come with you. We are very concerned that you find us worthy of continuing to serve you, in the ways to which we are accustomed. We don't relish a lot of changes in our life here, except those that will help to make it better. We are not at all sure what to make of your Olympians, and we don't much care for the rumors of strife and aggression that drift like an evil black cloud across Aegea's Sea - seemingly in your wake. We don't want it to follow you here, to Lemnos, and threaten all that we have tried for so long to create, and cherish, and nurture. We don't think we need to add violence and aggression to our island; and it has played a big part in your lives. We wonder if you can stand to give it up. We wonder if you can live peaceful lives."

I nod agreement at her words. "Oh, yes - Galatea. I think we all know that fear - of change, and what is new. We, too, wonder what a life free of constant threat might be like - having very little experience of it, in Thessaly. I know I look forward to it, with deep longing. And I know Gabrielle does, as well. You can ask even the youngest among our exiles, and they will tell you a tale of endless weary days of trouble, and uncertainty, and loss. So our chief concern, as your Queens, will be to nurture, protect and defend that sweet peace of Lemnos with every fiber of our being. And as for the InSight - or TribeMind - as you call it (*here she startles, as she realizes I read her thoughts, earlier*); well, that was a gift to the exiles from your Old Mother. For Gabrielle and I have had it, all along. And most of them, with some few exceptions - have embraced it as their birthright. So we seek to break down the walls between us, and find those things we hold dear in common, and form those bonds of sisterhood that Amazons the world-wide have always shared."

Gabrielle, who has been listening intently all this time, speaks. "Does this help you, Galatea? Are we answering your fears?"

"It is a start, my Queen. We want to help make this a success, because it is in all our interests to do so." Here she pauses, and a deep blush covers her face. "As for the other - I am sorry if some of us seem to . . . idolize . . . you and Xena. We have only heard of you since birth . . . and some of us naturally are - still in shock in your presence."

"Aw, *she's sweet, Xe!*" Gabi whispers, in my mind.

And I reply, in kind. "*Decidedly - but I prefer my own adorable Queen.*"

She wrinkles her nose at me. Then she turns to the Myrinian women. "Well, I think we have made progress in this conversation. I, at least, have a better idea of your concerns and hopes. And perhaps you are beginning to know us a little better. I have a proposal, for encouraging this exchange among us, which I hope you will find agreeable. How will it be, if you and your cohort take the evening meal, each day, with Xena and I, and our Council? This will give us a chance to get to know one another better, and also to more easily go about the daily business of governance."

Galatea turns, and we can see them sharing their thoughts - but we do not intrude. It is best to have privacy for some things, which would be discussed in private, otherwise. Then she responds.

"My Queens, we will be happy to do this."

"So, here now is our Council. They can tell you what role they have played in Thessaly - and if they have counterparts among you, let them then share of themselves, with all of us. What you each do; and how you have managed to hold things together, here, while awaiting our arrival." Gabrielle nods to Alysia, and settles back, leaning against me.

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Chapter 17: Gabrielle

Myrina, Day 4: The meeting with the Myrinian Council.

. . . Well, that went better than I expected. Alysia introduced herself as Regent, and we discovered that basically, Galateia is essentially her counterpart. I am still not certain how they are getting along. There is some rivalry, there, I think. And maybe some jealousy on the part of Galateia. I hope they work it out, because we will have need of both of them. And as for Talia - the Myrinian healer is named Kallidike, and they hit it off right away. I expect they will be deep in conversation for days. At the end of the meeting, they were busily planning Talia's visit to the Place of Healing. She plans on joining in with the daily routines there. Eusta's counterpart, named Lykia, oddly enough is completely deaf. She has been so since birth, apparently, and yet is deeply respected for her knowledge of the Gaian Mysteries. I will offer to teach Eusta and Lykia the sign language I developed while I was in Egypt, so they can more readily converse. Ikthenia has made a fast friend, I think, in Phoibe, who is so much a part of the earth of Lemnos that she seems to have sprung from it, full-born. She is a study in browns - and looks as though she spends long hours digging the soil and tending the crops. Her weather-beaten face is friendly and full of humor. Ikthenia will be making a tour of the surrounding farms in the coming week, to learn of the bounty of this land. . .

Once the initial awkwardness was over, conversation flowed between everyone - and it moved with us to the table, when the evening meal was served. Io and Paphos at some point unobtrusively adjourned to the kitchen, where they prepared a delicious repast for all of us. I so much love them - more every day!

After the meal, we agreed to sit down tomorrow morning with Galateia, Alysia, Eusta and Lykia, to plan the funeral rites for the Old Mother. I am anxious to learn of the religious rituals of Gaia, and how they are played out, here. Xena is less enamored of the rituals of religion. She has had too much of Gods and Goddesses in one lifetime, and carries a healthy skepticism for most of it. I am not sure how I feel, now. I have pondered it. I think I will talk with Xe about it, later.

. . . And, oh, I did ask Galateia about the little bird. When I described it to her, she laughed, and told me it was called a linnet. She said the women of Lemnos often tame the little birds, and hang out small round shelters made of clay for them in the olive trees, so that they can hear the singing often. She gave me a strange look, after. . .

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"What is it?" I ask her.

"I - oh, my Queen, I just never expected . . . that you would care so much about such a small thing . . .!"

"I always care about the small things, Galateia. In my life, they have often been the only things I could count on . . . I couldn't bear to live a life without them."

Xena comes up to us, just as I am saying this, and she slips her arms around me, and pulls me close. And Galateia looks suddenly very ill-at-ease. I take Galateia's hand in mine, and speak again,

"No need for embarrassment, Galateia. Xe and I have been Soul Mates for many lifetimes, now - and will be so forever . . . We have survived so much that we do not put off our love or hide it, any longer. Time is precious. You will soon enough grow used to seeing used like this. It is who we are. When there is time, I will begin to tell the Tales of Xena, the Warrior Princess and Gabrielle, the Bard of Potedeia - and you will all understand why we are so."

She inclines her head, a smile showing at the corners of her mouth. "Yes, my Queen. We are all awaiting that day with much excitement! We shall be avid listeners, I think." And she takes her leave of us. I turn round in Xena's arms, and look up at her.

"Xe - I don't think I can utter one more word today. I have talked practically the entire day. And so have you! My, that's scary! Aren't you getting a little restless? Don't you want to go out and walk the perimeter, or something?"

"Ah, no - regretfully, I have a previous engagement!"

"You do?"

"Uh huh. I do."

"Can I come too?"

Absolutely."

And before I can utter another word, she puts her arm behind my knees, and sweeps me off my feet. It always startles me when she does this, because I have not exactly ever been light-weight. And if I am honest, we are no longer 'spring hens!'

"Xena!"

"Yes, my love?" Ah, that innocent voice. She can't get away with that. But she has a wicked smile, now, and I suspect her intentions. There is such a nice lovely warm bath in the next room . . .

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**The End
Of**

