

~ The Crucible ~

by Pysta

Posting Description:

In this, the conclusion to the *Lemnos Quartet*, Gabrielle and Xena learn that the path to righteous rule is fraught with complexity. They follow the precepts of Lao Ma, however, and fulfill their destiny, and learn that '*all good things come to those who wait.*'

This is the conclusion to the story arc that began with [The Judging of the Queen](#); [The Chakram and the Dragon](#); and [The Annals of the Queens](#).

Disclaimer: As far as I know, Xena: Warrior Princess, Gabrielle, and all other characters that have appeared in the syndicated series Xena: Warrior Princess, are the sole copyright property of MCA/Universal and Renaissance Pictures. But in some sense, the Xena and Gabrielle I know have passed into the realm of Archetypes. And *they* belong to all of us, now.

Violence: Ah . . . violence. There's a lot about aggression, in this tale - but not so much physical violence as violence to the psyche . . .

Main text (not Subtext!): Our heroines are 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. They are unabashed, unashamed, and unexpurgated. We should all be so.

I want to thank those fans who have responded to my bardic journey. Xe and Gabi have led me down an interesting road, and I willingly followed. I have tried to be true to what they wanted me to see. I only hope I have done a halfway decent job of being as true in the telling. I know I sure had fun in the writing, and thank them both for keeping me in such good company this whole year.

I have tried to ensure that the four parts - in the end - would knit themselves into one seamless whole. I apologize for any niggling errors that I may have missed!

Comments to: pystas-works06@hotmail.com

Prologue

[Pysta's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)

The Crucible

By
Pysta

????? (Crucible), (n.): a place or set of circumstances where people are subjected to forces that test them and often make them change.
--



Prologue

In the days following the arrival of the Thessalonian Amazons, the two Councils continued to meet at the evening meal, and much was exchanged in the way of daily life on the island, and how the integration of the two Tribes was to proceed. Mostly, it was a time for bonding and friendships to be created, as the Thessalonians began to think about what each wanted to do, and how each wanted to live, and where, and with whom.

If there was one exception to all this, it was that there was no move made to introduce the two Queens to ceremonies attendant to the worship of Gaia. Galatea and Lykia seemed ill at ease about any questions regarding the Temple, and the inner workings therein. The Queens had yet to set foot inside the building. When Xena or Gabrielle would broach the subject, they were met with deflection. For their part, the two Queens accepted this – understanding that these were the Mysteries – and there would likely be some kind of rituals or initiations that would be required of them, in due time. There was no sense of urgency about it, yet. Xena had more of a problem with this than Gabrielle did. She was - and probably always would be - skeptical when it came to the Gods and Goddesses. ‘Twice burned, forever cautious’ (as the old saying went). She had had too much of the capriciousness of Immortals to go back to any of the blind trust of childhood.

Xena found a parallel reticence in her probes regarding the defense of the island, and how they managed to stay seemingly untouched, while all around them, bloody strife continued. In her rounds of the town, she had seen no signs of any armories or storage of weapons, and no apparent routines for fighting drills or practices. The women seemed completely passive – disinterested in anything approaching self-defense or aggressive fighting behaviors. She had to admit in her heart of hearts that this irritated her. . . and she wasn't sure but what it was just her own unease with the idea of living peacefully. She shared this with Gabrielle, whose response was a calming: *"Give it time, Xe – they'll share everything when they are ready."*

Aside from this, there was only one other disquieting thing. More frequently, in their casual conversations with the Thessalonian Amazons they heard remarks and comments – in a variety of contexts, but strikingly similar in theme – such that the Amazons of Lemnos were strangely lacking – no deep joy, sadness, anger or strong emotions of any kind. They were kind, courteous, friendly, hospitable, and completely passive. They were incurious about the harsh past and difficult memories of their new Amazon sisters, and seemed - when these were divulged - to display a singular lack of appropriate responses. "If I hear one more 'That's too bad, dear,' the next time I tell them about the Fire, I'm likely to do something I'll regret!" - as one woman said to Gabrielle.

* * * * *



Chapter 1

The time of the new moon was upon them, and the period of mourning for the Old Mother was spent. The time had come to put her to her final rest. A long, winding line of women, walking in single file, moved slowly out of the central square of Myrina. The women were dressed in white, but the various Counselors were also wearing colorful sashes, draped over one shoulder. They followed a worn path

leading up through the fragrant lavender bushes covering the hillside behind buildings that nestled above the curved beach. Richa Nera - a rocky, jagged volcanic hill rising above the idyllic sheltered bay - was their destination. The line stretched right from the square to close to the summit of the ancient mound, where the women disappeared from view. A cave was there, a Sacred Place, where the Old Mother was to be sent to her rest in the arms of the Goddess. The sunset blazed all around them, lighting everything with a soft, golden glow.

At the head of the procession came the honor bearers, Lykia and another woman, carrying the bier with the body of the Old Mother. She was wrapped in a simple brown cloth, adorned with a spray of rosemary, for remembrance.

Near the end of the procession walked the High Priestess of Gaia, her head and shoulders draped with the Shawl of ceremonial stripes that symbolically brought all the colors – and the Tribe – into one harmonic whole. As she walked, she chanted, slowly and sonorously, the Hymn to The Goddess:

“I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of life.
I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of love.
I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of the avatars.
I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of each one.
I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of all beings.
I believe, O Goddess of all Goddesses
That Thou art the eternal Mother of the Universe. .
I believe, O Goddess of the Universe
That Thou art She Who created my soul and set its warp.
Who created my body from dust and from ashes,
Who gave to my body breath, and to my soul its possession . . .”

Behind her, came the last two figures - the two Queens: Gabrielle of Potedeia, Amazon

Queen of Thessaly and Lemnos, Chief Bard of Athens, Lion of Thebes and Protector of Pharaoh; and Xena of Amphipolis, Warrior Princess of Thrace, Redeemer of Chin and Jappa, and Amazon Queen of Lemnos. This would be their first ceremony of the ancient mysteries of Gaia, and they were wondering just what they would see, and how it would compare to the rituals of Artemis.

“ . . . Mother, bless to me my body
Mother, bless to me my soul
Mother, bless to me my life
Mother, bless to me my belief. . .
. . . Enwrap Thou my body and my soul beloved
Safeguard me this night in the sanctuary of Thy love . . .
. . . Thanks be to Thee, Oh great Goddess
For the many gifts Thou hast bestowed on me
Each day and night, each sea and land
Each weather fair, each calm, each wild . . . ”

“I wish I could get more excited about the pageantry. I never was much for it. After the Twilight, I had hoped we could be free of all this.” Xena scowled as she shielded her thoughts so that they would be screened from everyone but her mate. Gabrielle looked sidelong, her mouth betraying just the hint of a smile.

“Come on, Xe. You know how benign this is, compared to Olympus! We both know how much Amazons need ritual in their lives. They love the chance to dance, and drum and chant, get dressed up in their feathers and leathers! Ok, so they don’t have those here – but if they did, they would! A little mystery is not a bad thing. And think how it would have been, if we hadn’t had a friend in Aphrodite – and Artemis.”

“The mystery we know is always preferable to the mystery we don’t?” Xena’s long legs took the steep slope easily.

Gabrielle’s eyes lingered on the ripple of the muscled thighs, and she caught herself as her thoughts strayed to the sudden image of them under her hands, the night before, as they lay in love together in their bed. She pulled her thoughts back to the topic at hand. *“Now, Xe –aren’t we the last ones to suspect mystery? We reek of it, ourselves! After this is over, we can get to know Galateia, and the*

women of Lemnos. We'll make a tour, and tell our stories, and listen to theirs, and it'll all work itself out." The Queens had discussed the idea of an excursion around the island of Lemnos. They hoped to go soon after the enforced period of mourning for the Old Mother.

*"You think it'll be that easy?" Xena looked over at her, one eyebrow arched up. "When has it **ever** been easy? Where Gods are concerned, they always manage to jerk us around – set us against one another. The way Galateia has been, since she discovered we've got the InSight, just proves my point."*

Gabrielle mused over Xena's evaluation of the situation. She had to agree the High Priestess was proving to be an enigma. Gabrielle thought it was only to be expected. The woman had maintained her position for years, and enjoyed an unchallenged stewardship. It would be a miracle for her just to relinquish everything immediately. It was not in Xena or Gabrielle's nature to push someone aside in that way. Both of them were too knowledgeable of the intricacies of political maneuvering to do such a thing. On the surface, she always seemed in awe of them, maybe even a little smitten, but that masked something deeper, something not so easy to understand. So the folklore of the Legend: 'And they returned to Lemnos, and ruled as Queens, and lived happily ever after' was proving elusive.

She came back to awareness of the voice of the Priestess, and the bard in her was again engrossed in the language of the Hymn. In truth, she thought it passing beautiful.

“ . . . I am giving Thee worship with my whole life
I am giving Thee assent with my whole power
I am giving Thee praise with my whole tongue
I am giving Thee honor with my whole utterance
I am giving Thee reverence with my whole understanding
I am giving Thee offering with my whole thought
I am giving Thee praise with my whole fervor
I am giving Thee love with my whole devotion
I am giving Thee pleasure with my whole desire
I am giving Thee love with my whole heart
I am giving Thee affection with my whole sense
I am giving Thee my existence with my whole mind

I am giving Thee my soul, O Goddess of the Universe . . .”

Xena, on the other hand, was not one to get distracted. She was worrying over her continued apprehensions since they had landed at Myrina. *“I don’t think the Old Mother did us any favors! She had her own reasons – maybe she didn’t know what was true here – she was in Thessaly all those long years - or maybe she just needed us to get here, so we could deal with everything after she was gone. The way she talked, we’d just get handed the Island. Now why do I get the feeling that it’s not going to be like that, at all? There’s something still hidden, here.”* When no answering thought came from her mate, she realized that Gabrielle was listening to the verses.

Xena came to an abrupt halt, for they had passed through the mouth of the cave, and were now standing at the back of a sea of women. They were lit by three braziers, placed around the sacred space, illuminating only the immediate area. The rest of the large cavern was dark. The air was cold, after the heat of the sun outside. It felt good.

The women were seating themselves on the rocky floor, and were ranged in two semicircles, with a wide clear area between them, leading down a gentle incline to the sacred space. This was paved with octagonal flagstones, in the center of which was a large altar stone, also flat and highly polished on top, with a large depression worn into it. *“It’s like a large bowl.”* Xena thought, and her eyes immediately searched the dim recesses above, where she could see a huge stalactite hanging down. The stalactite was slowly dripping, and she watched the drops fall through the air into the rocky bowl beneath. It was full of the liquid. She was not sure it was water. In other caves that she had seen, usually this would generate a stalagmite – a mirror cone would usually form from the drops calcifying and hardening from the floor upwards. This liquid seemed to wear the bowl, increasing its depth. *“Huh, there doesn’t appear to be an outlet, but the liquid doesn’t seem to overspill. Interesting . . . I wonder what it can be.”*

“. . . I am beseeching Thee
To keep me from ill
To keep me from hurt
To keep me from harm
To keep me from mischance

To keep me from grief
To keep me this night
In the nearness of Thy love . . .”

Gabrielle chuckled to herself, as she watched Xena’s eyes search the environment, noting when she had made her assessment of the altar and its configuration. She dearly loved how Xena’s mind worked - always alert, always curious about everything. *“I won’t even mention the rest of her. . . Artemis, I apologize for my distraction . . . but You, most of all, should understand!”* She had to admit, in her heart of hearts, that she would hold first allegiance to the Goddess of the Amazons. She owed her life and happiness to Artemis, and always would. She thought she could respect Gaia, if only for providing this refuge for the last of the Amazons in this place. If what the Old Mother had told them were true, she and Xena - a part of Gaia, after all – would somehow have to come to terms with this deity. Her eyes roamed over the quiet figure next to her, as they stood behind Galatea, waiting for the Priestess to make her next move. The bier with its burden rested on a lashed wooden cradle next to the altar.

The Amazons of Thessaly sat together as a group near the back of the host of women. They, too, were getting used to this strange new set of rituals and customs, centered on the worship of Gaia, and they seemed uneasy with the spectacle. They cast frequent glances at the two Queens. Gabrielle smiled reassurance at them. They were all strangers, still, and needed the comfort of familiar relationships and of their two Queens.

The torches swirled and soughed as a cold wind snaked through the cave from somewhere back of the darkness. Gabrielle shivered. She could see the little bumps rising on her arms, Xena seemed unaffected. *“Ah, well – her body heat is higher than mine.”* Her eyes strayed to the patterned scar that circled Xena’s neck, as though she were a Celt, with a torque resting on her collarbones. The Chakram - legendary weapon of Ares, Olympian God of War - had been transformed by Xena herself into a tattoo. *“It will go wherever she goes, for the rest of her days. It still has a power in it. But it is less a burden than the weapon was, for sure.”*

Her fingers twitched, at the tactile memory of how the scarred flesh felt – a raised, rough texture. It mirrored her own body-art - the Fire Dragon of Jappa, given to her by Akemi and transformed in the Conflagration – again, by Xena – into the Water

Dragon. The woman who returned to her was more than the Xena who had left her, bereft, in Jappa. *“Of all things to think about, why are my memories of these coming to mind?”* Gabrielle pondered, for she knew by now that there are no coincidences, and she rarely had a thought without a good reason.

“ . . . May the Goddess shield me
May the Goddess fill me
May the Goddess keep me
May the Goddess watch me
May the Goddess bring me
To the land of peace
To the grove of the Goddess
To the peace of eternity
Praise to the Nymph
Praise to the Mother
Praise to the Crone
The Three in One“ *

Her thoughts came back swiftly to the present, as she realized that the voice of Galatea had stopped, The Hymn was finished. There was a deep silence. Galatea moved forward down the slope to the altar. Gabrielle and Xena stood where they were, waiting to see what would be happen next.

Galatea faced the altar. She lifted her arms, holding them up-stretched. She threw back her head, and her voice sounded loudly, as she cried out:

“BEHOLD - GREAT MOTHER GAIA! We bring to you your servant, last of the Old Mothers - who has faithfully completed her long exile in the land of Greece, and who has shepherded the Great Queens of Lemnos home!”

Galatea now turned, and faced the Tribe. The women - with one voice - began chanting; one low note which would underlie the next part of the ceremony. Four women rose up from the front of the seated throng, and moved to the cradle. They lifted the small shrouded bundle from the bier and shifted it, laying it gently to rest in the bowl-shaped depression. Xena and Gabrielle – indeed, all the women – now watched, as drop by slow drop, the liquid fell on the shrouded body underneath it. The sound of the drops as they splashed the cloth covering the Old Mother was

clearly audible to Xena, with her preternatural hearing. The liquid already in the bowl began to saturate the figure.

Galatea turned again to face the body. Stretching out her hands over the body, she began another incantation, pitched just above the note of the underlying chant:

“Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow . . .
Sleep, thou beloved, in the Rock of the fold.
Sleep this night in the breast of thy Mother
Sleep, thou beloved, while she herself soothes thee. . .

Sleep, O sleep in the calm of all calm
Sleep, O sleep in the guidance of guidance
Sleep, O sleep in the love of all loves . . .
Sleep, O beloved, in the Goddess of life!” *

Then, as her voice died away, she stepped back, and with one arm raised across her chest in the Amazon salute, she bowed her head before the still form. There was another deep silence.

‘They’re all waiting for something . . . or someone,’ Gabrielle thought, and Xena answered in her head, *“Right . . . and here it comes . . .”*

A dark form loomed suddenly over the altar – a tall, hooded, robed figure emerged from the inky gloom of the rear of the cavern. It began a strange weaving and swaying over the Old Mother’s body, stretching its shrouded arms over the corpse. Galatea’s voice suddenly broke the awed silence of the collective audience.

“ALL PRAISE TO THE GREAT MOTHER GAIA!
SHE HAS GRACED US ONCE MORE WITH HER PRESENCE,
TO TAKE BACK WHAT IS RIGHTFULLY HERS!
ALL PRAISE TO THE GODDESS!”

As one, the Lemnian women in the cave bowed their heads down to the floor, and stayed in this supine position. Xena, Gabrielle and Galatea were the only ones left standing. The Thessalonians remained seated, looking about them with unease. Galatea gazed at them with a fierce expression, and motioned for them bow

down. They slowly acquiesced - although this Gaia did not seem very “godlike” to them.

The hooded figure, meanwhile, continued its weird dance above the body of the Old Mother. It did not seem to notice the break in the proceedings. However, as the silence continued, it slowly paused, and then rose up to its full height – easily a head taller than Xena – and its dark hood turned and gazed at the two Queens. There was no visible face – just blackness, and two glowing eyes.

Xena suddenly turned her head, looking at a spot to the left of the hooded figure and the altar. Her eyes went wide, and the pupils dilated almost completely black.

Gabrielle drew in her own breath, as her eyes followed Xena’s - and she, too saw the apparition of the Old Mother take shape in the space. They both listened, as a quiet voice spoke in their minds. *“Do not cast me into the Darkness, my Queens! Send me into Light, I beg you! Heed not this Dark One, for she is not the Gaia she pretends to be!”*

Xena turned and searched Gabrielle’s face, looking for the confirmation she needed. It was there. Gabrielle nodded her head once, her lips set in a grim line. Xena turned back to face the dark figure. She took Gabrielle’s hand in hers, and spoke.

“Gaia . . . If that is who you are . . . the soul of the Old Mother has spoken to us. She has no wish to join the great Shadow. She chooses Light. She chooses freedom!” She clasped Gabrielle’s hand even tighter. The weaving figure paused again, cold anger radiating back at them.

A rasping sibilant voice hissed at them. “Why do you violate my ritual? What manner of Queens are you, to flaunt it? The transfer must be complete! My sacred daughter cannot rest, until her troubled soul adds its burden to the great Shadow. Her power will strengthen the ShieldWall for generations to come!” The figure renewed it’s swaying above the body. A throbbing sound began to emanate from the space around the altar and the area above the body of the Old Mother.

Allowing herself to sink into the compelling surge of power from her mate, Gabrielle moved to face Xena, her back to the bier and the dark figure behind it. She leaned in, her forehead resting on Xena’s shoulder, her hands creeping around Xena’s waist. A soft sigh rustled from the Thessalonian Amazons, as they craned their necks to watch their Queens, for they knew the Dragon was to be released. Now Gabrielle knew why the unbidden memories had come, and why Xena was

speaking for the Old Mother's ghost. The Dragon was meant to free the Old Mother from the clutches of this strange Pretender.

Xena stood straight, her head up, her eyes closed, as the power surged up from deep inside her. A moving, glowing band of energy swirled around Xena's neck; then flowed down, through the chiton, and into the etched shape on Gabrielle's back. The outlines of the creature began to glow beneath the thin material of her chiton, until gradually it pulsed, and the light in the shape of the dragon began to radiate outwards from her back. Gabrielle swayed, and sucked in her breath, as it awakened. She could feel it uncoiling, and a shudder passed through her. She pulled back, her eyes searched Xena's face, where she sought - and found - the look of utter, absolute love. Gabrielle's hands gripped the cloth of Xena's chiton, but their locked gaze never wavered. Bowing her head, she released the Dragon. It gathered itself, and leaped from her back. The material on her back hung in shreds, blackened at the edges of the hole.

With a, dry slithering sound, the shimmering image stretched out through the air and then, solidifying, it landed on the body that lay in Gaia's Bowl. The wrapped form, resting in the liquid rock, began to pulse with an unearthly glow. The dark figure behind the altar hissed, and shrank back at the fierce actions of the lizard form. The Dragon's voice sounded in the sudden stillness as the silver-white flames ignited the body, and roared up, torch-like; and within the flames there rippled all the colors of the spectrum.

As the flames rose higher, licking the jagged stalactite that hung there, suspended - bringing the ocher colors of the rocky ceiling into vivid focus - the voice of the Warrior Queen rose in the Lament she was legendary for having created. Gently rocking the woman clasped in her arms, she sang the Old Mother into the Light. The Dragon crouched protectively over the body, until the flames had died down to a glow, and there was nothing left but ashes, slowly soaking into the liquid in the bowl-like depression. Then the Dragon sprang up and - its image once again stretched thin and wavering - returned to the bowed back of the golden-haired Queen of Lemnos, where it coiled itself, and went back to sleep. Xena gently folded Gabrielle into her arms, careful not to touch the scarred image, which still glowed and burned.

The hooded figure, which had drawn back at the manifestation of the Dragon, once more rose up to its full height. From the darkness of its hooded countenance, a deeply outraged voice came hurtling at them. "YOU HAVE PRESUMED TOO

MUCH WITH THIS TRAVESTY! YOU DARE TO CIRCUMVENT GAIA AT YOUR PERIL! BEWARE MY WRATH!”

In the profound silence following this dire pronouncement, Xena put her arm about the shaking shoulders, turned her back on the dark figure, and led a sagging, silent Gabrielle out of the cavern. The Thessalonian Amazons rose up and followed their Queens, from long habit forming a defensive ring around them. Xena yanked a torch from one of the wall sconces, to light their way back down the hillside to the town, for darkness had fallen during the ceremony. As they exited the mouth of the tunnel, she could see a blaze of stars above their heads.

The dumbfounded women of Myrina were left to themselves and their deity, In the normal protocol governing the ending of the ceremony, likely Galateia was supposed to have gone before everyone else - to have led the women back down the hill in a dignified procession. Presumably, she was answering to the darkly shadowed figure.

Xena was damned if she was going to think it was really Gaia - and so the High Priestess and other women of the Temple would have to salvage what they could of the ceremony. “*A definite breach of protocol,*” Xena thought, glumly. She did not much care. Her understanding of the import of tonight’s ceremony was causing ominous misgivings to swirl around in her head. She did not like to think where they would lead. “*Damned all Gods and Goddesses – they are always trouble!*” She ignored the throbbing pain of her own scarred tattoo; she would salve it, later.

Paphos, Io, Talia, Alysia, Eusta and Ikthenia moved up to form a protective phalanx around the two Queens, who were walking slowly. Io took the torch from Xena. The rest of their Tribe followed behind as a rear guard.

Alysia ventured a hesitant question. “Xena, should we talk about this? What is this going to mean?”

Xena shook her head. “Give me some time to sort things out, Alysia. My main concern now is getting Gabrielle home. Will you make sure that all our women are on the defensive, for the rest of tonight? I don’t think there will be any further excitement - there has been enough, already - but we might as well be prepared. I will see to the rest, before the dawn comes. And then I will send word as to what may come next.”

Alysia nodded acquiescence. “Very well, Xena.” She dropped back, to confer with the rest of the women. Then all but Io and Paphos split off to return to their lodgings.

The four figures walked in silence back through the streets to the house of the Queens. As they entered the gated courtyard, Gabrielle suddenly sagged against Xena in another faint. Xena stopped, catching her as she began to fall.

“Get some rest,” Xena muttered to Paphos and Io. “If I need you, I’ll let you know.” They pulled the gates shut and fastened them, and went off to their room.

Without hesitation, Xena lifted the slight form, and carried her mate through the doorway, across the hall and up the sweep of stairs to the floor above. Gabrielle murmured a faint protest, but Xena hushed her. In their bedchamber, Xena gently deposited her on the bed, face down. Gabrielle suffered in silence, wincing as her back inadvertently was brushed by the remnants of her shirt. Xena went to the cupboard, and brought back the alabaster jar with the healing salve. She sat down next to her prone partner, carefully removed the ragged tunic, and began to apply the ointment to the dragon outline. “Well, my love – that was impressive. This is the first time I’ve seen your “pet” at work!” she said, her voice hushed at the memory of that sinuous creature, crouched over the body of the Old Mother. “I’m sorry – I didn’t see that we had much choice, there.”

Gabrielle nodded. “Sss . . . ouch!” she hissed in pain. “I know.” Gabrielle turned her head, fitfully. “Did you see Galatea’s face? She wasn’t expecting any of that. Do you really think that was Gaia?” She laid her hand on Xena’s thigh, gripping it involuntarily at the pain. As the healing properties began to numb the scarred pattern, her hand relaxed, and she turned her head to look at Xena. Her expression was weary. “I think you were right. This is not going to be as easy as I thought, is it?”

Xena shook her head. “The power just came surging out. When that . . . well, *whoever* it is - started hissing about taking the Old Mother’s burden. I’m beginning to see, now, why the old woman brought us here. She may not have been strong enough to go up against that creature, by herself. She needed us, Gabrielle. Lemnos needs us.” She sighed, and looked ruefully at her partner. “I’m going back up there, as soon as you are settled, and do a little snooping around.”

“But, Xe . . .”

Xena gave her a mock-fierce look. “Don’t say it! If the Dragon release is going to be like the other times, you need rest - a little coddling! Just enjoy it, why don’t you? Don’t worry about that . . . *thing*. I’ll deal with it.” She leaned down, and kissed Gabrielle on the cheek. “Now, go to sleep. Give your back a rest.”

She sat, keeping company, as Gabrielle gave her one last rueful look, sighed, and settled her head sideways into the pillow, her hand clasping Xena’s firmly. As Xena waited, she pondered the strange events of the day. Her free hand moved, restlessly smoothing the disheveled hair on Gabrielle’s head. Her eyes traveled the dear, familiar face, noting the lines of fatigue. She thanked Artemis once again for giving her back the love of her life. She really didn’t care if Artemis was only a memory, now – as her long suspicion of the Gods came back to mock her.

“You should fall on your face and thank Her, for what you have regained,” she scolded herself. *“Give it up, Xena. The Gods created you, and they still live inside you and Gabrielle. Mystery is what got you here. Now you and she best learn to use it -just as you did the Warrior Path - and you can start with this ‘Gaia’ Pretender.”*

She sighed, and straightened. Shrugging her shoulders, she tilted her head first one way then another, working out the tensions the events had brought to her body. Then, gently disengaging her other hand from the sleeping Gabrielle, she dipped her fingers once more into the pot, and applied some of the salve to her own necklace of pain.

“And for that, I’ll need to take a closer look at the cavern.”

She got up, silently passed through the house, and exited. Her tall form strode purposefully through the dark streets, retracing the route to the cave.

* * * * *

When she arrived at the cave mouth, all was silent. The torches were dead, and there was no one about. She stepped cautiously into the mouth, and peered into the darkness: Silence. Then, striking her flints, she relit a torch, and entered the tunnel. She walked quietly through to the large cavern. The dripping of the liquid into the pool was the only sound, and her nose twitched at the remaining odor of burned flesh, the stink of it acrid at the back of her mouth. She waked slowly down the incline, to the altar, examined the bowl with its chalky liquid – now suffused with the ashes of the Old Mother.

She held the torch higher, and walked around behind the altar. As she advanced on the back of the cavern, the inky darkness fled at the hungry torchlight. All was in silence. There was, as she suspected, another exit. A large boulder, easily twice Xena's height, formed a part of the back wall, and there, behind it, Xena found a narrow passage. She inserted herself in it, holding the torch before her, having to turn sideways to squeeze forward. It was not pleasant. She felt her chest brushing up against the wall of the passage, through the thin cloth of the chiton. She inhaled, and kept doggedly on. The passage ended, suddenly, in another small chamber, carved out of the rock. There was a pallet, an unlit lamp, and a dark robe hanging from a spike in the wall. She fingered the robe, then brought it up to her face and sniffed at it. A dark, musky odor emanated from the garment. The smell – it reminded her of something . . . what was it? She shook her head, vexed that the memory would not come. "No goddess wore this," she said to herself. "A mortal, and one who has a name, I'll wager. Now, where are you, my lovely?" She cast about the room – a dead end. The woman had left with Galatea, and her coterie. She must have walked out as an ordinary worshiper. "Neat," Xena said to herself. "That was very well-staged. Galatea, you have some explaining to do."

* * * * *

Xena made her way back down the mountain to the town, not bothering with a torch, but extending her hunting senses. It was very dark. The moon was still too young. She entered the maze of streets, threading her way to the door of the Temple. She paused, listening, before melting back into the darker shadow of a pathway down the side of the building. She boosted herself up the wall behind the building, and dropped down into the garden. She was looking for – and found – the small dark entrance that marked the chute used to drop the leavings from the Temple kitchen down onto the midden. Moving slowly to avoid making any noise, she stooped and crawled inside. It was steep, but she could manage it. The other end of the short, cramped passage opened through an identical grate into the kitchen.

She moved through the darkest part of the kitchen and thence into the side corridor, leading to the private rooms of the temple guardians. She was looking for Galatea – and for the Pretender.

A noise from one of the rooms down the hallway attracted her attention. She drifted closer. There was a silent figure standing – statue still – before the door. This must be one of the Sibyls Eusta had told them were permanent fixtures in the

Temple. Xena could now hear the sounds of muffled whimpering from behind the closed door. In the old days, she would have reacted with violence, and with force. However, she was a different soul, now – and she was aware that sounds could be deceptive.

She reached over, and put the pinch on the figure. Nothing happened. Xena drew back in surprise. *“Hmm . . . this is like no Sibyl I’ve ever encountered. This guardian is not human – whatever it is. All right - what’s the best way to get past a golem?”* She fished a small scrap of scroll out of the pouch attached to her girdle. It had a small endearment written there, from Gabrielle. Leaning even closer to the still figure, she whispered in its ear. “Open your mouth, and receive the Prayer of the Goddess.” Its jaw dropped, the mouth sagging open, its expressionless face grey in the darkness, Xena stuffed the vellum in, quickly. “Now, your Master speaks! You will obey my voice. Go to the Grand Hall, and wait there for my Presence.” The Sibyl shut its mouth. Xena waited with baited breath. Would it work? The figure slowly stirred, then turned and walked down the hall. Xena briefly stared after it.

“Not bad! Gaia must sound like me, when she’s not being a Goddess. I just hope Gabi will forgive me for what I’ve done with her love note!”

She paused a moment, then noiselessly slipped through the doorway, pulling it slightly closed behind her. She slid sideways in the shadows. There was a single oil lamp burning on a table next to the bed. The light wasn’t much, but it was enough to reveal the figures of the Pretender and Galateia. Both were naked, except for an inky black mask and hood covering the Pretender’s face and head. She straddled Galateia’s prone body, which lay face-down, legs splayed, hands cruelly bound behind her back, and a gag stuffed in her mouth. Her eyes were squeezed shut. Methodically and violently, the ‘Goddess’ of Lemnos was raping the High Priestess.

Xena slid back out the door. She strode down the hall, and exited through the garden. Once outside, she leaned against the outer wall of the building, working to control the rage that had welled up within her.

“Okay – okay. You don’t know. This might be how they pleasure one another . . . it is none of your business!” Xena beat her fist against the stone, until it ached in protest. “Damn, damn! You know it isn’t that! You know she is not a willing partner for that bitch! Now how do I prove it to the Amazons of Myrina - before any more harm comes to Galateia?”

After walking about the streets for another candle mark, she spent the rest of the night sitting up next to her sleeping partner, watching over her, and thinking hard.

* * * * *



Chapter 2

Xena walked out into the part of the courtyard that was shaded by the grape arbor. A long bench, with a cushion covered in banded colors, sat next to a table bearing a bowl of fruit, nuts and figs, some feta and a loaf of bread, and a flagon of wine. She poured herself a cup, and sat down next to her companion - who lay, one arm draped over the curved side of the bench, a still face turned up to the sun's rays filtering down through the back-lit leaves. The leaves cast a pattern over the sleeping figure, and Xena suddenly found those gently curving lips too inviting, and leaned over for a lingering visit.

"Mnmf," Gabrielle muttered sleepily, - then responded wholeheartedly to the greeting. Xena, finding the Bard's tongue demanding admission, hastily thumped her wine cup onto the table, and wrapped her arms around the familiar body.

Xena grinned. She drew back slightly, and looked at Gabrielle's face. "Uh huh - I can see your sap is rising again . . . we're gonna have to do something drastic about it!" She shook her head, imitating a tragic air. "Oh, what has been done to my Gabrielle? She's turning into some kind of a voracious vine-creature!" Gabrielle broke into a fit of laughter, as Xena picked up her cup and downed it in one long swallow. She wiped her lips with the back of her arm, and then she went back for more. Gabrielle ran her finger under the folds of Xena's chiton, where it curved down between her arm and her breast, as she once more captured Xena's lips. Xena stilled - waiting and wanting it all. Yet she teasingly drew back, her one eyebrow raised. "What is this? Haven't you heard that old saying - 'wandering hands and a wayward heart?'" "

Gabrielle's eyes opened wider, their brilliant green almost matching the grapes clustered above them. "I have not!" she said indignantly. "When have you **ever** seen that, in me?"

Xena's hand captured the fingers that still tickled under her chiton. "Not ever."

Gabrielle smiled sadly. "Not even with all those handsome young men, in my youth?"

Xena kissed the palms of Gabrielle's hands. "That wasn't you wandering. That was you being the sweetest, kindest soul I know." Gabrielle laid her cheek against the fabric above Xena's beating heart, and smiled a secret smile.

Xena quelled the sudden, unbidden image of the Pretender and Galatea that flashed into her mind, shielding it from Gabrielle. She would let her recover, first, before sharing what had been revealed in the depths of the night.

* * * * *

The arrival of Talia interrupted their interlude. She came seeking Gabrielle. They had planned a visit to the House of Healing - where Talia had been spending most of her days since the arrival: observing, talking, listening, and assisting with the care of those women suffering various ailments. She had settled into a routine much like the one she had followed at their old village. Although she was not the person in charge, she seemed content with her role, and was eager to build a good relationship with her counterpart, Kallidike. They shared a deep love of their work. Gabrielle was glad, because that meant Talia's own healing was happening, and she would be able to go on into the future, her head held high - and with her love of Eponin something to cherish, intact.

"What's the news, Talia?" Gabrielle asked, her gaze pulling away from Xena's somewhat petulant expression.

The woman stopped, flustered, as she realized she had interrupted a very private moment. "O, my Queens! Please forgive me! I can come back later . . ." She began backing up. "I just thought you might have recovered enough to come with me, today. Like we planned?"

“Oh, Talia – it’s all right – really! We were . . . just . . . ah. . .” Gabrielle stuttered, and then stopped, the heat rising in her face. Xena clasped her hand, and shook it slightly.

“Talia – Gabrielle seems to be recovering nicely. As the official Healer to the Queens, I am sure you are pleased!” Xena smiled innocently.

“Oh, yes . . . of course, I am happy to hear it, my Queens! Although really, Xena – you are much more the healer for yourselves than I could ever be. Has there been anything, yet, from Galatea or her Council? It is quiet in the town. We have not had any reaction at all from anyone. We expected at least something – but no one has said anything to any of us about the ceremony. It is strange. ”

Xena shook her head. “I wouldn’t wait for it. The Temple is quiet, today.” Xena said, suddenly somber. “Somehow, though, I expect a visit from Galatea. This Sedate Xena Routine is sometimes really trying, I can tell you!” With obvious effort, she tried for a smile, but managed only a grimace.

Gabrielle gave Xena a thoughtful look, and nodded. “Oh, I can just guess. Well, Xena – shall we resume our . . . umm . . . conversation . . . when I return?”

Xena nodded, and popped a grape into her mouth. “Have a good time.” She waved them off. The cushions were already cozy. She leaned back and inhaled the lingering, citrus scent of her Bard. She wanted to think about the next step – the inevitable visit from Galatea - and maybe, after – a nap. She even managed a smile, as she heard Gabrielle’s response in her head: “*Sedate Xena – yeah, right!*”

“Not for much longer, I suspect.” Xena said to herself, her face growing somber once more.

* * * * *

Gabrielle and Talia ambled in companionable silence down the street toward the building that served as the House of Healing. They passed a pleasant spot, halfway down the hill, where an old grapevine curved over a low bench. Gabrielle paused, putting her hand on Talia’s arm. Talia looked at her with a questioning smile.

“Talia, can we sit a moment, here? And can I ask your opinion about something – as a friend?”

“Certainly we can, Gabrielle.”

They sat together, and Gabrielle frowned as she thought through what she wanted to say. She started, cautiously. “When I look at myself in a mirror – I see someone who doesn’t look a day over thirty seasons. If you just count the seasons as they normally pass, I am fifty-five seasons. But after Ares’ little stunt of putting us in ‘deep freeze’ for so long, I have trouble seeing **any** changes in myself. That experience did something weird to both of us. We never got a straight answer from any of the Olympians. Now, it’s too late. So now I just have to wonder.”

“Well, if you want my honest opinion, you are both remarkable women. You truly do seem as if you are only thirty seasons old. But do you fear growing old, my Queen?”

Gabrielle frowned, and looked down at her feet. She sighed heavily.

“No more than most. It is hard, because Xena and I are not normal – I mean, in the way that everyone else is normal. Normal people don’t have a dragon tattoo that comes to life, or a chakram scar that harbors strange power! Not to mention the number of times we have both died to this life, and then returned. Although we do not dwell on it, I think we have both wondered if we have acquired some kind of immortality – or at least, an unusually extended lifetime. “

Talia frowned pensively. “Maybe I’m asking the wrong question.”

Gabrielle looked away suddenly. Talia pulled her arm, turning Gabrielle around to face her. She saw the look - before it was quickly masked - of pain and of sadness.

“Oh, my dear . . . Is it that you are afraid you will **not** grow old - when all the rest of us will? It would surely be hard, saying farewell to so many of us, over the long years?”

Gabrielle did not respond. Talia looked at her with compassion. “I can’t take away that fear, my friend – but I can offer you this: you and Xena have already taught us all a few things about life. Whether you go before us, or with us, or after we have long gone, that is a powerful gift.” She paused, wanting to say the rest as gently as she could. “But for the really important question - the one you haven’t yet asked - I think you are no different than any of us. I think you - like all of us - will probably live just as long as you **need** to.”

Gabrielle nodded and then hugged her friend. ““Thanks, Talia. I guess that’s what I’ve come to believe, but it’s good to hear it from someone else.”

“Any time,” she hugged her back. She wondered, again, at the strange life her friend was living. “Have you and Xena . . . talked about this, at all?”

Gabrielle sighed. “At times we have - but never very comfortably - because we both feel so strangely about it. For a long time, before our deaths and resurrections, it was mostly about Xena – wondering if she were like Hercules and part immortal – because there was always some question about whether Ares was her father, or not. Now, I guess it is about both of us – and it is still awkward to discuss. I think it is very likely that we *are* something of Gaia – so we have been given abilities that are more than most people have, and we have that power for a reason. But what it is meant to accomplish, we still don’t see.”

Talia nodded. “I guess that’s not so crazy. Especially as there aren’t any easy answers. It’s not like there’s some test for it. Or is there?”

Gabrielle laughed. “I don’t know! I used to think, if someone did not ever die, it meant the person was immortal. **We** have died and come back. We’ve tempted the Fates and outwitted the Gods so often - I don’t know if that counts as the test, or not!”

Talia nodded. She paused, and continued hesitantly. “Gabrielle, as long as we are truth-telling, here –may I ask you something?”

“Of course you may, Talia.”

“Since we have come here, I have to say that I like most of the women we have met. They seem, as a rule, amiable and good-natured; but I wonder, if there isn’t something . . . troubling about them.”

Gabrielle waited.

Talia sighed. “Maybe it is just my imagination, but I could swear that they all seem . . . well, kind of **flat** to me.”

‘Flat?’ Gabrielle frowned.

“Actually, they remind me of . . . sheep. . .” She cleared her throat, and smiled apologetically. “I don’t mean to belittle them! It’s just that they never seem to have any opinions! The stories they have told us, of their lives? They’re boring. There’s no . . . **excitement** to them!” She sighed again. ‘Have you noticed this, at all?’”

Gabrielle looked at Talia, frown lines puckered between her eyes. She thought of the conversations she had had, since their arrival, with the inhabitants.

“Well, Talia. Maybe it’s because they’ve not had the stress that we have had. Maybe that’s what peaceful life is like. We’re not exactly familiar with it, are we? I’m not even sure I know what it is, to be peaceful!”

Talia grinned. “Maybe,” she replied, skeptically. “But if that’s true, I guess I’m not sure the peaceful life is what I really want, after all! Anyway, it’s been bothering many of us – not just me – that everyone here is so remarkably dull!”

They both laughed, and Gabrielle answered. “Well, I sure won’t mind giving it a try, anyway – just to find out! We can always get up a lively hand-to-hand competition if we need some stimulation!”

They laughed again - then agreed they had better get on with their intended visit. Rising from the pleasant seat, they continued down the steep hill to the broad avenue below, and then crossed the wide square to the House of Healing. They pulled open the heavy door, and entered the cool recesses within. The building was shaped in a square, with rooms all around a center courtyard that was open to the sky and the sun. They walked through the arched hall to the courtyard, where they found Kallidike sitting under an old cedar tree with her two young apprentices.

“May Gaia give you peace, my Queen . . . Thalia?” Kallidike rose, and bowing her head to Gabrielle. “I hope you are well?”

“Greetings, Kallidike,” Gabrielle responded. “I am fine, now, thanks. All that must have been . . . startling to witness, I am sure. I do not relish these experiences, frankly. They are always a trial to me. But it is a part of me, now, and I must accept what comes of it.” She paused, thoughtful. “I hope it was not too disturbing for the women of Myrina. We do not mean to do **anything** to which you would take offense.”

Kallidike nodded, calmly. “I am sure, my Queen, that we will all come to understand the meaning of Gaia’s actions. It is not always so clear. We must wait for further guidance.”

Gabrielle gazed at the healer. She saw only calm, which unaccountably disturbed her more than had the response been anger, or resentment. What were these women feeling? Why did they never express it? Talia’s observations flooded into her mind, but she put them aside, firmly. It was not the appropriate time to cloud this visit. She affectionately clasped the healer’s hand. “We have come to visit the women who are healing.” Gabrielle smiled at the others clustered nearby. “Is Lykia here with you? I had hoped to speak with her. I need the practice with our sign-language.”

Kallidike shook her head. “No, My Queen. She is not here.” She gestured for them to follow her. She led them to the opposite side of the courtyard, and through a connecting door to a long room, containing some pallets, where several reclining figures took their ease while they were being treated. The group moved among the figures, stopping here and there, as Gabrielle took their hands, and stooping, kissed the foreheads of the silent women.

A sudden commotion heralded the arrival of someone in need of help. Two women held another in a basket-carry - her leg stuck out in front of her, wrapped in bloody bandages, and a hastily contrived tourniquet made from one of their girdles. The woman was pale, sweating, and half-swooning. Kallidike, Talia and Gabrielle all went into swift action. They laid her on an empty pallet, calling to one of the apprentices for sutures, cloths, water and the ointment against infection. Talia questioned the two who had brought her, to determine what had happened, while Gabrielle applied pressure to the bandage directly over the wound. The woman had been cutting back old grapevines, and the cutting tool had slipped, and embedded itself in her thigh. They had pulled it out, and it was clear that the woman had lost much blood in getting her to the healers.

Kallidike took the container handed to her by one of the assistants, opened it, and then calmly said “I wanted the other. This is just the earth for the bee-stings - it is useless for this. Go back for the ointment.” The girl turned to walk from the room.

Gabrielle’s head came up, and she looked at the box in Kallidike’s hand. A strange, dizzy feeling surged over her, and she heard herself speaking, in low, urgent tones. “Kallidike! Call her back, quickly! Send her to Richa Nera and have her bring a flask of the liquid from the Altar – from Gaia’s Bowl - **HURRY!**”

The young woman turned back towards the clustered figures, a questioning look on her face. Kallidike spoke to her. "Go, now. Do as she says." The youngster turned and calmly walked out. The Healer turned a questioning gaze toward Gabrielle. "What is it, my Queen? What do you mean to do?"

Gabrielle shook her head, the buzzing feeling still with her. "When she returns," was all she said.

Gabrielle waited, agonized, as the moments passed with infinitesimal slowness. The girl finally returned, holding ewer to her chest, so as not to spill it. She brought it up to Kallidike, her arm outstretched. Gabrielle, still leaning on the wound with all her weight behind her hands, nodded her head at the other assistant. "Now get her a mortar. Quickly!" The girl went over to a long shelf, filled with vials and boxes and bags of healing medicines. She returned with a mortar and pestle. Kallidike opened the box, and poured out a good amount of the reddish earth into the mortar. Then she did likewise with the pitcher, the liquid flowing milky into the bowl. Kallidike stirred the mixture, creating a paste the consistency of curdled cream. The stuff had a bubbling quality to it. She looked at it, then at Gabrielle. "Now what do we do?"

"Bring it here." Gabrielle instructed. "When I pull the bandage off, you scoop that – all of it – directly into the wound. You must be quick!" With that, she suddenly released the pressure of her hands leaning on the wound, and snatched the blood-soaked pad away. The horrid, gaping wound welled up with thick, dark blood. Kallidike leaned in, and did just as Gabrielle had instructed. The sticky, frothy red paste completely covered the wound, and there was a sudden silence, as they all watched, and waited, to see the result. They all sighed with relief, when nothing happened. There was no sudden surge of blood – no blood at all, in fact.

Her head in a strange fog, sounds strangely muffled in her ears, Gabrielle – trance-like - stretched out her arm, and held her hand palm-down over the site. The paste began to glow with a strange, reddish light. Then it died away. She slowly passed her hand over it once more. The glowing intensified - then died away again. The wound now appeared as though it had scabbed over. The others stared at Gabrielle, their faces awed.

Talia used a cold wet cloth to wipe the forehead of the injured woman. They had put a bolster under her head, and had another large pillow under her injured leg. Talia felt her forehead, and then put her fingertips to the side of the woman's neck

– feeling for the life-pulse, there. She nodded. “It is good - steady, and not too fast. She will make it.” She proceeded to cover the injury with a clean pad of cloth, and loosely wrapped the leg with gauze. She then gestured for the two companions of the woman to come forward. They moved to the side of the pallet. “Sit beside her, and stay company with her.” They sank down, dust and sweat still streaking their cheeks.

Gabrielle sat back, feeling the depletion that follows intense action and anxiety.

Kallidike shook her head in wonderment. “My Queen – how did you . . . ?” Gabrielle looked up, puzzlement showing on her face. “Oh – I saw it!” she answered, vaguely. “I . . . it rolled out before me, like one of my stories . . . But let us go out to the courtyard. They can stay with her. She needs silence, now – and healing rest.” The three women and the two attendants walked back out into the courtyard. They sat under the tree once more. The assistants brought a pitcher of water, a bowl, and a towel, that the Queen might wash the blood from her hands.

“Where does this earth come from, Kallidike?” Gabrielle asked, as she held her hands over the bowl, as the attendant poured the water over them. She wiped them dry with the towel, and nodded her head in gratitude to the young woman.

“It comes from another of our sacred sites, my Queen. It lies to the north, in a very rugged place. It is called Gaia’s Cradle. A wide, shallow depression in the land, which probably used to be a lake, but now is dried up; and what remains is a huge area of red, cracked mud. Nothing grows there. We discovered some time ago that the mud, when mixed with water, helps heal the stings of bees, and is also good for snake-bite.”

“I see.” Gabrielle said. “Well, it now appears that it is able to do even more than that!”

“Indeed, my Queen. Although I would say, **you** have caused it to change. I am thankful to you for giving it this new healing property. It will mean a great deal more to us, now.”

“Oh – No . . . it wasn’t I who did anything!” Gabrielle appeared flustered at this idea. She shook her head. “No . . . really – it was the water from the Altar – really!”

Their conversation was interrupted by one of the companions of the injured woman, who came running out to where they were seated.

“Healer! Come quick!”

Gabrielle, Kallidike and Thalia rose and followed her into the room. They approached the pallet, and could see that the woman had regained her senses, and was attempting to sit up.

“Hold, my sister.” Kallidike commanded her. “Stay put. You have had a nasty injury. I do not want you to move around, just yet.”

The woman looked up at her confusedly. “But I’m fine!”

The three women clustered around her. Thalia undid the bandage that held the pad of cloth over the wound. She gently pulled it back, and gasped. “Kallidike, Gabrielle – look!”

They all bent forward. Thalia gently wiped away the residue of reddish dust that obscured the wound site. Where minutes before there had been such a terrible, gaping wound – there was now just a faint scar.

They all looked at the leg, and then at one another, in astonishment. Then they turned, as one, and looked at her with awe on their faces. She could deny it all she wanted – it was the water, certainly - but it was Gabrielle, as well.

“O, Sweet Artemis! What have I done?” Gabrielle whispered.

* * * * *



Chapter 3

After a brief nap, Xena got up and crossed to the arched entry to the house. She ascended the stone stairs to the upper floor, then down the hall to the room that Gabi had taken to calling the ‘scriptorium’ - where she was planning to house the scrolls of her own stories, and those that told of the Amazon Nation. Xena had set up a large table for her near the wide window, so that it caught the best light of the day. This was where work would begin on the fire-lost scrolls. Xena had an idea, already, for a wall of cubbyholes, like the chest Gabrielle had, back in the Amazon Village – only this would need to be made of the local brickwork – wood being so scarce here. She even had a design in mind for the glazed tiles she would put between each cubby. She was looking forward to the physical labor of making this for her Gabi. With any luck, it would be completed in time for their Mating Day – at the Spring Equinox.

Here also, on the opposite wall, was another kind of repository - where Xena had mounted all the accoutrements of the Warrior Princess years. There was the sword and scabbard, as well as the katana from Jappa, her armor, whip and breast knife, their bows and arrows, and Gabrielle’s staff and the sais. It was a sobering sight. She sat down on a bench nearby, and gazed at the wall of the Past.

“Can I possibly hope that these will now gather dust, and never have to be used again?” she muttered pensively. She rubbed her hand on the scar at her neck, sighed, and shook her head. “Don’t hold your breath for that one, Xena. Life has shown you many surprises – but so far, peace has never been one of them!”

She rose from the bench, and restlessly paced up and down the length of the room, talking to herself. “That charade in the cavern stank of more than just cremated remains. I didn’t like the look of that mumbo-jumbo. It smacked too much of Alti, for my liking! Alti . . .” she frowned, her thoughts pulled to the past. “I wonder . . . if this Pretender is any kin to her. She certainly has the ruthlessness and the appetites.” Her mind cast back to the Bad Old Days, when she was pursued by the thoroughly wicked shamaness. “More than a passing similarity, here . . . I wonder . . .”

She stopped before the weapons wall, eyeing the objects. Then she took down her own sword, and strode out of the room. She ran lightly down the stairs, and back out into the courtyard. She stopped in the center of the open, paved area and went completely still. She began, slowly and methodically, to go through her warm-up routine. If nothing else, it kept her limber, attuned to her body and its needs. As she felt her muscles warming up and stretching out, she picked up the pace. Soon, the

sword was a blur, as she executed the parries and counter-parries, thrusts and counter-thrusts; and then began to work in the flips, front and back. Her body was freely sweating, now, and she suddenly found herself grinning with delight, at the easy rhythm of it all, and the old familiar feeling of her blood singing in her veins. She laughed, and then let loose with a Warrior Princess yell, just for good measure. Then she stopped, panting just a little, and leaned on her sword pommel . . . and waited.

“Xena! Is everything all right?” Paphos’ voice preceded her as she came out onto the terrace. She came closer and whispered. “Galatea is finally here to see you. Io is guarding her in the entrance hall.”

She grinned at Paphos.. “Everything’s fine! I was just having myself a little workout! Go ahead and send her through. Tell Io to ease up.”

Paphos nodded, and turned back. Xena called out after her, “Gabrielle and I are going for a swim, later – we’ll bring back lobsters for the evening meal!”

“Oh - good idea! How many of us are there to be tonight?”

“I think just the four of us.”

Paphos nodded, and strolled back into the house. Xena leaned back, waiting, admiring the way the sunlight was filtering through the vines. She willed herself to be calm. This was going to be awkward, at the very least. Galatea emerged from the house, looking warily about her.

“Will you take a cup?” Xena waved the flagon. Galatea nodded. Xena poured her a cup, and held it out to her. Galatea came over, and accepted the cup.

“Why don’t you sit and make yourself comfortable?” Xena suggested.

Galatea looked around, then walked over and sat down on the nearby stone bench. She sipped her wine nervously. “I . . . hope Queen Gabrielle is . . . well?”

Xena nodded. “Well enough. The . . . after-effects of her experience at the Old Mother’s ceremony have diminished. Other times, she has recovered fully after a day or two.”

Galatea looked startled. “Other . . . there have been other times?”

Xena sipped her wine. Leaning over, she selected a chunk of cheese from the plate, then tore off a piece of bread from the loaf, wrapped the cheese with the bread, and chewed on it thoughtfully. She took another long swallow of the wine, to wash it down.

“Actually, twice – besides this time. Once in Jappa, where the Dragon saved Gabrielle from the attack of a Demon. And before we got here, it saved both of us from being reduced to cinders when the Grove of Artemis was burned to the ground.” She put down her cup and picked up the sword, and rested it across her knees. She did not feel like going on about it. Small talk had always tried her patience; but she needed to draw this woman out. She needed answers.

Galatea moved uncomfortably, her eye on the sharp sword in Xena’s hands.

“Tell me something, Galatea . . . who is Gaia?”

“Gaia is our Goddess.” Galatea answered promptly.

“No. Who is Gaia?” Xena calmly asked again.

Galatea flushed. “You question the devotion to the Goddess?”

“No - I do not question your devotion. I question how you **show** that devotion, and how you are choosing to **interpret** that devotion . . . So I am asking you again – who is this Gaia-person?”

Galatea shifted uneasily in her seat. She seemed to have forgotten her drink, which she held clutched in her hand.

“My Queen!” she said, her voice catching with dryness. “I have come today to apologize to you and Queen Gabrielle. I . . . we did not realize the extent of your powers. We did not understand how . . . how much your coming would change our lives, and our ways.” She paused, waiting for Xena’s response.

“All right – we’re coming up to it, now. This is all about their power, and our power, and my reputation.” Xena changed her tack, going oblique once again. “I’d suggest you take a drink of that. I do not mean to discomfit you.” Xena waited calmly. Then she leaned forward once again. “I still am waiting for your answer, my Priestess.” Her use of the possessive was deliberate. Galatea swallowed

nervously. Her face had turned pale, and still. She again eyed Xena's sword uneasily.

"You may speak frankly with me, Galateaia. I am not here to denigrate the Goddess, or your belief in Her. I am also not here to deny the Amazons of Lemnos a full, rich and devoted expression of their love for the Goddess. I **am** here to make sure that the women of Lemnos are safe and secure, and untroubled by any form of oppression: **either** from the world out there, **or** the world of this island. That I **will** do. It is time, now, for you to explain what is going on here, and why." Her dark blue eyes gazed levelly at Galateaia, and she waited for the woman's response.

"It is nothing, my Queen. It is a device, only - a way to give us the semblance of Her presence. It is a focus for our rituals and ceremonies. A . . . a drama, if you will."

"Really? If that is all, then why was the Old Mother so disturbed that she felt she had to turn back from her patient waiting for Elysium, in fear of losing that safe passage? She surely would not have bothered, if all this was just a **performance!**"

Galateaia swallowed nervously. She twisted the cup in her hands. "I . . . I don't know what you want to hear."

Xena's eyes blazed. "No? Then what I said at the ceremony came as a complete surprise to you? You had no idea what I meant when I answered your 'goddess'? I find that hard to believe." Xena sat back, waiting.

Galateaia tipped her head forward, seeming to study the contents of her cup. Xena could tell there was a silent conversation going on. She sat, motionless, and cast out her senses, searching for the murmur of the mental voices. Yes – there they were – just beyond the edge of hearing. If she stretched out a bit further, into the velvet of that inner dimension, she sensed the other – the dark presence they had challenged in the cavern.

Galateaia stared, preoccupied with the internal communing. Then she suddenly sat up, lifting her chin - her gaze and attention returning to Xena.

"Verdict reached, then?" Xena asked, dryly.

Galateaia shook her head impatiently. "It is not that simple, my Queen. We have worked long years, here, to establish a sanctuary for our Amazons, so that they

could live peaceful and productive lives without fear of aggression. It is paramount to the Goddess that you do not jeopardize what we have built! I understand that you have all had a difficult, painful journey to these shores, and that you wish nothing more than to settle here and be free of it all . . . but that has its price. We in the Temple are bound to uphold the laws we have formulated.” She stopped abruptly, as if she were frightened she had gone too far. She looked again at the sword in Xena’s lap. ”You . . . you push the Goddess too far. She does not take kindly to her power being . . . questioned.”

Xena sat back, idly fingering the sword, studying her. Galateia was a striking young woman – no question. She had coal black hair, honey-colored skin, deeply set brown eyes, and a well-formed body. There was no indication of bruising or injury. She seemed none the worse for the scene Xena had witnessed. She did not want to antagonize this woman – who was a key to their successful integration into the fabric of Lemnos – but she also did not want to be manipulated by her – or the so-called ‘goddess.’ She gazed directly into Galateia’s eyes - her own turning the color of lapis.

“I think maybe you are getting Gaia and this ‘stand-in’ mixed up. Where does the actor leave off and the Goddess begin? Perhaps it is finally time for you to tell me what the price is, for admission to Lemnos. We have been very well-fed, well-housed, and well-entertained **guests** here, so far, Galateia. However, that is not the same as fully-embraced Amazon Queens of the Tribe of Lemnos.” she said, keeping her voice measured, low, and calm.

Galateia’s eyes dropped. She moistened her lips, wiped her hands on the fabric of her chiton, and ignored the first question completely. “The Goddess traditionally requires the surrender of all weapons and an Oath of Submission.”

“Surrender? Submission? Maybe we are now talking about someone who has more power than ordinary Amazons do, and who postures as a ‘goddess’ to get what she wants.” Xena’s voice took on a sharper, more dangerous quality. “And this is all given to that ‘player’?” She waited for Galateia’s reply.

Galateia raised her eyes again. “She **is** the embodiment of Gaia. She **acts** for Gaia in this, and in all other rituals. There is no separation between her and the Goddess, for the women of Lemnos.”

“Let me make sure I am getting this. Your expectation is that Gabrielle and I, and all the Amazons from Thessaly who came over with us will surrender our

weapons, and our . . . what you call ‘soul’s burden’ to that . . . person?” Her raised eyebrows and suddenly fierce expression was not lost on the Priestess.

She inclined her head; then looked up once again, into the brilliant gaze of those dark blue eyes. “That is the custom, my Queen.”

“I see.” Xena leaned forward. “So tell me: when you have had other Amazons come here, say from the high steppes of Anatolia - as we did from Thessaly - what did this ‘Gaia’ do with their weapons?” She looked curiously at the woman. “They must have brought their weapons with them, surely, as we have done?” Xena leaned forward, presenting a conciliatory manner. She rested her elbows on her knees, keeping the sword lying across her lap. “So – did they willingly give them up to your ‘goddess’? “Did she destroy them? Moreover, while we are at it, please - tell me the nature of this oath. I am eager to have that explained.”

The Priestess sat, silent, her gaze turned inward once more. Xena sighed, and tapped her foot impatiently. She would much rather speak with the Pretender, directly, than have to go through this well-meaning but obviously enthralled young woman. “*Oh, well – in for a dinar - I might as well just go all out.*” Sensing that she would need to take a more conciliatory tone, she elaborated.

”Galatea, I am not blind. I see that it must be hard for anyone who comes here to understand how this island remains a carefully protected sanctuary in the eye of a very stormy world. I admit that I struggle to trust my own longing for such a home! I know that there must have been women who would have been even more of a problem than I might have been, in my youth – and they would be difficult to convert to a . . . passive state. Amazon warriors are used to a life of fighting. I ask this, because I know that some of our own companions are having a hard time. It is a strange new environment for them: different houses to live in, different clothing, no horses, even – although it took a while for our Amazons to adapt to the horse, having started out as foot-stealthy tree-dwellers! The food they eat - everything is new, and different! They will need to have a way to talk about the frightful things they have experienced in their lives, and an alternative way to channel their own aggression – peacefully. I must find a way to help them make whatever adjustment is necessary, so they can live long, happy lives, and not ever regret, coming here. If you have a way that works, I would appreciate knowing of it. I want very much to understand.” She waited, curious to see what the response would be.

“It is a simple thing, really. There is a ceremony, the weapons are surrendered, the Oath administered and the soul’s burden relinquished. Then all is peaceful.”

“Maybe I am slow of wit, today. Humor me. What do you mean when you say ‘the soul’s burden is relinquished’?”

Galatea sighed, her tone that of a long-suffering adult speaking to a wayward child. “It is easy enough! The Dark One – the living manifestation of Gaia’s dark side – performs a ‘laying on’ of the hands, and she receives from each supplicant the dark dreams, memories, and pains that they have suffered in this life. “

Xena sagged back in her seat, as the significance of this washed over her. *‘O, my sweet Gabi – this is shades of your flirtation with Mnemosyne and of mine with the Fates. She is relieving the women of Lemnos of their emotions and memories, and weaving these into an invisible shield to cloak the island!’* She felt an immediate surge of concern from Gabrielle.

The hapless Galatea continued explaining. “They must give up killing. There must be no temptation to go back to the old ways. We . . . take the temptation away, by destroying the weapons. The Oath, and the transfer of the soul’s burden, completes the passage.”

Xena nodded thoughtfully. “I see . . . (*Not to mention making sure no one – including the Queens - threatens the peace from within . . . How could we, with all our memories scrubbed of any conflict or pain?*”) In that case, what did she do with . . . recalcitrant warriors? I assume there were some. If they were anything like the old Xena used to be, I’m surprised you convinced any of them, considering what they must have gone through to get here.”

Galatea shifted uncomfortably under Xena’s gaze. “Oh . . . well . . . it wasn’t anything so terrible, really. They were simply . . . isolated.”

“Isolated?” Xena’s eyebrows shot up.

Galatea nodded. “Yes, my Queen. They were shunned. They were banished to the other side of the island, where they live . . . apart. They were also denied access to the TribeMind.”

Xena cast her senses speedily to the north. The emotions she expected – dark anger and sorrow - were not there. Instead, she came up against what she could only feel was something like a blanket – a muffled blurry mass that gave no clue to anyone living in that place. She felt her eyes tearing. *“Such cruelty here - why deny them*

the mental connection? What purpose does that serve?" Her throat closed with the pain she felt so keenly. She knew that despair. She had lived there once, herself. She felt her own anger, and frustration, at not being able to sense these 'Outcasts.'

"How . . . many have there been? And how long has this been so?"

Galatea shrugged. "Maybe two score . . . thereabouts. I have lost track, over time. It has been, oh – maybe twelve seasons, since we had any number of . . . reluctant refugees. Until your tribe came, we have had no other arrivals. We doubt there will be any more. It is not possible, now."

"Not possible? We came, didn't we?"

Galatea looked uncomfortable. "Well, of course, that is different. We knew of your coming. That is why we came out to greet your ship. The Old Mother . . . made a way for you."

Xena nodded. "I see. Getting back to the 'Outcasts' - have their numbers increased, now that they live beyond contact with the women of Lemnos?"

"I know not." She shook her head, her shoulder lifting dismissively. "All things considered, it has worked out for the best, this way. The island remains safe. The Amazons of Lemnos are at peace. We have no bloodshed, no violence, and no sorrow born of strife. It is a goodly life. One we will not willingly give up." The warning was obvious.

There was a long silence. Xena worked to get her emotions under control.

Do you at least trade with them?" Xena asked.

"No, we do not trade. There is hardly enough along that shore, to eke out a living. What would they trade? It would be ridiculous." She shook her head. "They doomed themselves, by their willful refusal to join with us! We had solved the problem. Why did they intentionally reject that? It was nonsense. There was no other solution imaginable. Gaia pronounced judgment upon them – and that was the end of it."

"Gaia?" Xena asked - her voice sharp. "Or was it Gaia's 'stand in'?"

Galatea shrugged. "It is all the same, to us."

“How much land do they hold, in this ‘cast-off’ place?” Xena asked - her voice icy.

“Enough.” Galatea responded. “The boundary is about a league in from the shoreline, and stretches across the top of the island.”

“And how do they live?”

“As best they can, I imagine . . . Gaia provides.” She responded

“Ah, **Gaia** provides, but of course - so that **your** Gaia should **not** have to,” Xena responded, her forthright assessment causing the Priestess to flinch. “How do you enforce this . . . separation? What keeps them apart? Would that also be the ShieldWall your ‘goddess’ referred to, last night?”

Galatea stared at Xena, a look of anguish now entering her expression. “You **don’t** understand, my Queen! It works! Gaia has provided us this way to keep all of us safe and secure. We saw how well it worked, and we have kept it strong, all these years. We have kept out those who would destroy the peace we have. You cannot conceive how good it has been, here, without all the violence, the anger, and the fear!” Her hands twisted in her lap, the wine cup forgotten on the seat beside her. “Don’t you see, my Queen? We have awaited your coming for our entire lives! We have been told, since we were babes, that you would come to us, and be healed of all you have suffered, and endured. That the Amazons remaining in the Wide World would come home to us; and we would succor them, and heal their wounds, and they would all find peace, here! Oh, why do you not see?”

Xena continued to stare at the woman, her emotions roiling. “*O, my sweet Gabrielle – we have a large problem, here – and one that will take all the tact we can muster. Something I’m running short of, at the moment!*” She felt a twinge from her mate – a reassuring surge of warmth that helped calm her anger. She sighed.

“Galatea – I know that it will take time for you to trust us, and for us to understand what you have accomplished on Lemnos. I am now going to make a pledge to you. If you knew anything of me, you would know that I do not pledge myself lightly! I always . . . **always** keep my word. I say to you that there will be **no** return to the ways of violence and warfare on this island. There will be **no** erosion of the peace and safety of the women of Lemnos. I **will** take these . . . ‘Outcasts’ under my

protection; and I **will** find a way to return them to the love of their sisters, and their rightful place in this society. I may not do so in the way you have chosen, but you will have to find a way to accept them – and they will learn to accept you. Beyond that, your ‘Dark One’ is going to have to relinquish the role that she has played - now that we are here, and ready to assume our rightful dominion and protection of this island, and of the Amazons of Lemnos. We have come at the Old Mother’s calling. The terms of the prophesy charge us, as the rightful Queens, to bring Lemnos into the Light. The big question now is - do we have your support, in this matter? I need to know - are you truly empowered as the High Priestess of the Temple of Gaia - or are you enthralled to this Pretender? Do **you** need our help, Galateia?” Xena paused. *“Please, let her give me some sign,”* she thought.

Galateia’s face was pale, and her brow was sweating. She looked at her abandoned cup – then snatched it up, and drained it of the remaining wine.

A sudden commotion interrupted the thick tension between them. Xena knew instantly that Gabrielle had returned. They both watched, as the sun-browed figure crossed the gap between the arched entryway and the arbor where they sat. She came up behind Xena, who felt a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Xena reached up and gave it a squeeze. Then she took the sword from her knees, and laid it across the table.

“Greetings, Galateia!” Gabrielle spoke, her voice cheerful. “How goes it, with you?” She crossed to the table, poured herself a cup of the wine, and plucked a ripe fig from the bowl of fruit. Then she plopped herself down on the flagstones at Xena’s feet, and sat back between Xena’s long legs. She took a healthy mouthful from the cup. “I have just been to the House of Healing, with Talia. It has been a very extraordinary day!” She took a bite of the fig, and waited expectantly for them to urge her on.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Gabrielle’s eyes drew together, a slight frown between them. She had hoped to calm the situation with her light-hearted approach. Xena put her hand to Gabrielle’s head, and combed her fingers affectionately backwards through the thick, silvery-gold hair.

“We’ve just been discussing some . . . issues . . . my love.” Xena said, lightly. “But I’m sure we’d both like to hear about it.” She looked across at Galateia, who visibly relaxed; relieved, no doubt, to be out from under the white-hot intensity of Xena, aroused. . . “But - before you do – Galateia was about to give me an answer. And I’d just like to get that out of the way, before we change the subject.” Her eyes

narrowed as she watched as the woman's face, where an ill-concealed battle was raging.

Gabrielle smiled. "Oh, of course – I will surely defer to our Priestess! And what is your answer, Galateia?" She gazed curiously at the woman. She had of course picked up most of the conversation, while she was walking back from the House of Healing – having 'listened in' after the first surge of outrage from Xena.

The woman hunched her shoulders, the conflict apparent in her face. She seemed uneasy. She tried to mask this – but not quickly enough, so both women caught the underlying anxiety.

'As I suspected,' Xena thought to Gabrielle. *"She's caught in a net she can't easily get out of."* Gabrielle's hand caressed Xena's calf.

Galateia had recovered her mask of calm, and answered. "I can only take this back to the Temple, and confer with the Dark One." Her face had resumed the expressionless mask of her position, but the woman who looked out of her eyes was a frightened, unhappy soul.

"Oh, adroitly done, my Priestess," Gabrielle thought, *"And you have told us volumes, without need of words: So much for the serenity of relinquishing your soul's burden! One thing at a time, though. The lines are drawn."*

Xena nodded. "Thank you, Galateia. We shall not fail in our obligation to **any** of the Amazons of Lemnos - including **you**. I expect you to take the rest of what I have said under advisement. We will surely have more to discuss – and soon."

Galateia inclined her head, but said nothing more. She rose, and strode off to the side gate. Xena and Gabrielle gazed after her.

"Well," Gabrielle said, "that was revealing. Do you think she is being manipulated?"

Xena reached down and gave her a hug. "She is being bullied and intimidated," she whispered in Gabrielle's ear. "And I think she is in danger."

"Of course she is." Gabrielle agreed, turning to look up at Xena. "And we'll have to rescue her, won't we?"

Xena nodded.

Gabrielle sighed. “Okay . . . put it on the list: Save the Outcasts, save Galatea, and vanquish the Pretender. Just, please – can we go for a swim, first?”

* * * * *

They made their way down to the harbor, and then took the path that curved out around the edge of the bay, toward a beach of white sand. As they walked, Xena filled Gabrielle in on the exchange with Galatea.

“Do you think Galatea got it? I mean, got that you suspect she is in trouble?”

Xena shook her head. “I hope that what I said, and how I said it, will sink in. I do not see her as an adversary, but I am certain that she is in thrall to this person, and - no, I don’t think the Pretender is anything even approaching a goddess. I know that what our InSight saw in Galatea is still there - but buried deep, now. Her youthful altruism and enthusiasm for the Legend of the Chakram and the Dragon were probably how she began her Stewardship. I think that time - and the influence of this hidden person - has ensnared her. And we’re beginning to get a hint of why the Old Mother was so keen to get us here.” She smiled bleakly at Gabrielle, who was walking, head down, her brow furrowed in thought, as she listened to Xena. “I just wish she trusted us, more I think we need to find out who this ‘Dark One’ really is, and the source of her power over Galatea and the others on this island, before she does any more harm to any of them. She is already causing Galatea great suffering.”

Gabrielle nodded, thoughtful. “That one reminds me too much of Alti. Oh gosh, Xe – do you suppose . . .?”

Xena shook her head vehemently. “No way - **that** one is permanently gone. But I agree – there is a similarity. I suspect this one has been trained as a shamaness, somewhere – the ritual she was performing reminded me of Anatolian practices. I have to tell you – her hold over Galatea includes bondage.”

Gabrielle stopped dead in her tracks, her face anguished. “Gods, Xe – are you sure?”

Xena nodded. “The night of the funeral, I saw them. You don’t want to know the details,” she said, dryly.

“We’ve got to **do** something, Xena!”

“I know. We will.”

“You have a plan?”

“Beginning to,” Xena said, laconically. “but first, we need reinforcements.”

“You mean, the Outcasts?”

“Exactly - and you need to summon the Egyptians. We’re going to need all the help we can muster. We have to move quickly, so she isn’t put into any more danger. I’m worried for Lykia, as well. None of us have seen **her** since the Old Mother’s ritual.”

“So – we go soon?”

“Soon.”

“Just you and me? Just the two of us? No horse?”

“No horse.” Xena’s expression softened.

“No tagalongs?”

“Nope.” Xena’s mouth twitched. Despite the dire circumstances, they needed this – the banter between them they’d had so long ago, and shared, in the old days. It had made so much bearable.

“What about the usual dim-witted but adoring villagers?” Gabrielle’s chin quivered.

”Hmmm . . . I don’t know about villagers. There **might** be some adoring Amazons - but they’re not dim-witted, as a rule.” Xena’s eyes danced.

“Can I bring my scrolls - and my staff?”

“Oh, my love! Could I expect anything less?”

Gabrielle shook her head, and they both broke up with laughter. When they had managed to catch their breath, Gabrielle shook her head, wiping the tears out of her eyes. “We’ll never get away with it! We have to be Queens. We have to have meetings! How are we going to manage this in secrecy – when everyone is one big ‘group hug’?”

“Oh, I don’t know - I think we might manage. We could leave Alysia and the Council in charge. It would work to our advantage, by the same token. We have the InSight, so it’s not as if we’d be out of touch. We’ll just need to shield our interactions from the Lemnian women”

“Do we dare go off and leave our Tribe at the mercy of the Pretender? Do you think Galatea is safe, now that you have thrown down the challenge? Do they think we will just go quietly like sheep to the slaughter? I have had my fill of Lethe, Xena – I am not going to give up my memories – no matter how painful they have been!”

Xena shook her head. “I know. I will not give up mine, either – not again! We need to show them another way, Gabrielle: the way of the Light. As we have always done. Look at what happened, just today, with you and that healing. It is another way that you found. Why do you suppose they hadn’t figured that out, already?”

Gabrielle shook her head. “Don’t know, Xe. It seemed such a simple thing, when it happened. It was like I was meant to know it, all along.”

“Exactly - we seem to draw on the InSight to bring about healing. If I hadn’t done the chakram thing, and you hadn’t released the Dragon, do you suppose the essence of the Old Mother would have ended up in the fluid? Then been available to transform that dirt? Somehow, I doubt it. No – it was something about you that made it change, when you combined the two and helped heal that woman’s injury. We disrupted the intent of the ‘Dark One’, to suck all the dark memories of the Old Mother into the ShieldWall. Instead, the goodness and the Light of the Old Mother caused the change in the waters. Maybe that’s why the same things don’t happen with them. They’re all too dopey.”

Gabrielle shook her head. ‘I guess that’s what the Old Mother meant, about you and I being from the true Gaia. We seem to have access to power that they do not – even though we share the InSight. At least, they have something that is akin to our InSight - but the ‘Dark One’ is perverting it. All these women walk around Lemnos, now, with gaps in themselves. They have paid too high a price for their

happiness and peace, and they don't even know it. Won't we have to do something about this, for Galatea - and against this Pretender - before we go?"

Xena nodded. "Looks like it. I would not want any oath-taking or weapons confiscating happening while we are gone. Or that Galatea should pay for our lack of piety."

Gabrielle nodded. Then her face lit up. "Imagine – just the two of us, out on our own, going off to right the wrongs and rescue the oppressed! Imagine that!"

They looked at one another ruefully. Some things would never change.

When they reached the beach, they disrobed. Gabrielle unfastened her sandals and took off running across the sand and into the aquamarine water. Xena followed after. They whooped and sputtered as they dove in; and, swimming with powerful strokes, they raced one another out into the bay. Gabrielle's arms and shoulders were powerful, but Xena had those long legs, so they were surprisingly well matched.

They arrived together at a small flat rock that stuck up from the floor of the bay, and hoisted themselves out of the water onto its surface, to let the warm sun dry them. Xena lay on her back, the water droplets glittering on her tanned skin, her eyes closed. Her chest heaved as she panted from the exertion of the swim. Gabrielle lay beside her, on her stomach, propped up on her elbows. She could feel the soft, caressing breeze across the surface of her skin, and she shivered in delight. She exhilarated in the sudden rush of feeling, as the knowledge welled up within her: they were equally matched – full partners. She pushed up onto her knees, placing her hands on either side of Xena, and brushed her tongue across Xena's chest, licking up the salty droplets. Xena jumped, reflexively, at the feel of it - keeping her eyes closed against the sun. Gabrielle watched, as the aureoles darkened in relief, and the nipples swelled and hardened with desire. Xena's hands grabbed Gabi's shoulders.

"What are you doing to me?" she growled.

"O, I am loving you, my Xena," Gabrielle said, her voice husky with emotion.

"Huh. Two lecherous old women," Xena smiled, her eyes still closed - arms reaching around the sweet, familiar body, pulling her close. As the sun traveled west in the sky, their figures began to move in the age-old dance.

* * * * *



Chapter 4

The following morning, Xena and Gabrielle met with Alysia, the Council of Thessalonian Amazons, Io, and Paphos. They explained the situation – Xena’s conversation with Galatea – and the urgency they felt to find and make contact with the Outcast Amazons. Galatea’s comments had indicated to them that the band was somewhere on the north coast of Lemnos. They would visit the Temple – and after a confrontation with the High Priestess and the ‘Dark One’, they meant to set out for the North. In order to slip out without the inhabitants of the Temple knowing, a diversion was going to have to be set in motion, so that Xena and Gabrielle could go North, and make contact with the Outcasts as quickly as possible.

The Council was uneasy. The dark cloud of the Pretender hung above their heads, and they did not appreciate her oppressive presence. They did not want their Queens out of the picture so soon after a major confrontation. They were all for decamping, en-mass, and joining up with the Outcasts. They had lost their initial enchantment with the peaceful town of Myrina, and the women who lived there so quietly. The inhabitants’ serenity now seemed ominous. Xena and Gabrielle had quite a job to convince them of the rashness of this idea.

“Look, I know how you feel.” Xena said to them. “All your sympathies go out to those women, wretched in the North, isolated and probably suffering privation. You don’t like it that cut off from their Tribe they live deprived of the rights they all should share as free Amazon women. You are right about that. The answer is not to add more of us to their ranks. The answer is to dissolve the Wall that separates them from the rest of us. The answer is to break the hold that this ‘Dark One’ has over the whole Nation.”

Eusta, the one among them who had refused the InSight, now spoke. “But how will that keep all of us safe, Xena? The ‘ShieldWall’ you talk of is surely effective, in keeping out the hordes we have just escaped. How will you defend us without it? Isn’t this just the thing that your InSight was meant to do?”

Xena looked quietly at the assembled solemn faces. This was going to be a hard thing to say - maybe an impossible thing to ask of them.

Gabrielle, who had been standing by silently, spoke up in her stead. “If there had been no ShieldWall, when we arrived on this island, would you have stayed, anyway? Remember – we came ignorant of its existence.”

They sat, silent. She was right, of course. They had come, trusting in Artemis, They had come, trusting in Xena and Gabrielle. They had all so longed for a safe harbor, and a quiet life.

”I know how tired you are – we all are – of encountering such fear, and violence, wherever we go. We have to make a stand, here in Myrina, and for this whole island home. We have to build a strong, happy Tribe, who will inhabit all the hills and valleys of this place, and live together as one Nation. That will come, but only if we are willing to trust one another, and hold on to all that we are, and all that we have been, and will be. I am asking that you stay here, and not give up on your Sisters in Myrina. I am asking that you let Xena and I find a way to return the emotions, dreams and memories of these women to their rightful place, which is in their own hearts and minds. They may find it hard to live fearlessly without the oblivion of Lethe. In the end, it will be infinitely better than the powerlessness that this ShieldWall enforces. We shall have allies arriving here, soon, in the women from Egypt. They will be able to help with this in ways I haven’t even had time to explain to you all. We can do this.”

Xena smiled at Gabrielle. Her Bardic Voice was strong, vibrant, and truthful. Every day, she was a demonstrably stalwart and powerful leader, the partner of her heart. “*She builds them up, so I can tell them the hard part. Will it work, I wonder?*” She studied the faces before them.

“There will be some disarray, when it comes time to take down the ShieldWall. I can probably guarantee that you will see some unhappy women around here. We will not let that turn to something dark for the Sisters of Thessaly. The hard battle is not for you. It is for Gabrielle and I; and it is with Galateia, the Sibyls in the Temple, and above all, with this ‘Dark One’ who calls herself ‘Gaia.’ I wish it

were easy – a simple matter of going to the Temple, and casting down this Pretender – but the ShieldWall is made of the memories and feelings of all the women of Lemnos – barring the Outsiders – and they unconsciously keep it knitted together, and functioning. The ‘Dark One’ has merely enabled them to do this.”

Gabrielle spoke up again. “In order to convince them to release the power of that ShieldWall, we must be clear about the consequences of keeping it. For all they have given up of their fears and sorrows, they have traded them for isolation, and ultimate oblivion. No one can now come to Lemnos. No one can seek refuge here, as long as the ShieldWall stands. Not one more woman in the Known World may come here, ever again, as long as the Tribe of Lemnos survives. How long would that be, with no descendants to inherit our Right of Caste? When we are all gone, what kind of a place will remain, but a deserted isle, waiting for some conqueror to claim. Who will hand down the stories of the Amazons, then? We will not let you down. We will confront them, and help them to see the right – and the only – solution.”

The women conferred with one another, while the two Queens waited patiently. Io and Paphos sat quietly to one side, listening to the whole proceeding. Gabrielle smiled reassuringly at them. Then she called the meeting to order once more.

“My good Council – will you give us your support in this matter?”

Alysia stood, as the titular head of the Council. “My Queens, we are in your hands. We are for you, as we always have been, and always will be. You are our hope and our strong shield. You are our comfort, and our spirit. We await your instruction. How can we be of service, now?”

Xena heaved a sigh of relief. Then she listed quickly, ticking off her fingers as she spoke: “First, we will pay a visit to the Temple. We will not be telling Galateia and the Pretender of our plans, however. Our visit to them will be to set the “diversion” in motion. Second, we will need you, Alysia, to take over the daily decision-making. Third, we will need the rest of you to keep watch on the Temple, the Sibyls, and Galateia. I expect that the ‘Dark One’ will continue to remain hidden. This is not someone who walks around and barter at the marketplace, or hangs out the clothing on washday!” They all laughed, albeit nervously. “But make no mistake – you may have to act – with the full force of Amazon defensive capability, if need be. Finally, we will be going north to find the lost Amazons, and do something at least temporarily to disable the ShieldWall while we are at it. We both feel that it may become necessary for us to bring the Outcasts back with us - if

they will agree - to help deal with the Pretender. I think it would be good if we could have a guide, when we leave – someone who is familiar with the land, and who would not be indisposed to us.”

Ikthenia spoke up. “I think I know someone. There is a woman I was introduced to, shortly after we arrived. She is the goatherd who roams the hills outside Myrina, moving with the goats as they graze. My guess is you could work your way north with her. Most of the island is inhabited only by the herds and wild animals. I believe she is still in Myrina, gathering supplies.”

Xena nodded. “All right, Ikthenia. Will you find this woman, and ask her to come to us this evening, if possible?”

She nodded. “I’ll go now.” She got up from the table, and left.

Xena turned to the others on the Council. “Will you adjourn, now, and let us work out the details of the rest? We will be sure to have Alysia report to you, as all of this unfolds. We will keep in touch with you, Alysia. using the InSight.” They arose, and departed after Alysia. Eusta lingered a moment, behind the others. Gabrielle looked up, and smiled at her.

“Eusta - what more can we do for you?”

The woman looked sadly at Gabrielle and Xena. “It is not important, my Queens. I just wondered . . . have you seen Lykia anywhere, since the Old Mother’s funeral? I was supposed to spend some time with her – to begin to learn the basic rituals for the next feast day, and she never has come to get me. I know we aren’t welcome yet, at the Temple, so I didn’t feel comfortable just going there . . .” she trailed off, her face full of concern.

Gabrielle walked over and put her arm around Eusta’s shoulders. “No, we haven’t seen her. I asked Xena about her, myself. She is usually out and about, and I expected to see her at the House of Healing, when Talia and I were there. She wasn’t there, either. We will see if we can find out for you. Maybe she is not feeling well, or has forgotten your meeting plans.”

The woman nodded, and silently turned and left the room.

Io and Paphos remained with them. Io spoke up. “Can’t we go with you?” she pleaded, in a rush. “I know you would rather be off by yourselves. It would be good experience for us, and we are eager to see more of our new home.”

Xena looked at Gabrielle. They had known this would come up. Neither of them wanted to have to say no, but they both knew that this time they would.

Gabrielle smiled, and took Io’s hand in hers. “Io, we know how much you and Paphos want to be with us, and share in our adventures here. This is a situation that neither one of us is clear on, yet – we do not know what to expect. We need to approach the Outcasts with care, and determine what to do about them. We know that they are probably blind to what has been happening since our arrival. They may not even know about us. They are likely an unhappy lot, from what we have been able to find out. We will be starting from scratch, and we think having only the two of us will pose less of a threat” She paused, waiting for Io’s response.

Io looked at Paphos, crestfallen. “But, will you feel . . . safe? I mean, two more wouldn’t be so bad . . .” She watched the two women’s faces, and saw their answer. “I . . . I guess you and Xena know best.”

Xena grinned. “Did you think we were just going to let you sit idle? We have a big job for you. You are going to be our “diversion.” Do you remember what we told you about the forty Egyptian women? After their sojourn in Athens, Anacreon was to bring them to Lemnos. With things as they are now, that would not be possible. Gabrielle has been in contact with them - using the InSight – and has directed them to go instead to Lesbos, where they are to stay with Sappho, until we call for them to come home to Lemnos. Gabrielle and I want the two of you to go to Lesbos. It means getting Althaia and a crew for the *Leto*. You will go to Sappho, and wait there for the women to arrive. When they have, you will bring them back. With any luck, by then the ShieldWall will be down for good,”

Paphos’ eyes widened. “You . . . you mean – **the** Sappho?”

Gabrielle smiled. “Yes.”

Io nodded, her brow furrowed with thinking of the plan. “But – how long do we have to wait there? What if the Destroyer has taken them or Anacreon is dead? How will we know? And how are we going to be a ‘diversion’?”

Gabrielle smiled. “Good questions, Io . . . They are even now sailing to Lesbos. I received a mind message from Djeserit just this morning.. It won’t be such a long wait!. Especially as you will be in such good company! You may even arrive there at the same time – if the winds are favorable.”

Xena looked at them keenly. “You will be the diversion, because we will be telling Galateia and the other one that the two of you are going to school – with Sappho on Lesbos.”

They both looked at each other, and Gabrielle and Xena watched them hesitate, their eyes big with fear and excitement. “Okay – so they are more likely to let us go, right? That would be because it seems so – well, ordinary? Paphos smiled. “Awesome!”

“And of course, you won’t say anything about forty Egyptian women coming back with us! We will do whatever it takes, Xena. We will make you proud. You’ll see!” Io put her hand on her heart, to swear it.

“We have confidence that you’ll do just fine.” Gabrielle got up, went around the table, and gave them both a hug. Paphos paused, and looked back at the two women. “Could I really have gone to school with Sappho?”

“Would you like that?” Gabrielle asked - her expression soft.

“OH – it would be wonderful!”

“After all this is over, I will see what we can arrange.”

Paphos came back, and threw her arms around Gabrielle. They she ran off to join Io, and begin their preparations.

“All right, so let’s review this.” Gabrielle said. . “I thought you said that the ShieldWall keeps everyone away. So now, we are going to ask, very nicely and sweetly, for them to part the waters, so to speak – and let the *Leto* sail.”

Xena nodded. “Yep; exactly - the wall keeps the world out – but it also keeps all of us **in**. Nice little control factor, isn’t it - especially for someone who enjoys control.”

Gabrielle slowly shook her head. “Wait a minute, Xe. That puts Io and Paph . . . Oh - no, they would be like bait, Xe! The ‘Dark One’ will be watching that boat like a hawk! We’ll be off in the highlands; but then what, if she decides to change her mind? What are you thinking?” Her voice rose with her anger. Then she stopped abruptly. “On the other hand . . . they’re not exactly children, any longer. And we will need those women, especially for the mending, once the ShieldWall is down.” Her eyes were suddenly full, and she didn’t bother to wipe them.

Xena looked away. “I know,” she said, softly. “But I swore, long ago, that if we had another situation, none of ours would ever again be used against us – like Solon and Hope, and even Eve . . . I think if we play this right, Io and Paphos will be allowed to go. We are more likely to be the ‘bait.’ I just don’t want to underestimate this person – whoever it turns out to be. I was too aware of the Old Mother’s real fear – which means there is true power, there, that needs disarming. If we can get them away to Sappho, and have Sappho keep them safe for us, until this is resolved, I’d feel a whole lot better, wouldn’t you? Then they can come back, once the Wall is down, and bring those women with them.”

Gabrielle put her hand on Xena’s arm, pulling her close. “Another reason I have to agree with you on this one, my love.” She hugged the woman to her chest, wanting her to relax. “Now, are we ready to ‘beard the scorpion’ in her den?”

“Oh, sure – like what else did we have planned, today? We haven’t had a good challenge since the Ceremony. I just cannot wait to be the mad, bad, Xena! A day without confrontation is **so** boring.” Her grimace was genuine. Her determination to make things right was equally so.

* * * * *

Xena and Gabrielle pushed open the tall, bronzed doors of the Temple, and strode through into the darkened interior. The hall, with its circular peristyle of columns, was silent. As they stood quietly, the torches mounted at regular intervals around the walls suddenly lit, one after another. A figure came through from the opposite side of the circle. It was the Galateia. The three Sibyls followed, and silently stood behind her as she came to a stop before the two women.

“My Queens,” she said - her voice low and guarded. “To what do we owe this sudden visit?”

Xena came up closer, so she was eye to eye with the High Priestess. “Two things bring us here, Galateia. First, Eusta asked us to inquire after Lykia – she hasn’t been seen since the Old Mother’s passage. Lykia invited Eusta to participate in the next feast day rituals, and was to have begun teaching them to her after the funeral. She has not done so, and Eusta is concerned. We hope she is well?”

Galateia licked her lips and her face suddenly flashed a look of anguish, quickly masked. She struggled to find her voice.

“Ah, she is undertaking a retreat . . . She is in seclusion. It is . . . a custom for one of us to do so . . . after a Great One has passed.”

Gabrielle watched her carefully, a growing sense of alarm rising up within her. Something was not right, here. The woman was lying, and - she was upset. “How long a seclusion is required?”

“Oh, it varies. It is pretty much left up to the individual. Ly . . . Lykia did not indicate how long she felt moved to do so.”

Gabrielle nodded, giving Xena a quick look. “Ah . . . I see. Well, I’ll tell Eusta that Lykia will be delayed for some time. I’m sure she can be patient, in this.”

Xena now spoke up. “We have also come, Galateia, to meet with ‘Gaia’. I suggest you announce us at once.”

“I . . . do not know if that is possible, my Queens. She is not . . . someone who comes at my beck and call.”

“No? Who else would have the ability to ‘beck and call’ her, if not the High Priestess of the Temple? Doesn’t a state visit of the Royal House of Lemnos deserve her august presence?” Xena’s intent was clear. She was not in the mood for quibbling over semantics. “So what’s it going to be, here? Does she come to us, or do we go to her?”

Galateia was now visibly wringing her hands.. “Please, my Queens – do not take offence where none is intended! It pains me to see us at odds, like this. Is there no way that we can make our relations more amenable?” Here eyes betrayed desperation.

“That depends on how you take the subject of our visit.” Gabrielle spoke up, her voice calm and even. They would have to play this carefully, so Galatea would not be in an untenable position.

Galatea turned with a look of surprise, on her face. “And what subject would that be?”

“Simply this: we have had plans for sending our wards, Io and Paphos, to Lesbos. We expected them to attend Sappho’s school. She has agreed to foster them. This was something we had decided before we ever came here, and we had no idea this . . . barrier was going to be a problem. Therefore, you can imagine our dismay. The young ones have naturally been excited at the prospect for some time, and we would hate for this to prevent them from having the experience. We need you to make the necessary . . . arrangement . . . so that the *Leto* can transverse the . . . barrier . . . and take them there **safely**.”

Xena watched the woman closely, as she picked up the conversation. “So is this something that you are allowed to do, or does it require a decree from On High? If that is so, we would rather have it direct from the ‘horse’s mouth’ – if you take my meaning.”

The Priestess stood silently, her eyes searching the faces of the two Queens. The sudden question about Lykia had thrown her completely. How could they know? She had been terrified that this would get back to the Dark One, who had promised her even more unbearable torture, should word of Lykia’s absence become common knowledge. She quailed at the prospect of the truth coming out – especially if the Queens discovered what had happened. She wanted this so much to be over, and done with. She wanted them to be the heroes she had envisioned them to be, and not push her into the darkness that threatened, if she did not comply with the ‘Dark One’s demands. How could she possibly tell them - that Lykia had been murdered, by the Dark One, after the fiasco of the funeral? The woman’s rage at the Queens had been uncontrollable. She had taken it out on the poor woman. Galatea was bereft - and under that, ashamed.. She should have taken Lykia’s place. At least the torment would have ended.

“I will ask.” She turned, and walked back the way she had come. The Sibyls stood where they were; as if rooted to their spots on the floor like some strange caryatids. It gave Gabrielle the willies. She wanted the comfort of Xena’s voice in her head, but this was no time or place to try the InSight. She kept her eyes on Xena, as the tall figure roamed around the hall, walking past the silent figures as if they were of

stone. Xena stopped, abruptly, in front of one of the still figures. She looked closely at the expressionless face, then smiled, and whispered something in its ear. After a moment, the figure slowly turned its head and looked at Xena. Then she turned back, eyes forward – still expressionless. Xena smiled again, and came back to Gabrielle's side, and put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulders, hugging her reassuringly. 'Courage,' she breathed. "This will soon be over."

"What was that all about?"

"I'll tell you later . . ."

The figure of the Priestess appeared, suddenly, followed by the dark, looming figure in black. She moved to one side, gesturing to the Queens, and spoke to the wraith. "The Queens of Lemnos, Exalted One, have come to supplicate you." She bowed her head, the image of deference.

Xena grimaced at the characterization, and coolly looked the figure up and down. Whoever the woman was, she was a head taller than Xena. Gabrielle stayed close to Xena, and worked to slow her breathing. She was surprised at the fear she felt. "*Silly – just because the woman is tall, doesn't mean she's fearsome!*" She flinched, as the hooded visage swiveled to stare at her, the words barely surfacing in her mind. "*Ok, I guess I am being a little quick to judge, here.*" A thin sound of hissing laughter emanated from the figure.

Xena moved, then, standing unconsciously taller; and Gabrielle could feel the steel coiling inside her partner, and the dull emotional surge as Xena worked to keep it in check.

"Well, we are waiting to hear what you have to say. Are the rightful Queens of Lemnos **permitted** to request that you lift the barrier for one small boat and two young Amazons?" Xena spoke, her voice stern.

The figure turned its head away from scrutinizing the blonde Queen and settled again on the tall, white-haired one. This Xena was always the troublemaker. It was tiresome, and vexing. She had hoped that, with the demise of the Old Mother, they would come willingly to heel. It was obviously not going to be so simple. She growled in her throat with annoyance. "*However, flies come better to honey,*" she reminded herself. "*Give them enough rope . . .*" Besides - she would know where the brats were, if there had to be a sudden change in her plans.

“You try my patience, Xena of Amphipolis. Nevertheless, I am not a vengeful Goddess, and I will allow your younglings to travel to Sappho. Their voyage through the ShieldWall can coincide nicely with the occasion of the Queens of Lemnos taking their Oath. We shall expect you both here as soon as you have seen to their departure from the harbor. You can bring the rest of the Amazons of Thessaly with you. Of course, should you decline the invitation; you can expect that they will never return to Lemnos – at least, not in your lifetime.” She turned, abruptly, and was suddenly gone. The torches flared, and went out.

Galateia looked at them with a sorrowful face. “I hope you will see this as favorable, my Queens - and when the time comes, you will understand, and join your subjects in the ways of Lemnos.” Her eyes dropped to the floor, then her gaze came up once more – desolate and pleading. “We are only here to serve them.”

Xena looked steadily at the woman. “As are we, Galateia. I doubt any of us will forget that. Meanwhile, have courage, Priestess. Help comes in strange ways, even if unexpected, and uncalled for.” The two of them turned, and strode from the Temple. Gaia gazed after them.” *There is little hope.*” she thought sadly. *“She is used to getting her way.”*

The bronze doors boomed shut behind them.

* * * * *

They walked up the hill toward their home.

“So what do you think?” Gabrielle asked - her voice husky with emotion.

Xena shook her head – her anger barely contained. “I have a bad feeling about this. I don’t believe that stuff about a retreat – Galateia looked stricken at Lykia’s name even being mentioned. My guess is – something very bad has happened.”

“Do you think . . . Lykia is a captive of this Pretender?”

“No, sweetheart . . . I think she’s past even that – I think she is dead.”

Gabrielle felt a chill pass through her. “Xe – what is going on, here? Who **is** this person?”

“I don’t know, yet - but I will - and believe me, we won’t stop until she is dealt with. There is too much fear and too much manipulation by someone pretending to be the Goddess of a peaceful Amazon Nation. From where I stand, it looks more like she’s got everyone just where she wants them, and is indulging in her own personal private kingdom of domination.”

* * * * *



Chapter 5

Io and Paphos went down to the harbor the next morning. They needed to arrange with Althea to get the *Leto* to leave as soon as possible. The weather was fine: a promising stiff wind out of the west. They estimated it would take a good ten candle marks to get to Lesbos. They hoped to get the details worked out immediately. They stopped at Alysia and Eusta’s home, and picked up a hefty pouch of dinars, to use for the expenses on their trip. Alysia told them she wanted them to be very cautious and circumspect about the plans for the sailing. Since Xena and Gabrielle were leaving this same morning, they had to be ready to divert attention. They took no other baggage with them – in order to appear to be merely running errands. They had to have their story ready – and be able to tell it convincingly.

As they approached the docks, Paphos suddenly put her hand on Io’s arm. Io slowed, and turned to look at her.

“What?”

“*Here comes trouble.*” Paphos telegraphed to her. Io saw immediately - Galateia was walking directly toward them. She patted Paphos’ hand, which was convulsively clutching her arm even tighter, as the Priestess came closer.

“Io and Paphos!” She hailed them, her face curious. “What brings you here so early? I thought you were preparing for your journey to Sappho.”

“Oh, yes – we are.”

“Ah . . . we wanted to see about getting some . . . some . . .” Paphos trailed off.

“Fish!” Io interjected. “Fish. Lots of fish,” she added, lamely. “We are planning a big feast, a kind of farewell feast, see – before we leave for Lesbos. And we knew that the Queens like fish, so we thought we’d come down and speak with the fishing crews, and arrange for it . . . them, I mean . . . the fish.” she stuttered.

Galatea smiled blandly at them. “Ah . . . I see.” She said. “Well, don’t let me keep you . . . from your fish!” She started again, then paused, and turned back to them. “Oh, please tell Xena and Gabrielle I have the time factor for them. I will stop by later today.”

“Oh!” Paphos responded. “That won’t be possible . . . they’re . . . they’re . . .” she turned and looked at Io with a beseeching look.

“They’re off camping for a while . . .” Io said, quickly. “Won’t be back for oh, I’d say three suns . . . didn’t they say, Paphos?” she added, doing her best to smile.

“Camping?” Galatea repeated, looking startled. “What is this camping?”

“Oh, it’s something they used to do, in the old days . . .” Io shrugged. “They like it. They go out in the hills, nobody around for miles. It’s a kind of ritual - . . . and they . . . camp. We’re going to have the feast as soon as they get back, and then we’re off to school!”

The Priestess shook her head. “Not very convenient, considering your immanent departure!” she said.

Io nodded. “I guess. Well, that is just their way. They don’t like arguments about their camping. She shook her head. ”It’s very . . . sacred to them.”

“Sacred?”

“Oh, yeah - No question.” Paphos joined in. “Really sacred. We aren’t even allowed to ask about it!”

“I see. Well, since it is a matter of the sacred, I will just have to give you a message for them when they return from this . . . camping. Tell them the passage is possible - but only for the next quarter-moon. You will tell them, won’t you?” Galateia moved off, without a backward look.

“Certainly we will.” Io called out, as she smiled and waved at the Priestess. “I just don’t get her!” she hissed to Paphos, as soon as the Priestess was out of sight. “What do you mean?”

“There is just something so phony about her. She acts so calm – but you know, underneath that mask – she seems frightened, to me. I have a confession to make . . . I tried the InSight on her, once!”

“Io! Weren’t you worried she’d catch you?” Paphos gave her a horrified look.

“Nah – I was pretty crafty about it. Anyway, I saw that Galateia really believes all that stuff about the legend of the Two Queens. She sure is into all those rituals, and chanting and stuff. She’s super single-minded when it comes to having no weapons here, and no violence. I just do not see how they manage it, without doing something weird to keep intruders away, and not have armed Amazons anywhere. I still feel . . . naked. I know - it is silly. There is no violence here, right? Then why does it make my skin crawl? That doesn’t even **begin** to describe how I feel about that supposed Goddess person! She gives me the **willies**. . I feel like she could chew me up for breakfast, and spit my bones out for the cats! I don’t care what they think – she’s not a Goddess, at all. We never used to wonder with Artemis. You always knew how much She loved us, with that One - even if She was in a major snit sometimes! I think this one is flat-out **evil**.”

Paphos nodded. “I know . . . she has some serious power. She gives me the creeps too. But I know what you mean – they are all so closed-mouthed about the weapons, and avoiding violence. They seem so . . I don’t know – completely unconcerned. Underneath that, don’t you think they are all just afraid? Although, I have to admit I’ve never heard any of them so much as whimper, or shout, or get angry, or anything, much. They all act as if they just woke up! You know, we have probably been through more ordeals, year for year, than these women have **ever** faced. I’d say we could hold our own, if we had to.”

They hustled over to the fishing smacks, lined up at the docks. They were looking for Althaia, who was currently crewing on one of the boats. The name of the vessel

was the *Cassiopeia*. It was there, moored alongside the others, and Althaia was just tying off some rigging when they came alongside.

“Hola, Althaia!” Io sang out. The woman grinned, and waved them closer.

“Hola! What brings you two down here?” she offered them a hand up, and they eagerly swarmed aboard.

“We’re on a mission for Xena and Gabrielle - and it’s very urgent. Is there some place we can talk with you that is private?”

Althaia looked intrigued. “Sure – come into the cabin . . . the others are away, getting some stores for the galley. So we have a few minutes, anyway.”

They ducked into the small cabin amidships, and Paphos began hurriedly to explain. “Xena and Gabrielle want you to take the *Leto* over to Lesbos – the sooner the better! We have to go there, and bring back all those Egyptian women Gabrielle told us about – remember?”

Io chimed in. “Althaia, Xena said you should be in charge. We don’t know where the *Leto*’s crew is, now.”

Althaia scratched her close-cropped head, and stared out the opening at the harbor beyond. “Well! I don’t see why I shouldn’t. We have just been out for the last week, and managed a good catch. Nothing else planned but a layover. I’m a free agent, now. When do you want to go?”

“Right away – as soon as it is possible.”

Althaia arranged with the two youngsters that they would meet at the *Leto*’s moorage within two candle-marks. She would gather up and load the stores for the journey. The other Thessalonian Amazons who crewed the boat were living aboard the *Leto*, so they would not be hard to find. They could easily get underway at the turning of the tide.

* * * * *

Earlier that same morning, Xena and Gabrielle were up and preparing to leave. The sun was just a dim glow to the east, over the bay of Myrina. They silently stowed the familiar items in the packs that had seen so much of their lives together: the

changes of clothing, the scrolls and quill case, the medicine bag. Gabrielle had a small pouch of the rare earth, as well, and a small skin of the water from the Altar of Gaia. Flints, hunting knives, and a stash of tea. A cooking pan. A bag of olives, figs, cheese, and bread. Two nested wooden bowls and spoons. Their bedroll. Two full skins of water. Then they stopped at the weapons wall. Gabrielle took down her staff. She turned, and looked at Xena, who stood silently, her eyes roaming over the collection.

“Anything more?” she asked, laying her hand lightly on Xena’s arm.

Xena turned, and looked out the window, at the growing light of day. She shook her head. “No – I think not.” She turned back, and gave Gabi a pensive smile. “All right, my Love – let’s go!” They walked down the steps, and out into the dawn.

In the street below, they found Ikthenia, Alysia and the herder, who had come to them the evening after their visit to the Temple. Together, they had mapped out their route. They would be led to her camp on the high plateau by the herder, then move along with the goats, to the northwestern part of Lemnos. Alysia and Ikthenia bade them farewell.

“Ikthenia, keep a wary eye on the Temple for us, will you?” Xena cautioned. “Call it prudence. I want you to be ready for anything.” She turned to Alysia. “Above all, keep your InSight on the two youngsters. I hope that Galateia and the Pretender will be lulled into thinking that they will not sail for at least another week, once they hear the story Io and Paphos will feed them. They are vulnerable until they are well away from the island. Althea will be in charge of the *Leto*. Make sure she understands the situation - she needs to get them away no later than tomorrow.”

Alysia nodded. “You can depend upon it, my Queens.”

* * * * *

They took the path leading northeast, up over the low ridge of volcanic hills surrounding the peaceful bay. The way was rocky, and hard on the feet, but they both had forsaken their sandals for sturdy boots. They were also wearing short Roman-style togas and leggings. Soon, their stride lengthened, as they stretched out their walking muscles. Their spirits lifted, to meet the rising sun. The scent of rosemary was strong in the air, and there were scattered patches of wildflowers growing among them,

“We haven’t been across country like this since . . . well, in a long time.” Gabrielle mused, as she walked by Xena’s side. Her staff made a rhythmic thump that evoked a surprising number of memories. They were setting a good pace. The woman who accompanied them walked slightly ahead. Seemed to prefer silence, and kept her distance. Obviously not used to Queens as everyday company.

“True.” Xena nodded. “Do you think we’ve forgotten how to do this?” she teased.

Gabrielle flashed a brilliant smile. “O, I think we’ll remember. Some things stay with you! Like riding a horse – or . . .”

“ . . . Fishing?” Xena prompted - a big grin on her face.

Another wave of memory washed over Gabrielle: images of herself, laughing, as Xena did her imitation of a Great Blue Heron; then tossing her a flopping big fish. “Not much chance of that here . . . look at this land – volcanic, isn’t it? It reminds me of the area around Mount Olympus . . . and Mount Fuji.” Gabrielle sighed. “It’s not very hospitable to lakes. We’ll be lucky to find running streams. I wouldn’t mind an occasional fish – but we’d have to be getting it from the sea – and we’re not likely to see that until we hit the north coast.”

“I was joking, Gabrielle.” Xena said, reaching out and ruffling Gabi’s hair, as they walked.

“Do you think Io and Paphos are all right with the plan? It seems - somehow dishonest to send them there thinking they will come back so soon. I left a scroll of introduction for Sappho, with Paphos. Do you think they will really be permitted to get to Lesbos? Did anybody find out if Althea is in port? I thought she sign up with a fishing boat, to get more experience. Will they manage to find crew enough for the *Leto*, from among our Thessalonian Amazons still in Myrina? I know many of them have spread out already and are building their new homes. I fear for them, Xe . . .”

Xena smiled to herself, as she listened to this running river of worry coming from her mate: another flashback to the constant chatter of a certain young woman from Potedeia. “Gabrielle,” she gently chided, “you’re fussing.”

“I know, Xe.” It’s just that I’m bothered.” She shook her head. They kept walking. Xena waited. Sooner or later, Gabrielle would settle. She could count on it.

Gabrielle walked ahead of her, with the guide out front. Her ash-blonde head was shaking slowly back and forth. She was sorting it all out.

“GODS – NO! NOT THIS, AGAIN!” She swore, as she abruptly stopped in her tracks. Xena was brought up short, right behind her mate. The forcefulness of her cry caused the guide to turn, and stare at them from her place a few yards ahead of them on the track. And Gabrielle was suddenly, unaccountably, in tears. Xena stood, nonplussed, and then - in a stride - had her arms about the Bard.

“Hey, whoa – sweetheart – what is this?”

Gabrielle sniffed, and angrily swiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, Xe – it’s just that I really am having trouble trusting that we can just go **do** this, like we always did before. That *creature* is frightening me . . . Me - the Lion of Thebes! It doesn’t make any sense! Here we are on a perfectly safe island, without any likelihood of violence or danger. We are walking along - two grown, capable women, with no need for weapons. We have powers we don’t even understand! Why should I be fearful? This is ridiculous!”

“Yup - it is ridiculous. But it’s also understandable.” Xena turned, and looked at the guide, who had dropped to her haunches, and was patiently waiting for them to resume their journey. “My sister,” Xena called out. “We are going to sit here and have a conversation. Is the path well-marked?” The woman nodded affirmatively. “Good,” Xena said. “How about you go on ahead, and we’ll catch up to you later?” The woman looked speculatively at them, then nodded once more, rose to her feet, and went on up the trail, until she was out of sight over a small rise.

“Now,” Xena said, turning back to her mate. “Let’s get this sorted out.” She went over to a large outcropping of rock, flat on the top, which stood dustily nearby. The sun was not so high in the sky, yet, and the morning light was pleasant enough. They sat on it together. As they had done so often in their lives, Gabrielle leaned in, Xena’s arms protectively around her. How many conversations they’d had, over the years, in just this way? . . . and usually, it all got said.

“So what am I doing, now?” Gabrielle sighed, heavily. “I feel like such an infant!” She accepted the water skin that Xena handed her. She took a deep swig of the cool water.

“Exactly! Here we are setting out on a journey - doing things we used to do, a hundred times before. We have been reminded of things we used to talk and just

about, our old ways of playing. What's more natural, than that you should suddenly be thrown back to that time, when life was not so easy for us, and the dangers were constant? Look - in the past few minutes, you mentioned Fuji. This is a hard memory, and it brings back all the old feelings and sorrow. The last time we set out together, alone, cross country like this - was the road to Jappa."

"You mean, I'm remembering the loss so intensely, that I am feeling what I felt then, as if it were now?"

"Well - not completely. The remembered pain – not the real pain. The InSight is strong in you now – so you are connecting with your younger self in ways that make the remembered pain more intense. Now we have that goddess-Pretender to confront. We will certainly have to face her down: sooner, or later – and that will not be pleasant. Of course, we'll be equal to it – we've faced much worse, in our time. Only now, you are battling with that youngster in you, who still feels vulnerable and remembers the pain of the past. So you are certainly feeling vulnerable. I'm not always good with the deep stuff – but does that make sense?"

"Yeah – it makes sense." She laughed, shakily. "How did you get so wise and articulate?"

"Well, I got carried along inside you for quite a spell, for one. And, then - I had the good sense to hang onto you – what else?" Xena hugged her close, whispering in her ear. "Rest easy, love. Dealing with this is **not** going to mean that you lose me, Gabrielle. We are safe, now. All that is behind us. Truly."

Gabrielle sagged into her. She was overwhelmed with weariness - of the past, of the nightmare memories, of the loss.

"Xe?" she whispered back. "Are we to carry this always? A long, **long** life of it sometimes seems unbearable to me." She turned, and a tear trickled down her cheek, as she laid her head against Xena's head. "I'm sorry - sometimes I wish I could just forget the past. All of it, except our love. There is a part of me that wishes it were that simple – to surrender the sadness and pain to the ShieldWall. I can see why the women here would give it up."

Xena hugged her close. "I know – so do I."

"Xe I need to say something to you, because there isn't anyone else who would let me say it and just listen. Maybe that's all I need - I don't know. I am afraid of

what it will do to me, over time - especially if it turns out to be a **very** long time.” Gabrielle shook her head, her face a misery.

Xena went very still. Whatever was bothering her, Xena wanted to hear it. She wanted Gabrielle to know that she could say anything, by now – do anything, even – and it would be all right. She just sat, her arms around her woman, waiting. ‘I’m right here, - whatever you need. You know you can say anything to me.’”

Gabrielle turned, so she could see Xena’s face. Lifting her hand, she traced the familiar line of Xena’s cheek and jaw, stroking it again, and again. Xena sat, still, her eyes never leaving Gabrielle’s face. *“Whenever you are ready, my love.”* Gabrielle nodded, then laced her fingers between Xena’s long ones, and held on tight.

“Xe, I thought that once we were here we would finally be somewhere safe.” She shook her head, bemused. “That was probably my last remaining bit of naiveté. Oh, I know . . . this struggle with the Temple will have to be resolved. The Pretender will have to relinquish her hold over the island. I know that we will have to earn our safety, and peace, every step of the way. That is not really my problem.” She paused, her fingers laced between Xena’s fingers against her midriff, as she struggled with her tears.

“It is more just . . . I think I am having a hard time with this notion that you and I are different from mortal women. It’s the after-effects of the Dragon, too. On the other hand, maybe, just call it the accumulation of our life. Call it all the struggles we’ve had to honor our relationship, and protect it from so many assaults and attempts to drive us apart - or worse. If we really look at it,, Xe - we’ve had a brutal time of it - practically since we first met.”

A look of anxiety crossed her face, and she continued hastily, “I don’t want you to get into that old thing now of feeling that you are bad for me, or that it’s your fault. Please! I couldn’t bear it if you felt that, after everything we’ve been through together, and all we’ve been to one another! That’s not what I am saying.” She stopped, as Xena hugged her tight, and kissed her.

“Say it, then.. What do you need?”

“I need to be somewhere, just with you, just alone. No one else except us - for a long enough time that I can feel whole again – or maybe whole for the first time. Every other time we’ve been together, there was always this feeling of uncertainty

– could we stay together? Could we weather all the assaults, and manage your redemption, lose and find each other? We did – we did!”

Xena nodded - her face sad with the memories. “Yes we did.”

“At the risk of sounding completely selfish, I could say - right now, without any hesitation - to Hades with the Amazons, and to Hades with Gaia, and our powers, and our destiny! It would not bother me one bit! I . . . I guess that is what has been triggered by this little excursion. You know . . . *once more, into the fray, for the Greater Good.*” A harsh bark of laughter escaped her throat, leaving it aching.

“Great Artemis, - how I hate the Greater Good! I loathe it. I want to be free of it.” She looked guiltily at Xena. “Or, I want **us** to be the Greater Good. Let the **real** Gaia and the TribeMind take care of the rest of it! Now there is this opposition. I guess I thought we would just show up and everybody would be glad to see us, and not question our role, here. I thought we’d just be ordinary women, like all of our Amazons. I don’t want to be the Hand of the Goddess. I need – I want – peace.”

Xena waited. She knew her love well enough. Now Gabrielle would try to accommodate the shining altruism that lived in her like a beacon.

“There – I’ve said it. I know it isn’t realistic! I know we have to go on, and do all the things we’ve said we want to do. We have responsibilities.” She sighed, heavily. “And I will be right with you, living up to every one of them - superhuman powers and all.”

“Yes, my love – I know you will.” Xena said, gently.

“I’ve never thought of myself as becoming a selfish old woman, who hides from the world and thinks ill of people. I don’t want to become . . . smaller . . . like that. I feel like I have spent most of my youth doing what youth is supposed to do – being idealistic, and brave, and ready to fight the good fight, and overcome adversity, and help others along the way. I learned the Way of Peace, and the Way of the Warrior. Now, I am not young, anymore. Now I need to be an older woman, who can pass on what I have learned from all those experiences. I want time to teach Paphos the barding ways, and all my tales of our adventures, and finish writing the history of the Amazons, and build the scriptorium. Then, when she is ready, teach her the skills of governance. Get my reward for all that I have given up, while we were young. I am naming my reward: it is to be with you - - and just live. I don’t want to be treated as a living Mystery. I want the Dragon to retire. I want to be an ordinary old woman!”

Xena sat, quiet, thinking. She stroked Gabrielle's arms, and held her tightly. "You are still the best thing that ever happened to me," she said, her voice low and passionate. "And you still have the most incredible way of getting right to the heart of everything. And I wouldn't jeopardize that for any cockeyed Amazon rescue mission!" She paused a long time, thinking just how to put it. ". . . Here is what we will do. We will go see these miserable Outcasts, and we will bring them home, somehow, to the rest of the island. We will figure out what this Pretender and Galatea have created, and find a way to return their feelings, memories and dreams to the women of Lemnos. We will teach them a better way to be free from fear. Then, we will have those very capable young women take up the duties and responsibilities for building this Amazon Nation into the strong thing it will be. Oh, we will still be the Queens of Lemnos! We will be the Heart of the Tribe – not its Fist, or its Voice – and not its Mysteries. That will be for the women of this land, themselves, to be. That will be a way for us to go quietly reap that reward of yours. Maybe then the need for our mysterious powers will subside. What do you think?"

Gabrielle looked long into the deep blue of Xena's eyes. Then she nodded. "All right. I think I can abide that. I will be patient, a little while longer. Then I want you, all to myself. For as **long** as I want. And for you to have **me**, all to **yourself**, for as long as **you** want." She looked searchingly into Xena's eyes, her own scanning back and forth, as she plumbed the depths of Xena's expression. "But I worry about you, Xe. Do you think you can live without the rough-and-tumble, active life we have had? There would not be as much excitement. We wouldn't be waving our arms, and throwing out rays of power, or anything even remotely Ares-like. Will you be satisfied with that?"

Xena looked at her, the blue eyes searching, searching, in return. A lightning-fast range of feelings crossed her face. "You just try me," she answered. "Do you think I will regret not being beaten up every week, or having to fight my way to a drink of ale, or to a simple night's sleep with my Soul Mate at the end of the day? Do you think I would mind not having to play head games with every person who is supposed to be our ally - or even worse - our friend? Or to be able to choose my exercise each day purely out of my own delight at moving – without having it be always when someone else wants to fight with me? Not to mention not having to cope with warlords, dictators, and assorted perverse gods and goddesses!" She shook her head slowly, a dreamy look in her eyes. "I'd love time to spend with Io, one on one, teaching her all that I know - so that she can rally the Outcasts. Maybe help them establish a gymnasium, and organize a competition each season, for

excellence in the martial arts. I can't wait to turn Althaia loose and have her build a sailing school, and a crew of women who can take on any boat they can build! I would like to see Galatea being a beacon for the Charge of the Goddess, free of subservience to some twisted control-hungry shamaness. All ordinary things any self-respecting ex-Warrior Princess could do – without need of any special powers! O, no, my love – I'm not a hard sell, at all!"

* * * * *

Within a half candle-mark, they had caught up to the herder, who was patiently waiting for them up the trail. The land was hilly, with arroyos and pockets of green areas around and between the rounded humps of the hills – following the waterways of likely small springs. Outcroppings of basalt, worn and weathered, crowned them. Small, scrubby bushes and myriad wildflowers covered the skirts of the hills. Very good places for the grazing of goats.

All the rest of the morning, they walked. At mid-day, they stopped to have some food. The three ate in silence – the goatherd still unwilling to converse with them. She was quiet, and yet not aloof. Gabrielle sensed that the woman, being so solitary in her work, was naturally a person of few words.

She looked up to find that Xena, who had finished her rough meal, was climbing up a small hillock next to the trail, to see what she could see.

"Xena . . ." She sent. *"Are you ready to go on?"*

"Coming! I just wanted to get the lay of the land."

When Xena got back down to the trail, she looked hot. Gabrielle handed her a water skin, and Xena gratefully took a deep pull on it. Gabrielle moved around behind her, and proceeded to braid the long white tresses into a thick braid down her back. She pulled a length of leather braid from her waist pouch, and tied off the braid. Then she stood back and admired her handiwork. "There. Is that cooler, now?"

Xena felt it, and smiled. "Great. I like it! Maybe you can do this every day! There will be all that time." She grinned at Gabrielle. "Won't there?"

Gabrielle smiled a secret smile and nodded. *"O yes, my Xena - I will make each moment last a lifetime."*

“We both will.” The answer caressed her mind with such a fierce longing that it left Gabrielle breathless.

* * * * *



Chapter 6

Galateia sat, still as she could be, on a stone bench. Maybe, she thought, if she could keep as still as possible, she might escape the inevitable torment of the Dark One. She tried to avoid contact with the surrogate goddess, but that was difficult, given her responsibilities as the High Priestess. Not to mention the unspoken expectations from her tormentor – which had only become increasingly clear, and increasingly demanding – the more control the woman usurped over the years.

She tried to think what it had been like, before this woman arrived, when they were all still free. Sure, it had been scary, not feeling that they had any kind of a good defense against invaders – but they still had the legend to hope for, and to try their best to survive and flourish until the Chakram and the Dragon would come. They had been doing all right, hadn't they? She sighed, and bit her lip to keep the tears back. The Tribe had chosen her, at a young age, to be the High Priestess – mostly because of her ardent belief in the coming of the Queens, and her strong TribeMind abilities. She had worked hard to deserve their trust, and their respect. She had tried to be the best leader she could, in the absence of the true Queens. Lykia had been a boon companion to her, in those years. Like a big sister. Her tears threatened, and the lump in her throat got bigger.

When the Dark One had shown up, in that boatload of refugees from Anatolia, she had wasted precious little time in figuring out whom she needed to control. She had latched on to Galateia like a starving tick – and had never let go. All the subsequent years, whispering into Galateia's ears about the way to protect

themselves, and the reason that Gaia had sent her to them, to help Galatea fulfill the promise, and be ready to welcome the Queens, and soothe their troubled souls. It had all been so convincing. She had wanted to believe this. She had to face it. She wanted to think that it was all for the Greater Good. The Dark One had frightened her with the tales of the murderous onslaught that raged all over the Known World. She had offered the answer. Galatea had finally – inevitably – succumbed.

The other part – the part she could hardly bring herself to look at, in the hard light of day – was the way the woman had come to her, in the night – and had woven her spells on Galatea, and twisted her to dark and terrible, humiliating and shameful acts. Were she to be honest with herself – at first the woman mesmerized her. Underneath that mask – which she had never removed, even with Galatea, even when they were both otherwise naked – she had sensed a real woman, with needs, and passions, and even some dreams, she thought – but it was all too deeply submerged. She apparently had needed Galatea's fresh and youthful humor, and healthy optimism, and tender feelings, to assuage her raging thirst for pain, and domination. She could not bring herself release, alone. No other Amazon would consent to mate with the Dark One – she was too damaged a soul for that. So what remained, except to take by force what she needed?

Now . . . there was this thing with Lykia. The Dark One had been in such a towering rage, the day after the funeral, that Lykia had no chance! She was merely, in her dumb-show way, trying to see if the Dark One wanted any food. The woman did some kind of quick stabbing movements with her fingers to either side of Lykia's neck, causing her to gasp for breath. It was horrible. As Galatea watched, dumbfounded, a thick line of black blood trickled out of Lykia's nose, the cords stood out on her neck as she struggled for breath that would not come, then her eyes rolled up in her head, and her heels drummed on the floor where she lay. Then the awful quiet . . . she had been tossed aside, like dross.

Galatea had been paralyzed with shock. Then she had been forced to help dispose of the body. It was unthinkable. She was afraid to ask what she should say, if anyone asked for the missing woman. The Dark One had finally told her to say that bit about the retreat. The meeting with the Queens had been horrible. She was terrified the whole time.

Galatea berated herself. She was the perfect victim – always hopeful, always subservient when she thought the Goddess might be involved. She had been so gullible – so trusting, so willing to believe the hypnotic voice. Now, sinking into

the depths of her self-disgust, she had to admit that there were times when the abusive treatment had somehow also felt satisfying. She longed for a natural, normal, and joyful union with someone, and had always assumed that that Amazon would someday come, and claim her heart. Now, she doubted she had much heart left, for one such as she had dreamed. She was damaged goods, now. She would find it hard to trust anyone, again. Above all, she feared that the fleeting feelings of sexual arousal, and release, were now dependent on that pain and humiliation.

Finally, her tears flooded, and she cried, bitterly. Her only hope, now, was Xena – and Gabrielle. If only what they had hinted at were true. She did not know how long she could wait, for the unforeseen – the unbidden.

Her head whipped up, as the dark figure loomed over her.

“Ah ... there you are . . .” the sibilant voice crooned. A hand reached out, and grabbed her by the hair.

* * * * *



Chapter 7

They came upon the camp of the goatherd at dusk. They were now on the high volcanic uplands that sloped by graduated degrees down to the western shoreline. These were old – eons old – and the basalt had long since softened and pitted from the elements. Wildflowers carpeted them, small heather bushes were growing everywhere – and the goats were a happy lot, grazing and muttering to each other as they moved through the scrub. They were small goats – knee-high - with brown faces and long, droopy ears.

The herder had constructed a cunningly-woven brush and stick hut for herself, and had a snug little camp, up against the lee of some rocks. A nearby rivulet trickled out from between some of the boulders. A small, spotted dog ran up and greeted

them effusively, as they moved single-file up the slope. Xena grinned at the obvious close bond between the herder and her dog. She turned to the woman. “May we settle ourselves next to your hearth?”

The woman nodded, as she removed the heavy pack from her back, and set about constructing a cooking fire. Her long wild locks of hair, and dark brown eyes in a very dark sun-browned, dust-streaked face gave her a feral look. She wore a simple, belted shift of homespun, leggings of the same, and had a cloak of dark brown wool. On her feet were hand-made leather sandals with complicated cross-laced ties up over her leggings, to the knees. She was wiry, and tough, and small in stature. Mostly impassive during their long trek to the camp, she now revealed a sudden impish grin, when the dog continued to weave itself around Xena’s long legs, begging for attention. As Gabrielle took their packs and began to set up a space for them across the fire pit from the hut, Xena knelt down, and gave the dog a thorough rubdown, from its ears to the tip of its wildly wagging tail. The dog promptly rolled over on its back, begging for more. Xena laughed delightedly.

“What is she called?”

“??at??? – Sunrise.” The woman eyed Xena with a speculative look. “Do you like dogs, then?”

Xena nodded. “Sure. I have not had one of my own since I was a youngling, though. I was too long on the road - too much turmoil. Maybe now, I can get another.” She smiled at the woman. “And maybe, if this one gets together with a mate, you can send word to me. She is a pretty thing. I would favor getting one of hers – a female. What do you think?” She obligingly scratched the dog’s belly, provoking a fresh paroxysm of wiggling from the creature.

The woman nodded. “If . . . so.”

Gabrielle smiled to herself, hearing this exchange. “*Xena wants a dog. Well - why should she not?*” She finished arranging their bedding, and began pulling out their food from her pack.

The goatherd watched Gabrielle with interest. Xena saw the admiring glance. She grinned. “A fine looking woman, isn’t she?”

The goatherd looked abashed, then uncertain. She nodded cautiously. “Ah-ye.”

“We have been together for thirty-four seasons - and many other lifetimes, as well.”

The woman ducked her head, obviously awkward at the personal information. She gestured to her cooking setup – a nice big stewpot, hung on a tripod over the fire. “I keep stew going. There is plenty – to share.”

Gabrielle spoke, then. “Lovely. We will contribute some of our food, as well. Some figs? We have a nice loaf of bread. That will go well with the stew.” She smiled at the woman. “Thank you for your generosity. You have been very patient with us, on the journey up here”

“It is my way.” The woman shrugged.

They sat down, cross-legged. The woman to one side, her dog curled at her feet watching everything with bright-eyed intelligence, and Xena and Gabrielle together. The woman ladled some stew into their two bowls. They tore off hunks of the bread, passed the loaf to the woman, and fell to eating. Xena shed a small water-skin, which had been hanging from a strap over her shoulder. She uncorked it, and took a healthy swig. She held it out to the woman.

“I have my own.” She gestured to a skin lying near her foot.

Xena waved it at her again. “I think maybe you will like this better.”

The woman took the skin and squeezed it, sending a stream through the air and into her open mouth. Her eyes lit up. She smacked her lips, and repeated her motions.

“Ah . . . it has been a while since I have had this good.”

“What is it, Xe?” Gabrielle asked, curious.

Xena smiled, as she passed it back from the woman to Gabrielle. She lifted the bag, squeezed some into her mouth, and coughed, gasping, as the taste of anise exploded in her throat, and the fiery liquid coursed down to land with a warm glow in her belly. “Whoa! That’s something else!”

Xena and the goatherd laughed. Xena answered her. “It is a spirit called raki, made on Lesbos, love. I don’t think you’ve tasted it, have you?”

Gabrielle shook her head. It was powerful stuff. She would remember if she had.

The woman looked at Gabrielle, and directed a comment to Xena. “She is not one for the spirits, is she?”

Xena squeezed Gabi’s knee affectionately. ‘No – she got ‘tipsy’ on henbane, once – ate it in some nut bread – and told me I was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen! Then she started trying to teach some rocks how to sing, but she couldn’t stand up too good. It was funny!’

The woman grinned. “Opa! I would like to hear more of that!”

Xena looked appealingly at Gabrielle - who sighed and rolled her eyes.

“All right – Guess I can’t turn ignore such a flattering introduction!” She proceeded to tell the story of Anteus and Icus. After, they sat in companionable silence. The fire snapped and crackled, and the stars began to come out in an awesome display overhead. They shared the figs. Gabrielle stuck with her water skin, while Xena and the woman had more of the raki.

“That is a good story. You tell it so real. It is as if I was there myself.” The goatherd looked at the two of them, lounging completely relaxed next to the fire. She thought a bit - then spoke again, cautiously. “You go to meet the Others.”

Xena and Gabrielle both nodded.

Xena answered. “Yes. We are curious about them. We would meet them, and find a way to make peace among **all** Amazons on Lemnos.”

The woman threw more wood on the fire, but kept a stick, and began to peel the bark off it. Her hair obscured her face. Then she looked up, and sideways, at the two women.

“I was a Warrior – once. Long time ago, now. Before I came to Lemnos.” She gazed at the firelight. “I gave up my ??sta – my caste.”

Xena nodded - a sympathetic look on her face. “That must have been hard.”

The woman stared at her, unblinking. “It was for the best. I have now a good life – and no complaints. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. I am **free** – and no one to tell me what to do, or worse – try to kill me! I am not a one for all the words – never was. But I can be up here with my Sunrise, and my goats - and it is good.”

Xena nodded again. “Then it **was** a good thing to do,” she said, simply.

The woman looked at her, surprised. “You are a great Warrior, Xena. Everyone knows this. Why do you say it is good, and then go to the Others, and maybe tell them to keep their ??sta . . . how can you do this? It was easy for me - but you - you were the Warrior Princess – the Destroyer of Nations. Will you not be tempted to keep your Warrior caste? You maybe will challenge Gaia – what then, eh?”

Xena shook her head. “I have already given up killing. I am no longer the Warrior Princess. Or the Destroyer of Nations,” she said, simply. “If all Amazons on Lemnos are free, and there is true peace – why would we need to renounce anything? Why would we fear Warriors or even a Warrior Queen? What is it that keeps us peaceful? Is it some oath we take, or the surrender of our weapons? Is it truly surrendering big pieces of our selves – all that we have endured, and that has taught us to be the strong Amazons we are? To become, what? - smiling women who having no strength? I do not think it is so easy. The whole rest of the Known World would do so, if it was.”

The woman thought about what Xena said. Gabrielle watched, silently, the exchange between Xena and the goatherd. It was a critical conversation, because it would show them much of how the woman thought; and how what they said would be communicated to the Temple, and the dark Pretender, soon enough. “*What do you have in mind, here, Xe?*”

Xena directed a shielded response to Gabrielle. “*Go with me on this, love.*”

Gabrielle nodded, slightly, and waited.

“When you were a Warrior, what was your skill? What were you known for?” Xena asked.

‘Ah – I was a tracker!’ The woman’s teeth shone white in her face, as she grinned at the memory.

“A useful skill. It must serve you well, keeping these goats.”

The woman nodded, looking thoughtful. ‘Yes. Sometimes, I must find the strays – especially when they are young!’

“So tell me – what did you think, and feel, about giving up your weapons, when you gave up your caste?”

“Ah, that . . . it was hard, my Queen. I was not sure we would be safe, without them. I had to see that for myself, before I would willingly surrender them.”

Xena nodded. “And what was it, exactly, that changed your mind?”

The woman looked sideways at her, and then a long look at Gabrielle. Then she looked into the fire. They waited, patiently, for her answer.

“There was a morning we were called together, on the western headland outside of the harbor at Myrina. They showed us – six ships were headed right for Lemnos. We were wild! Why did they not call up the Amazons, to defend the island? Why were they standing there, so calm – even smiling on their faces? It was as if they had a death wish! We could not move them, with all our words, and our calls for our weapons. They just smiled, and said just watch, and see! And so we did.” She stopped and shook her head, the perplexed look on her face a twin to how she must have looked that day. “I swear on Gaia – it was a strange thing! The ships were close enough - we could see their faces. How could they not see us? They began to act strange. They covered their ears, and wailed, and beat their chests. They staggered about the decks – their faces stretched with fear - the like of which I have never before seen. They fought to turn their ships away from us. We could hear their cries fading, and they sailed away.” She shook her head, and sighed. “Aye. It was a powerful thing. It was like that old story of Ulysses and the Sirens.”

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged deep looks.

“And then we lay down our weapons at their feet, and took the Oath. Then Gaia took away our pain. It was easy, then. What magic she wove - I am but a humble herder. I do not know. I saw what she did, that day. It was no small thing. I do not feel like such a weak, puling woman – as you seem to think of us - under the Shield of Lemnos.”

Gabrielle nodded. ‘You have told it well, and clear. We do not think the less of you, for what you have done. It takes courage to walk into the unknown, as you

must have done that day. To give up so much is never easy. Thank you for the telling of it.”

Xena nodded. “I can see that you have a powerful thing in place, which works well, it would seem. I want to know if it shields us all – or only those who have given oath to Gaia . . . and why should that be so? What is good for some should be good for all. So - yes, I am going to speak to the Outcasts - to see who they are, what they think and feel, and what they need us to be, for them. I can do this, because I was a Warrior, and I think they will respect me. I want to know what is important to them, that they think is good to keep - and what can be put aside. We should not need to be afraid of anyone, or anything, in order to be peaceful. I also think that we should not have to give up our feelings, and our memories, and our dreams – even the painful ones! So I want to know – what is good to keep of the Warrior Way? Then, I can say to them, maybe it is all right to give up the weapons: but **keep** the caste: the skills, and the knowledge, and memories and dreams that are good, that will be of use. And not force them to be separate – to be Outcasts.”

The woman nodded slowly. “Ah-ye. It is seemly.”

“But does it seem good to **you**?” Xena pressed her. “I honor you, as our host, and also because you were once a Warrior. I respect your judgment of this.”

The woman stared, her mouth agape. Then she shook her head. “I have not had this happen, ever! To have a Queen ask me what is good – what is right?”

Gabrielle smiled, her whole face lighting up. “Well, now you have a taste of the Chakram and the Dragon.”

The woman nodded. ‘Ah-ye. I have a taste.’

“And how does it seem, to you?” Gabrielle asked.

The woman looked at her, and a smile crept in, and stayed. “It is good.” She said.

“Then we are satisfied, too. And we know that you will speak your mind.” Gabrielle responded. Her own brilliant smile flashed out to the woman.

* * * * *

After a short, companionable silence, spent watching the fire die down, Gabrielle found she could not keep her eyes open any longer. “Well, I don’t know about you two, but I need to sleep! It has been a long day.”

They all stirred. The goatherd stood, a bit unsteadily, and patted the dog’s head. Then she spoke to them. “I must see to my herd, before I sleep – and walk off some of this good raki! Sunrise and I will make the rounds.” She paused. . . “I would ask something of you.”

Xena answered. “Anything.”

“It would be good if my Queens would use my hut while you are here, and let me take my place at the fire.”

Gabrielle started to reply, but Xena flashed a caution. “*Don’t refuse! This is important to her!*” So she paused, thinking, and then spoke. “We thank you . . .” she hesitated. “May we . . . know your name, sister?”

The woman slowly nodded. “Ah-ye. I am called Skylla.”

She led them to the hut and gestured for them to enter. They bent over, and ducked into the enclosure. Skylla lit a candle, and put it on the low wooden box that served as a table. Then pulling her bedding into a bundle, she pitched it out through the opening. “I will fetch your things,” she said, and was gone.

They looked at one another. “*Well, Xe – that was fascinating!*”

“*At least we gave her something to think about.*”

Skylla returned with their bedding and their packs. “I will wake you at dawn.”

“We thank you, Skylla.” Xena said.

Gabrielle impulsively went to her, and gave her a hug. The woman was startled, but did not object. She stared at Gabrielle a moment, then put up her hands and shyly cupped them over Gabrielle’s ears, and gently pulled Gabi’s head forward. She bent her own head forward, and touched foreheads with the Queen. Then she was gone.

Xena went over to her, and folded her in an embrace.

“You are a wonder, you are!” she whispered, and their lips met for a long, long kiss.

They slept well, that night – the long day of walking and the raki at dinner saw to that. Xena awoke only once, in the night. After lying with her eyes open until they had adjusted to the dim interior of the hut, she arose and silently exited, and went off to see to her needs. A glance at the fireside found Skylla rolled in her blanket and snoring peacefully, the dog curled up between her legs. On her way back, she sniffed the air, and stopped again to listen to the sound of a sudden measured flapping of wings and a ‘who-who’ from a nearby owl, out hunting. Then she ducked back into the hut and reclaimed her place.

The bed was warm, after the chill of the outside air, and she sighed gratefully as Gabrielle turned in her sleep, threw her arm over Xena’s chest, and pulled her in close. Xena stroked her comfortingly, and thought how happy she felt, just at this moment. Their being out, like this, was right. It had such a good feeling to it – like the best of their younger days together. She had missed this feeling. Then she thought about Gabrielle’s revelation that morning; and how to hasten the day when they would do just as she had described, and take the time for one another that they had so rarely enjoyed. She made a silent vow to her self: that she would see her Gabrielle as happy, before another moon had finished its progress across the sky.



Chapter 8

As she whiled away the time until the boat would arrive at Lesbos, Paphos sat on a thick coil of rope out on the deck of the *Leto*. Io was helping the other women with the sails, and she did not mind having the time to go over the letter she had composed to Sappho, to accompany Gabrielle’s sealed instructions.

They had set sail without any difficulty, and as they move slowly out of the harbor, they became almost giddy with excitement when nothing happened to cause the boat to falter or stop in its own wake. They had half expected some crack of thunder, or a sudden thick fog to happen, to show the presence and power of the ShieldWall. Instead, it was clear, with a strong breeze flowing into the sails. They began to look forward to the voyage over to Lesbos, without fear.

Considering that she was to meet the great Sappho was almost too much for Paphos to contemplate. She had heard enough rumors and stories about the famous poet and her coterie of young companions. It was a little unnerving. She felt sure that it would be instructive – as Xena and Gabrielle seemed not to have any doubts about sending them to the woman. There must be great trust, there.

She had finished the letter that she had composed. She reviewed it now, one more time, anxious that it would be acceptable to the great Poet – no errors of grammar, and well spoken in the best Greek she could muster. It was a hard thing – she was still new to the writing:

"Greetings, Sappho! We seek audience with you: Io and Paphos, wards to Xena and Gabrielle, from the Isle of Lemnos, where we now live. They both send their words to you, and ask that you receive us and assist us with our plans.

They have entrusted us with the task of meeting the women of Egypt, whom - after being rescued from slavery by Gabrielle - have been of late residing in Athens before their planned relocation on Lemnos. It is our understanding that they are en route to Lesbos, where you will be sheltering them. We are then to return with them to Lemnos, on our ship.

They ask also that I deliver to you the enclosed letter, sent by Gabrielle, Queen of Lemnos, to Sappho, Greatest Poet and Daughter of the Muse Polyhymnia.

Thanks to you, for your kind attention to my poor attempt at this, written on behalf of my companion Io, and myself -

- Paphos

Apprentice and Ward to Gabrielle and Xena of Lemnos

She felt it was as good as she was able to produce. She wrapped it around the sealed missive that Gabrielle had handed her, before they left. Then she slid the two letters back into the cunning brass scroll case that Gabrielle had given her. The Bard had used it since her journeys to India - a present from Xena. Paphos felt awed, once again, that they had wanted to foster her and Io. It seemed a miracle. She rubbed her finger over the worn brass decorations. It was a beautiful thing. If it

could talk, it would have so much to tell – of Gabrielle’s long travails and of her life with Xena. She shaded her eyes, and looked at the rolling waves, on top of which their sturdy craft plowed its way forward. The cry of the gulls was soothing, and the stiff breeze smelt of brine. The sails flapped and bellied above her.

* * * * *



Chapter 9

The next morning, Skylla gently awaken the Queens with a tune played on a set of panpipes. As Xena came awake, she found that they were spooned under the colorful woven blanket they had brought with them from the house in Myrina. She lay quietly, listening, and when she realized that she recognized the music, she began to hum along with it. Gabrielle awoke to the gentle sounds in her ear, enjoying a secret smile at Xena’s accompaniment, before turning over and nuzzling Xena’s cheek.

“What a nice way to start the day,” she whispered.

“It’s just part of my new campaign.”

“O? What is that?”

“Making you smile as often as possible.”

“Got me., then!” Gabrielle stretched, sat up, and rubbed her face and head with her hands to get the circulation flowing. “Want to go wash up in the creek.” She mumbled. “Ouf! I feel like two days of bad road.” She got up, and exited through the doorway.

Gabrielle had a point. Xena rubbed her arm across her face. She had had a lot more raki than Gabi. “Blasted stuff,” Xena muttered. “It sure tastes good going down – but oh, the next morning!” She, too, arose and wandered out after her mate.

Skylla looked up, as they staggered out. The two Queens headed off to the small stream running down the hillside from the nearby copse of gnarled trees. Sunrise - her tail wagging like a whirlwind - skittered over and greeted them. Skylla lifted a hand in greeting. She put the pot on the fire to boil, and then got up, went to a nearby patch of low-growing shrubs, and picked off some of the leaves. The sharp odor of mint carried in the crisp morning air. She went back, and threw the leaves into the pot - and resumed her playing. Her pipes were handmade, and were bound together with braided colored cords, some of which hung down, embellished with small beads.

Gabrielle and Xena, meanwhile, were kneeling next to the small, swiftly flowing rivulet. They had shed their togas, and were washing up - using a chamois and a cake of herbal soap Paphos had thoughtfully given them before they left. Gabrielle washed Xena’s hair and Xena had her re-braid it while still wet. “It’ll keep me cool, as it dries.” Sunrise, meanwhile, waded into the creek, and took her doggy version of a bath; then proceeded to shake herself all over, spraying water on both of them. They chorused their protest, then dressed and made their way back to the cheerfully crackling fire. They could smell the mint tea, and were suddenly ravenous.

“Good morning, Skylla,” Gabrielle smiled. “Thank you for the music – you play quite well.”

Skylla smiled, caressing the instrument.. “My pipes - they were a present to me, last Solstice Eve.’

“Ah,” Xena said. “Someone knows what is needed, up here on the windy ridges, when visits are few and far between.”

“Just so.” Skylla nodded.

“Xena,” Gabrielle urged. “Why don’t you sing along with her, like you were just now? I wager she will enjoy that!”

Xena threw her a look. “Oh, well – turn about is fair play. Skylla - the tune you played, right before we got up – what was it? I seemed to recognize it.”

Skylla immediately put the pipes to her mouth, and began playing. Xena nodded, grinning, and then began humming along with her. Gabrielle, meanwhile, made up the tea, and pulled out some cheese, and another small loaf of bread. She cut the cheese into pieces, and added some olives.

“Time for food, you two.” She said. They fell to it.

When they were done, they cleaned up the meal, and then sat in companionable silence around the fire. The dog romped around them, wanting to have something to do. The woman gave a few hand-signals and several sharp whistles at different pitches. The dog watched her face and hands intently, and then raced off over the hill toward the goats.

“What did you tell her?” Gabrielle asked, fascinated.

“Oh, it is time for the goats to go to the spring, further down the hillside. They need watering. She will take them down there, and watch while they drink, and then she will bring them back up here.”

“You said all that, in those few words and whistles?” Gabrielle looked surprised.

“Oye . . . She is a champion! Many Amazons of Lemnos know of Sunrise! I trained her up good.”

“Mind - you send silent word to me, if she whelps a female. I’ll want the pup, for sure.” Xena said to her.

Skylla nodded. “Oye . . . It can be arranged. I will be taking her down for a visit to her breeding partner, in the Spring. He is another smart one. I think it will be a good litter, next time. I will save you out the best one, and I will bring it up here, and train it up good, with its mother. Then I will send word. You must think of a good name for it. I will need that, for the training.”

Xena smiled cheerfully. “Wonderful! I will tell you, when I have thought of it. You tell me what you can use, in return. I’ll come up to get her, and will bring up whatever you need.”

Gabrielle got out her scroll and quill case, and the small pouch that held her ink stick and rubbing stone. She put a small amount of water on the stone, and then

began rubbing the ink stick against the stone, and the water gradually turned black. Skylla watched, fascinated. When the ink was at the right consistency, Gabrielle began writing on the parchment. She wanted to record a good description of the herder, her dog, and her home in the hills.

Skylla, meanwhile, went about her normal routine. She pulled out a long coil of rope, and began to pick out the plaits in order to cut out places where it had worn too thin. She would then splice the good sections back together.

Xena lay back with her hands clasped behind her head, looking up into the clear sky overhead.

“What are you pondering so deeply?” Gabrielle asked, looking up from her writing. She had been carefully not eavesdropping mentally, so to give her mate some space.

“Oh, just the nature of life, and how we will learn of this place - and everything in between,” she joked, a wry smile on her face. “Not much!”

“Come to any conclusions?”

Xena sighed. “Only one . . . you never really know what will happen – because, like as not, you’re going to do something that will change what you thought would happen. And then it will be something else!”

Gabrielle nodded ruefully. “Like that time with us, when everything kept happening over and over to you. . .only a little bit different, each time And Joxer and I had no idea.”

Xena laughed. “Augh! I remember. That was a heck of a long day! But it finally did turn out the way I wanted it to, in the end.”

“Nobody got killed?”

“Well, that, too. But mostly - me and you – together - as always.” Xena grinned.

Gabrielle’s eyebrows went up. “So what you said before – your conclusion - is the rule, unless it’s me and you, and then it’s the exception!”

“Yeah. Right!” Xena said. “Of course. We’re always the exception.” They laughed, and knew it was true.

After a mid-day meal of dried fruit and some goat cheese, Skylla told them of a river that flowed deep, down at the foot of the mountain. They decided they would hike down to it and go for a swim, and then return to the camp with something for the evening stewpot. They set off, down the hill. Skylla had to keep Sunrise to hand, or she would have followed them.

As they crossed the valley below the high hill, they talked about the response of Skylla to Xena's speech about the Outcasts.

"Do you think that she will send her thoughts to the Temple?" Gabrielle asked, as they pushed through the thickets, and tall, prickly grasses.

"I hope not." Xena said, quietly. "Probably, though, I think she will. All we can hope for now is that Galatea lets us go our own way. Maybe she will have figured it out, and will say nothing to the Pretender. It is in the hands of the true Goddess, now."

Gabrielle was pensive. She made as if to speak- then stopped herself. They walked on, getting closer to the stream. Once at its bank, they sat down to prepare for the swim.

"Xe," she finally said. "Do you think we are right, to try to reconcile the Outcasts, and the women of Lemnos? Maybe it is better – if they do live apart. Maybe they can co-exist this way, and not have to feel like they are giving anything up – either group."

'And how are we to govern them, then?" Xena asked - her face calm. She had been pondering this very thing, all along their first day's walk - without many answers coming to mind. She really wanted to know what Gabrielle thought. She unfastened the woven leather girdle that clasped about her midriff, and laid it on the grass. She pulled off her leggings, and then her toga over her head, and sat - her naked body brown in the morning sun.

Gabrielle did likewise. "I don't think we can answer that, yet. We do not even know if these women **want** Queens! Maybe they have already **got** one. Maybe they've done just fine, on their own." She got up, and dove cleanly into the water. Her head popped up, streaming water, and she blew and huffed and wiped the water out of her eyes. "Oh, this is just great!" she grinned. "Come on in!"

Xena sat still on the bank, her knees drawn up, and her arms wrapped around them. She had a pensive, bleak look on her face. Gabrielle swam back over to the bank, and hauled herself out. She leaned up against Xena, oblivious to the water streaming off her body. “What is it, Xe?” she asked, contritely. “Did I put my foot in it?”

Xena shook her head, her throat muscles working. “No . . . but I think I did.” She turned her head away.

Gabrielle stroked Xena’s head. “What is it, sweetheart?”

Xena shook her head, swallowing, not trusting her voice to speak. Gabrielle waited, her hand gentling the hair away from Xena’s cheek, where it had come loose from the braid; and when Xena’s spoke, her voice was thick with emotion.

“I assumed that the problem with the Outcasts was that they would be like me, because **I** was shunned from contact, and human warmth, and companionship and love – because of **my** violence, and **my** aggression. I needed to be helped away from that – by you. These Outcasts – they do have each other, and that is no small thing! Only, I want so much for this island to be peaceful and for all who come here, and live here, to be welcome and united – one sisterhood - one Amazon Nation – not two. I do not want to have to be separated from you, if that is what it would take to make that happen. So our plan has just **got** to work.”

Gabrielle leaned her head on Xena’s shoulder, and stroked the brown arm wrapped around the knees. “Xe . . . Xe . . . you should trust your instincts, here! Give yourself more credit, will you? As long as I have known you, you have always had an uncanny sense of what was happening – and you mostly were right on the mark.”

“Well, yes – I do trust that feeling. I think there may be more wrong with the women in Myrina, than with those they call Outcasts. . .” Her face went still and thoughtful. She wiped her eyes, and leaned her head against Gabrielle. “Thanks for the encouragement. This is not an easy thing, for either of us. There is still so much to understand. And now, I guess I just went and did what you did, yesterday.”

Gabrielle hugged her. “We’re neither of us immune from our own emotions. You heard about those women – especially the way it was told to you – so heartless, and implacable – and you were thrown right back to your worst days. Of course, you want to help them! There is no fault, there. And you know what?”

Xena shook her head, but there was a hint of a smile now on her face.

“I know you will be of use to **all** of the women of Lemnos. We will have the strength and the ability to fulfill what we mean to do here. We may very well need these Amazons, when it comes time to confront the Pretender. I **know** they will follow you, Xe. No fear.” She turned Xena’s chin with her hand, and gave her a kiss. “Besides – everything we find out helps add one more piece of information to our understanding about who this woman is, and why she is here. We need all that, if we are to deal with her, don’t we? Now – how about we have that nice, refreshing swim?” She stood up, and held her hand down for Xena. They dove into the water together.

Afterwards, they sat on the bank while they donned their clothing. They were almost done when they heard a sharp whistle from the hillside behind them. Looking about, they saw Skylla loping down through the scrub. They waved, and stood to meet her.

“Hola, Skylla. What is it?” Xena asked.

The woman panted, catching her breath. She had run hard. “I have decided.” She said.

“What do you mean?” Gabrielle asked, puzzled.

“I have thought and thought hard, while I play my pipes. I talk over with my Sunrise. We agree. I have something to tell. I trust my Queens. I come to find you. Sunrise watches over them, while I am finding you.”

Xena nodded. “*I have been waiting for this, Gabi.*”

Gabrielle looked sharply at Xena. “*What is it?*”

Skylla looked down at her feet, then up at both of the waiting Queens. “I am the Watcher. Because I roam the hills between them and us, I am the Edge Defense.”

“Against the Outsiders?” Xena asked, sharply.

“O-ye. I keep my eyes and ears on them. I am to be the first to tell, when they make an attack on us.”

“**When** they make an attack – and have they, Skylla?” Xena queried, closely.

“Nay. Not yet – not ever.”

“But you expect them to do so?” Gabrielle asked.

“Nay,” she shook her head. “I have thought about this a long time. **I** do not. The Priestess back in Myrina – and Gaia - **they** say so. **They** say I must be ready!”

“And what do they mean by ‘ready’?”

The herder shrugged. “I am to tell. I use the TribeMind, to warn the Goddess. So she can prepare.”

“And what will she prepare, Skylla?” Xena asked.

Skylla shrugged. “I know not – truly, my Queens. They do not tell me. I am but a poor herder, out in the hills. I only play my part. I do not understand how they can attack. You will see when we get to the ShieldWall. You will understand why I say this. I have thought and thought, of what you said last night. I have decided. I am for you. I want to help you, with the Others. I want them to keep their Warrior Way. I want my caste back. I want my own feelings back – even the hard ones.”

Xena and Gabrielle exchanged deep looks. Then Xena turned to Skylla. “You are a proud and courageous Amazon, Skylla. You have not forgotten the most important thing, from your warrior-days.”

Skylla’s eyebrows shot up. “What, my Queen?”

“Truth-telling, Skylla. Truth-telling and honor.”

The woman’s eyes blazed and, with a fierce look of joy, she made the Amazon sign. “I have kept another skill, my Queen.”

“Oh? And what is that?”

“I am a **very** good hunter!”

Xena bared her teeth in a wolfish grin, and Gabrielle watched as the two ex-warriors began their quest for meat for the pot.

* * * * *



Chapter 10

Io and Paphos hurried down the plank that served as a bridge to the dock at Mytilene. They stopped when they heard Althaia hailing them. She walked down to where they stood.

“Listen,” Althaia said. “We’ll pay the docking fees, here, and stay on board while you are up at Sappho’s. Just send me a little mental message, and let me know how it goes.”

They nodded. “Sure thing, Althaia – and you can also keep an eye out for Anacreon’s ship. He’ll supposedly be bringing those women here. Forty Egyptian women ought to attract enough attention, eh?”

Althaia grinned, making the tattoos across her cheekbones and around her eyes change their patterns. “Ola! – maybe there will be some pretty ones. What do you think? Should I raise my hopes?”

They laughed good-naturedly, and wished her luck.

The two stopped the first person they encountered, as they walked up the main street. A woman, her head swathed in a black shawl, smiled when they asked her the way to Sappho’s home.

“Ah,” she said. “Everyone knows that one! She of the honey-tongue lives on this very street. Just follow this, and you cannot miss it – the last villa, at the top of the hill.” She hurried off the way they had come.

Paphos laughed. “Well, that wasn’t so hard, now – was it?”

Io looked at her, eyebrows lifted. “What – are you worried about something?”

“Oh, no - I just thought - you know - we might have a hard time getting to her.”

They stopped about halfway up the hill to catch their breath.

“What’s bothering you, Paph?” Io asked her again.

“I guess I’m just a bit . . . nervous about meeting her - Or something.”

Io nodded. “Yeah – I know what you mean. But it can’t be too bad – she likes young women, after all!”

“Hmm - maybe we both should be worried!”

They broke into peals of laughter, as they proceeded on their way. The street wound steeply up the hill. As they came out on the top, they saw a big villa through an arched opening in a high wall. The grounds were breathtaking, with graceful trees and sculptures of beautiful women. They entered a loggia, made of columns at regular intervals and tied with lintels - from which draped ancient grapevines, their thick trunks twisted around the columns. It was cool, and they could hear the musical splashing of water. They realized there was a long reflecting pool running beside the pathway under the arbor, and at the end closest to the house, the water poured out of a jug, held by yet another beautiful image of a woman, this one sculpted in flawless white marble, who seemed to be coming right out of the side of the building. Masses of watercress floated in the narrow pool.

“I must remember to write of all of this!” Paphos whispered. “It’s so beautiful!” Io nodded, beside her. It left her speechless. She had never seen such magnificence.

The sound of laughter, and voices, interrupted their reverie. Two women were coming toward them, along the loggia from the house. They stopped, smiling, when they encountered the two awe-struck young strangers.

“Hola! Welcome to Sappho’s home. How may we assist you?”

Paphos blushed. “Oh, we have just arrived, and must beg an audience with Sappho. We have been sent by Queen Gabrielle and Queen Xena of the Amazons of Lemnos.”

“Really?” one of the women said, her eyebrows rose up quizzically. “Well – if you say so. We do remember them!” She turned, and gestured. “Come this way, then. We’d better take you to her.”

They followed the two, and were quickly ushered down the loggia, which ran along the entire length of the building, and which led to a smaller courtyard, where several other women were seated around a woman holding a lyre. She was playing a lovely melody. As they came up on the group, she stopped playing, and looked up enquiringly.

“Yes? What is it?”

“Sappho – these two young women are come from Lemnos – so they say – from Gabrielle and Xena!”

“Ah,” Sappho said, nodding, a smile breaking out on her lovely features. “I haven’t heard from them in quite a while.” She looked around at the women gathered there. “Leave us now, will you? And thank you for showing them in.” The group arose, and made their way back into the house – leaving Io and Paphos alone with the famous poet.

“Well, now – I would venture that you are both tired, from your long sea journey? It is surely a **very** long way - from Lemnos! Would you care to sit and refresh yourselves? You must stay here the night. I will happily put you both at ease.”

They sank down on the cushioned benches near hers. Paphos realized that she was staring, and blushed. She had not expected the poet to be so tall - or so incredibly striking. She had a strong classic Greek face, her curly hair worn short, with a wonderful cross-banded headband that capped her dark hair. A flat circular pendant of polished agate, attached to the front of the headband, hung in the center of her forehead. She was dressed in a dazzling white chiton, with leather sandals on her feet. She set the lyre down so that it leaned gently against her seat.

“Oh, that would be lovely! But, here - I have this, to give you.” Paphos fumbled at her girdle, and brought out the brass scroll case. She handed it to Sappho.

“Thank you,” the woman smiled gravely at the flustered youngsters. Io still had not been able to speak.

She pulled the top off of the case, and slid the rolled bundle out of it. She unrolled the cover sheet, smoothed it out on her knee, and read Paphos’ letter silently to herself. Her eyes lifted from the page, and she smiled again. “So . . . may I know which of you Paphos is, and which Io?” she asked.

“I . . . I am Io.” Io stuttered, finally breaking her silence. “This is Paphos! She wrote the letter to you.”

“And it was done very nicely, too!” Sappho praised. “I will certainly entertain the two of you, on the Queens’ behalf. They both looked at her, speechless. “Oh, it is the least I can do - for all that those two have done for me, through the years! I welcome the chance to pay them back even a little! Tell me - I had heard that Xena was. . .” She stopped, as she saw the expressions on their faces. “Ah . . . I gather there will be more, in this other missive?” They nodded, and she proceeded to break the seal and unroll the letter from Gabrielle. She began to scan it, then stopped and looked at the two young women. She clapped her hands twice, and they were startled to see a young girl, about ten seasons old, come running out from the house. The girl came right up to Sappho, and the woman hugged her, and whispered in her ear. She grinned, and sped off back into the house. “That is one of my pupils,” Sappho explained. “She is arranging for some refreshments for us. I am sure that you must be hungry!” They both nodded. “Just so. I am, too. So we will eat, and talk about this.” She went back to reading the letter, as they waited in suspense.

Greetings Sappho, from Gabrielle and Xena, Queens of the Amazons of Lemnos!

It is long years since we have spoken, and much has happened to bring us to this new home and to this urgent request for help from our dear friend and mentor, Sappho of Lesbos, Greatest Poet of our Age.

Xena and I are now in sore need of a favor from you. We are sending you Io and Paphos, our two wards - young Amazons we

saved from certain death in Thessaly - and whom we have adopted as our own.

I am sure you are astonished to hear that we are here, and not dead long ago. Much has occurred, and I would love to sit for evenings on end in your sweet abode, and tell you all the tales . . . but rule on this island is newly thrust upon us, and we must establish ourselves in the minds and hearts of our Amazons, before we can rest. Perhaps Xena and I may sail over, for a visit, when all this I settled.

There is a favor we would ask of you, old friend – one that we hope you will find the kindness and wisdom to undertake. There is a contingent of women – forty of them, to be precise – who are on their way from Egypt, by way of Athens. These women come from the High Priestess of the Temple of Isis, and are ultimately to re-settle here with us, on Lemnos. They were, at one time, slaves, that I had the good fortune to liberate when I was alone in Egypt. They have suffered under their bondage - and are now mute. They are skilled at a hand language that I have taught them. They have also certain skills at communicating mentally – which we shall sorely need, in the time to come.

They are being ferried to Lesbos by Anacreon, a good friend to Xena and me, and they will need to find temporary shelter with you, there, until they are free to come to Lemnos.

We are in a difficult crisis, here. I shall not be able to give you the details – I will leave that to Io and Paphos to share. Suffice it to say that they think they will be escorting the Egyptian women back here as soon as may be. Your job, my dear Sappho, is to keep them all with you, until you hear otherwise from either Xena or me. There is too much uncertainty, right now, for them to be here. We do not want them to be in jeopardy. Will you undertake this for us, old friend?

In future, we also would like to send Paphos, at least, back to you, to attend your school, and spend some time absorbing all that you have to give. That can be done later. Observe her closely! I have taken her under my wing, and am teaching her to be a bard, after my own heart. In fact, observe both of them, will you?

Our need is great. Please love them as we do, and give them your hand.

With fond regards,

Gabrielle and Xena

Caveat: Should anything untoward happen, to the two of us – well, we trust you will take them in, and treat them as you would your own. At least, until they could return to Lemnos, and rule in our stead. They are our heirs. They will inherit our right of caste.

Sappho looked deeply thoughtful, as she finished reading. She carefully laid Gabrielle's letter on top of the one by Paphos, recapped the scroll case and handed it back to Paphos.

"This must be a treasured thing – it is very beautiful."

Paphos nodded. "It is . . . Xena gave it to Gabrielle – in India. She carried it all that time – to Chin, and Jappa . . . and Egypt, and back."

"And now she has given it to you." Sappho said, quietly.

Paphos nodded shyly. "Yes."

"And may I also keep this letter – from you?" Sappho asked.

Paphos looked up, startled. "Oh - why of course! I do not know why I wrote it, really. . It was just that I thought it should be done." She trailed off,

"Um, have you heard any news of the women from Egypt?" Io asked. "We are supposed to get them back to Lemnos as soon as they get here. I don't mean to offend your hospitality – just that the Queens are expecting us . . ."

Sappho turned her beacon smile on the young woman. "I am very sure you will not disappoint them, Io. However, to answer your question – no, there has been yet no word of these women. I will communicate with the harbormaster first thing tomorrow morning, so that we may be notified when they have arrived."

It was Io's turn to blush. Right up to the roots of her hair. "Yes 'm."

Sappho turned, as a procession of three young girls came out from the house, carrying trays laden with food, and ewers with water and wine. They set them down on a low table nearby. One of the young women then came over to Sappho, and whispered something in her ear. Sappho looked suddenly delighted.

“Ah, we have more guests, it seems! Will you two excuse me, while I go greet them? I will return with them shortly.” She got up, and gracefully walked over to the loggia, and disappeared from view. The three girls left Io and Paphos and returned to the house.

A few brief moments later, they could hear Sappho’s voice, as she returned. She came back into view, leading two elderly women toward the table. One had her hand on Sappho’s arm. The other followed behind.

“Io and Paphos. . . these are my good friends Alekto and Sibylla. They are responsible for the beautiful statues you saw, as you entered my home. They also, in their youth, did the statue of Gaia that rests in your home temple.” She helped the one to find her seat on a bench next to the table; then resumed her own seat. The other woman sat next to her partner.

“Aye.” The woman nodded. “But we are retired, now. We do no more commissions.”

“Oh! That is sad,” Paphos said, “I mean - I thought maybe . . .”she trailed off, embarrassed. She had had a sudden inspiration, but now her hopes were immediately dashed.

Alekto was much older than Sibylla. She was obviously completely blind. Her eyes were not even there – just sunken hollows where eyes would have been. Io and Paphos both started, but managed to keep their composure.

“We are honored to meet you. I am Paphos.”

“And I am Io.” Io added.

Alekto turned, and cocked her head to one side. “Young Amazons? And not native to this island, I would wager.”

“No,” said Sappho. “They are sent here by Gabrielle and Xena.”

“Ah, explaining much.” Sibylla said. “But I thought I detected the accent of Thessaly in your voices. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Paphos said, sadly. “We fled Thessaly, after the Conqueror Alexandros destroyed our village, and the Sacred Grove of Artemis. Xena and Gabrielle saved most of us, and we came to Lemnos.”

There was a long pause. The older women sat - their faces unreadable. “Well, well. From the legendary Isle of Lemnos . . . what do you know?” Sibylla said, speculatively. “I’d wager there’s a good story, here . . .”

“Why don’t you tell us about it?” Sappho encouraged, as they began to eat the food before them. Sibylla fed Alekto from time to time, tenderly offering tidbits of food, pieces of fruit, and sips of the wine. Both Io and Paphos were quietly taking it in. Sappho smiled at their thoughtful looks, and good manners.

“Well, it happened like this . . . “

So Paphos told them the story – of how Xena and Gabrielle endured their separation, and how Gabrielle wandered in Egypt, but then returned, and how they had judged her, and then Xena had come back to her – beyond all hope. How they fought the Conqueror, and how their Regent, Eponin, long-time friend to Xena and Gabrielle, had died trying to save Io, and Paphos, and others of their Tribe.

“And what did you think . . . that you so suddenly sounded so sad? Is the statue of Gaia still there, after all?” asked Alekto, turning her sightless eyes toward Paphos’ voice.

“Oh, yes – it . . . is still there . . .” Paphos demurred. “It’s just . . . well, there is much wrong, in the Temple right now, and we don’t like to think about it, being so far from there, and worried, as we are . . . “ She petered out, suddenly close to tears. “I did hope that we would find the sculptors who had made such a beautiful figure . . .” she sniffed.

Io interrupted her. “Paph - it’s all right to tell them!”

“Well, when Xena and Gabrielle brought us all to Lemnos, they talked of a statue of Eponin – how they’d like one for the courtyard of our residence. Io and I decided we’d get them one, for the anniversary of their Mating Day.” She finished, miserably. “But we couldn’t think where to look. We do not even know hardly anyone there, yet. And we saw the statue of Gaia, and we thought . . . we hoped . . . the artists were there, and would do one for the Queens.”

She fell silent, and the two women sat, still as carved images themselves. Then Sibylla put her hand on Alekto’s arm, and spoke in a low voice.

“Well, dear? Do we have one more left in us?”

The older woman sat, thinking. Then she reached out her hand. “Come here, child. Io, is it?”

Io moved closer to the woman – until she was standing right next to her. The woman reached out both hands. “Come – let me touch your face, child. It is my way of seeing.”

Io knelt down before the woman. Alekto gently placed her hands on Io’s face, her fingers gentle and soft as they felt her features. She nodded, satisfied.

“Now, I want you to do something for me.”

“What?” Io asked, her voice a whisper. She looked at the features of the old woman, seeing the beauty that once lived there – and still did, even though it was a ravaged face, now.

“I want you to remember the face of Eponin, and her body. Can you do this, child?”

Io nodded, and swallowed her sudden tears. “Y . . . yes. I can remember.”

“Now, child. Think of her. Remember a particularly vivid memory you have of her. I want to get a good image of this.” The woman placed her hands on Io’s head. Io closed her own eyes, and conjured up the memory of Eponin, that day on the practice field when she had sparred with Gabrielle, when the Queen had saved her from the sudden crossbow attack. It was so vivid in Io’s mind that she felt as if she were there once again.

“Ah . . . just . . . so.” The woman said - her voice low and vibrant. She nodded, and sighed. Then removed her hands from Io’s head, and patted her on the shoulder.

“Thank you, my dear. That was a wonderful vision. I will easily recall this.”

Io looked at the two women, her mouth agape. “You . . . you saw her?”

“Oh yes, my dear - the TribeMind is good for many things, you know.”

Io gulped. “Oh! You . . . you have the TribeMind? How . . . How could you? I thought . . . only Amazons . . . “

Alekto smiled. ‘Many years ago, my dear. We both were of the Tribe – from Aretias – the Sacred Island of the Amazons, off the coast of Thermiskyra, on the ~~??e??? t??~~ - Euxeinos Pontos. Some call it the ‘Black Sea’ - although I cannot think why – it is beautiful, as I remember. I wasn’t always as you see me now – but escaping our fate had its price, for me.’

“You will do it? You will make the statue? How long will it take? Of course, we will pay you!” Paphos’ voice went up, her excitement palpable.

“Oh, I expect it will be several months, child. We must find the right stone, first – you see. Then we must talk to it, and find the way it wishes to be revealed. Not to mention figuring out a way to get it delivered to you!” she said - her voice ironic. “When is the anniversary day of the Queens’ mating?”

“It’s in the spring. Close to the Equinox.” Io volunteered. She stood up again, from her kneeling position before the women. “And it’s easily enough delivered. It can be brought over by boat, just as we were.” An undecipherable look passed between Sibylla and Sappho.

“Hmm, yes. Well, we will manage it, somehow.” Sibylla nodded. “Now, my gracious hostess – and young friends - we must go. Alekto has had enough excitement for one day.” She stood, and turned to Sappho, who was also on her feet. “Thank you, my dear. As usual, our visits to you are always a delight. And the food was delicious.” She took Alekto’s hand, and placed it on her arm. Then she guided her partner out through the loggia.

“You – you’ll let us know if you need anything – anything at all!” Io said, in a rush.

‘Of course, dear.’ Sibylla’s voice floated back to them. “Good night, young Warriors! Thank you. You are both too sweet for words! Have Sappho sing your praises!”

Sappho smiled at their stunned expressions.

“Well, you certainly captivated them!” she said, affectionately. “Come, now – let us retire inside. I will show you to your room.” They followed her in and up a broad staircase to a second story. A wide corridor, with rooms at regular intervals, stretched out before them. Braziers glowed along the way, so it was well lit.

Sappho moved to a closed doorway; then she stopped. A woman came out of one of the rooms further along the way, and moved toward them. As she came closer, both Io and Paphos were agape. She was breathtakingly beautiful. She came directly up to Sappho, and was promptly folded into Sappho's arms. They exchanged a deep kiss, and then Sappho turned to the two young women, who were trying their best – and failing - not to be too interested.

“Io – Paphos – this is my beloved Anaktoria . . . Dearest, these are the wards of Xena and Gabrielle – Io and Paphos. They are staying with us.”

“I am well pleased to meet you both. We hold Xena and Gabrielle in highest regard!” Anaktoria gave them each a familial embrace, kissing them on both cheeks. Then she turned to Sappho. “Will you be along soon, my love?”

“As soon as I have shown our guests to their rest.” Anaktoria nodded, smiled at them once again, and then went off down the corridor. Sappho turned, and gave them a dazzling smile. ‘Here is your place, then. If you need aught else, just ring the small bell on the table in your room. Someone will come directly. Thank you both, again, for the story of Xena and Gabrielle, and Eponin. It was a wondrous tale. You were golden-tongued, in the telling. We will speak more, tomorrow morning, of the current situation.” She clasped them once again to her; then retreated after Anaktoria.

Io and Paphos entered their room, and saw that it held a very inviting bed, a table on which stood a bowl of fruit, and a basin and ewer full of water. A towel and a nice small cake of mint-scented soap sat next to these.

Paphos sighed. “I think we’ve arrived in Elysium!”

Io grinned. “Or at least it’s antechamber!” She threw her arms around Paphos, and they collapsed onto the waiting bed.



Chapter 11

After another day of moving with Skylla and her herd of goats, Xena and Gabrielle had arrived on the high upland part of the island. The fair weather and the solitude had allowed them to talk and walk together undisturbed. It was healing for both of them. They ambled through a gently rolling landscape, without much cover. Scrubby scattered shrubs, growing low to the ground, and tough dry grass. They were only going as fast as the goats, which grazed constantly as they moved. It was even slower than normal human walking, and Xena was admittedly getting a little twitchy. She fretted over the precariousness of Galatea's position. Any delay was likely to prove costly. She was, however, able to do more deep thinking about the Pretender. The picture that was growing in her mind's eye was disquieting.

Gabrielle sighed, as they prepared to make camp once again. They were going to miss the comfort of Skylla's hut. The woman had been very quiet, most of the day, as she worked the herd with her beloved dog; giving them much-needed privacy. Gabrielle was getting very fond of Skylla.

"I would be willing to bet you all the dinars in Athens that we are about to be in big trouble with the Pretender. What do you think will happen, when we don't show up with all our troupe of Amazons, and it begins to dawn on that woman that we had no intention of coming?" Gabrielle asked, as she prepared the fire pit for their evening meal and for comfort. The temperatures would be cooler, up at this elevation.

"Oh, I expect that the Dark One will have a temper tantrum. I just hope she doesn't take it out on Galatea – but I'm afraid that is exactly what she will do." Xena twisted a piece of leather in her hand. She had been braiding it to make a new tie for her hair.

Gabrielle sat up from working the flints to get the fire lit. "So what do you think we should do?" She leaned over to blow on the softly smoking embers. The fire caught, and she fed it small twigs, and then larger sticks.

Xena shook her head. "Well, we won't go running back to Myrina – no matter what fireworks erupt over our absence. That would be letting ourselves react to her. I will not do that – with anybody. Well - I mean anybody but you! And besides," she grinned. "She has a thing or two to learn about tangling with our

Council, and our Regent. They are unflappable – and we both know they are capable of decisive action, if the need arises - when pressed to do so!”

“And do you think Io and Paphos will be safe?”

“With Sappho? Absolutely. I do not think the power of the Pretender extends so far. Besides, I am more worried about those two youngsters circumventing our intent! They are completely capable of wayward action, when they think it is called for!”

Gabrielle laughed. “O, yes! Remember the stealing of your chakram?” They exchanged a deep look, remembering that they had still been apart, then.

“”Mostly,” Xena whispered, as she moved over next to her kneeling partner, and lovingly clasped the silvery-gold head between her hands. She knelt down. After a long interlude, they parted; their faces still inches apart. “Don’t worry, they can handle themselves and Sappho can handle them! “

“I know, Xe.”

There was a sudden clearing of the throat, and a rustle of the bushes. Skylla had returned from settling the goats. They looked up, smiling at the herder.

“Skylla – goats all settled for the night?” Gabrielle asked.

“Aye. I will make the meal, tonight.” Skylla dropped to her knees, and began setting up a tripod arrangement over the crackling fire.

“Oh . . . thank you,” said Gabrielle, startled.

“No trouble. It is for me to make amends.” Skylla pulled the pot out of her pack, and hung it onto the tripod. Then she got up. “I will be back. I go for some roots, and greens.” She walked off into the scrub.

“What was that about?”

Xena stared thoughtfully at Skylla’s retreating figure, as she moved down the hillside. “I would guess it’s because she is feeling a little guilty about being a ‘tool’ for the Pretender.”

“Divided loyalties, do you think?”

“Not any more. I think we’ve gained our first true Lemnian Amazon follower, my dear.”

“Well, whatever the reason, I’m grateful she’ll cook,” Gabrielle yawned. “I want some quality time with my Warrior Queen, tonight.”

Xena smiled, her eyebrow lifted. “*Anticipation . . .*” she crooned in her head. “*How lovely!*”

“*Not half as lovely as the real thing.*” Gabrielle smiled back, a promise in her eyes.



Chapter 12

The following morning, Io and Paphos had a delicious breakfast with Sappho and some of the young women who attended Sappho’s school. They were a merry lot, and there was much banter among them. Both young women felt much more at ease with their peers, and were loath to think they would have to depart. Sappho led them into a side room – one filled with scrolls. It was obviously her scriptorium, and they gazed in awe at the profusion. Paphos sighed.

“What is it, child?” Sappho asked.

“Oh, I just get discouraged, sometimes – there are so many scrolls – I shall never hope to read them all!”

“Ah, yes. Well, we all feel that way. But I understand that you are assisting Gabrielle, are you not?”

“Yes. We are recording the history of the Amazons.” Paphos sighed again. “Before we are all gone.”

Sappho took her hands. “My dear – you have no need to fear that, any time soon. Your Tribe is now alive and well on Lemnos, and surely it will thrive, under such able Queens!”

Io shook her head. “It’s never that simple, is it Sappho?”

Sappho looked long at the two young women. They were old for their age – old in pain and suffering, far beyond what any young women their age should have to be.

She shook her head. “No it is not. Yet you are strong, and your heritage will not desert you. I have much to discuss with you both, this day. Will you sit with me, so we can talk?” She gestured to a low cushioned seat.

They crossed to the table that served as her workspace, and sat across from the poet. She was seated before a blank sheet of papyrus. She took up her quill, and began to write. The two watched, as a shaft of sunlight moved suddenly through the open arch of the window, and fell across the writing woman. Paphos caught her breath, seeing the poet backlit - her whole form glowing golden in the light. She would remember this image for the rest of her life.

Sappho finished, and carefully sanded the writing. Then she rolled it tightly, and set her seal to it. Then she looked at them, and smiled. “This is for the harbormaster. I shall have it delivered immediately. Then, my dears, we will send for your ship’s crew, so that they may stay here with us, too, until Anacreon’s ship arrives. They may as well enjoy themselves as much as you, don’t you think?”

They nodded, mesmerized.

“Now, suppose you tell me all that is going on, there, in Lemnos. I want to understand how best to fulfill my part in this – drama we are creating. Your guardians have instructed me that you are to remain here, with the women from Egypt, until they call for you to return.”

She raised her hand, as they both began to protest.

“Now, my dears - please remain calm and civil. That is a very important skill to cultivate. I heartily recommend it, in fact. Let this be my first instruction to you, as your Teacher. You have also another thing to learn. You see, for the past twelve seasons, the Island of Lemnos has been lost. No one has seen it in all that time. It is

as though it disappeared off the face of the Earth. Now you must tell me what you think is going on, there. For I would dearly like to know!”



Chapter 13

Gabrielle woke with a start. The morning air was chill, and a bleary look about quickly told her that the fire had burned to a few embers, and the dawn was just beginning to lighten the eastern sky. The day they would reach the ShieldWall, and she was loath for it to begin. She saw that Skylla and the dog were not across the fire pit, so she presumed they had gone down to see to the goats. She turned, and finding that Xena was still sound asleep, her back up against Gabrielle's, she gently slid out from under the covers, and lovingly tucked them back in so her partner would not feel the chill. Then she moved quickly over to the tall thicket of bushes that masked the southern edge of the clearing, and saw to her needs. Coming back to the fire, she added several short lengths of kindling, tending it until there was once again a cheerful blaze putting out good heat. She got some water into the pot for making of the morning tea, and then slipped back under the blankets to cuddle, and wait for it to boil.

Putting her arm around Xena, she nuzzled the exposed neck of her mate. “Good morning, sleepyhead - are you ever going to get up?”

Xena turned over on her back - a blissful smile on her face. She stretched, and yawned - then turned to face Gabrielle. The blue eyes were a brilliant color, this morning, and Gabrielle just dove into them. The world could have fallen away, and she would never have noticed.

“Where's Skylla?” Xena murmured.

“Off with the goats, I think.”

“Time for once more . . . do you think?” Xena asked, wistfully.

“O, if you are *very* good . . . and promise solemnly not to *yell!*” Gabrielle teased. “And if you are prepared to race the water to a boil!”

“I don’t know . . .,” Xena said. “Sometimes I go there, and don’t want to come back too soon.”

“Don’t I know it?” Gabrielle’s mouth sought and found the sweet lips,

Xena moved under her, wrapping her long arms around Gabrielle, and pulling her close as skin can get, to skin. “Gods, Gabrielle” . . . she murmured, “I cannot get enough of you. . .” They reveled in one another’s softness, and the warmth that was creeping up and over them from their own passion. An increasingly insistent noise from the fire pit distracted Gabrielle. “Xe . . .” she panted. “Xe . . . the water . . .”

“Let it boil.” Xena said, speaking into Gabrielle’s mouth. “Let it go.”

Soft fingers brushed soft curls, found the way open, and they both moved to the beat of one another’s breath, rising up and over the top swiftly, coming simultaneously to their climax with an intensity borne of a long denial not yet fully redeemed. Sated, they both collapsed into one another’s warm embrace, and let the breath come back to quiet, and the sweat cool their bodies.

“I love you.” Gabrielle said.

“I know you do. And you know I love you.”

“I know.”

“And you know I am going to make you a happy woman, before we are through.”

“You are?”

“Uh huh.”

“I’m not a happy woman, yet?”

“Nope – not nearly enough happy.”

“Oh,” she said. “Whatever you say.” Gabrielle smiled a sudden, sunny smile – her nose wrinkling in the long-familiar way that made Xena’s heart jump.

“Good.” Xena growled, and kissed her once again.

“Xe . . . the water . . .” The sound of rapidly evaporating water reached their ears.
“The pot will burn . . .”

Xena sighed. ‘Oh, all right.’

* * * * *

Xena and Skylla were waiting while Gabrielle finished her morning ablutions. They were probably going to reach what Skylla referred to as the ShieldWall sometime that afternoon. Xena was impatient to see just what it was.

“Skylla, can I ask you something?”

“A-ye. You are my Queen. Ask anything.”

“When you told of the day when the ships came, and they sailed by without seeing you – will you tell me – were they warships? Did you see troops on the ships?”

Skylla frowned, her gaze shifting out over the flock of goats that chewed contentedly around them. She was silent along moment.

“I have to say, I did not see any warriors. I cannot say they were warships.” She looked at Xena, her face troubled. “They said they were. The Goddess and the Priestess. They said it was so. We had no reason to doubt - it was Gaia’s word.”
Xena nodded. “No. Why would you? There would be no reason to doubt them. They were protecting the Island, and all of its inhabitants. After all – the ships sailed away, did they not? Regardless if they were a threat or not – the result was the same – they did not see you, and they were driven from their course.”

“A-ye.” Skylla replied, but there was a question in her eyes.

Xena looked long at her. “Do you think you were tricked?”

Skylla looked back out over the hills that rolled off to the north. "It may be so." She sighed, and shook her head. "But now, it is long years hence, and I am blurry in my head, as to that day. Much happened, and much was painful. I do not have the memory, any more. They were taken, that day."

Xena smiled, grimly. "You can say that again."

"Well, are we ready to go?" Gabrielle walked up to them, where they sat on the pile of packs. She picked up her staff, and looked down at the two women. "What is it?"

Xena stood, and swung Gabrielle's pack up and handed it to her. "We were just talking about the day the ships sailed by." She held the straps, while Gabrielle slid into them; then donned her own. Sunrise was circling them, panting and grinning, ready to move out. Skylla gave her two sharp whistles, and the dog began herding the goats. The women brought up the rear, as the protesting herd moved up the slope to the next ridge.

Gabrielle's eyebrows rose quizzically. "And?"

"And it seems there is some question as to whether they were hostile, at all." Xena said, thoughtfully. Gabrielle looked at Skylla, who walked on the other side of Xena. She was grim-faced - saying nothing.

"Skylla, do you know if the thing that is used to block the Outsiders is the same thing that was used to hide the island?" Gabrielle asked.

Skylla walked silent, her head down, her face troubled.

"Skylla?"

"I think it must be so, my Queen. I cannot say for sure. You will have to judge for yourselves, when we come to the ShieldWall."

They walked on in troubled silence. Both Gabrielle and Xena kept up their dialogue in their heads.

"What do you make of it, Xe?"

"I'm not sure. But I think we are going to find something queer, when we get there."

“I agree. And we had better be able to figure it out, because this whole thing is beginning to give me the creeps.”

“You can say that again!”

They concentrated, then, on getting to their destination. A good two candle-marks later, they found themselves pushing to get up a slope that was higher than the others had been, and which seemed to cut across the horizon like a knife. The surrounding hills were gloomy, and sparse of vegetation. It was an empty, desolate area. The silence was strange. The land seemed deserted: the goats, dog, and humans out of place. The dog seemed affected by it, as well. She whined, and kept close to the women. The goats slowed to a practical standstill, and Skylla urged Sunrise - who harried them - to get them to keep moving.

When they reached the top of the ridge, they looked out at the landscape before them. It fell away steeply - down probably at least eight hundred feet - to a silent flat plain below. It spread out right to the edge of the coast and the azure blue of the Aegean beyond. They stood in silence, surveying the scene. It was hazy. They could not see any movement.

Skylla finally stirred, and spoke.

“This is the boundary. I and my dog and my goats will go no further.”

They turned, and looked at her.

“Is this your ShieldWall, then?” Gabrielle asked.

Skylla shook her head. “Nay. *This* is not.” She gestured at the ridge on which they stood.

“Then where is it?” Xena asked.

“You go. You will find it, soon enough.” She stood, the knuckles of her hands showing white where she gripping her walking stick, her face inscrutable.

They stared at her, but could read nothing from her expression. Xena stood a long moment, looking out over the plain below, and then swung around and looked back

at Skylla, her brows furrowed in thought. “Skylla? Will you answer me one more question?”

“A-ye.”

“Have there been **any** other ships, from that day - until the *Leto* came?”

The herder’s jaw sagged. She shook her head. “Nay, my Queen. No others.”

Xena nodded. Something confirmed by the answer. She smiled grimly. “Will you wait for us here, then? Until we return?” She asked.

The woman nodded her head, once – emphatically.

Xena and Gabrielle looked at one another. “*Well – it’s not like we haven’t been here - or somewhere very like here - before. Are you ready for this?*”

“*Nope. I am never ready. But we do it anyway – right?*”

“*Yes. We do.*”

They set off over the knife-edge of the ridge, and down the other side.

Skylla leaned on her staff. Sunrise sat on her rump, her side plastered against Skylla’s leg, and howled mournfully. “They will be back, soon enough.” she muttered, “Or I’m much mistaken.”

* * * * *



Chapter 14

The Pretender paced up and down, up and down in front of the statue of Gaia, seated in the shadowy light of the Inner Temple. At the feet of the Goddess, Galatea crouched, her chiton ripped and spotted with blood, her face bruised and swollen.

“So! Where are they, my sweet Priestess? Where are the last Tribe of the Amazon Nation, and their high and mighty Queens? They had a date with posterity, today - and they have chosen to snub the Call of the Goddess? Do they think they will escape the inevitable? Why cannot they see the rightness of this? Why are they so damnably stubborn?”

As she paced, raising her fists in fury, the exhausted Priestess shook her head, her hair hanging over her face. She did not care, anymore, what she said. It did not matter.

“I don’t know!” Galatea sobbed. “Why don’t you go after them yourself? You have the power to do whatever you want, don’t you? You do not need me, anymore. Just go – do whatever you are going to do, anyway! I have been a rotten puppet, in your hands, all along! All this time, it has always been about you, hasn’t it? You are not Gaia. You aren’t anything of Gaia! You are evil, and you are destroying the only chance for happiness and peace this Nation has ever had! Go ahead – kill me too! You will, soon enough. What does it matter, any more?”

The woman turned on Galatea in fury, yanking her to her feet, and thrusting her up against the carved legs of the seated Goddess. She held her there, pinned by the throat. She brought her hooded face close, and the hood fell back, revealing a mask, which covered the features almost completely. A pair of red-rimmed, angry eyes stared out, and the cruel mouth, with a sardonic grin, sneered at the trembling woman. She paused, then – an almost feral, considered pause. Cocking her head, she brought her face closer to Galatea. The young woman tried to turn her head away, but the powerful dominatrix was too strong for her, and turned her face back with the other gloved hand. With a low sound, the woman suddenly kissed Galatea full on the mouth, crushing her cruelly back even harder against the stone of the statue. Then she laughed.

“So much for the power of Gaia,” she snarled. “Look at this – right at the feet of the All-Seeing, All-Knowing Goddess of Earth – and what happens? NOTHING - that is what! I could have you again, right here, right in the Goddess’s lap, and it would be Oh so sweet! Would you enjoy that, my lovely?”

Galatea whimpered. She closed her eyes. It was too much to bear. Oh, where was the unasked for help - where the unforeseen intervention? She ceased her fruitless resistance, and swooned.

As she began attacking the vulnerable Galatea's body, shoving one knee between the woman's unresisting legs, cruel fingers forcing their way up into the ravaged sex, there was a sudden noise – the unmistakable booming sound of the front doors clanging open. The Pretender drew up to her full height, and let the limp figure fall. She whirled, and strode toward the noises from the outer hall.

A crowd of Amazons poured into the outer Temple. They were the Thessalonians - and Alysia, Talia, Eusta and the others of the Council led them. Moreover, they were Amazons armed to the teeth. They took up their defensive stances.

The Pretender strode out into their midst, her hood back up, and her figure imposing in the confines of that sacred space.

“HOW DARE YOU DESECRATE THE TEMPLE OF GAIA, WITH YOUR FILTHY WEAPONS AND VIOLENT AGGRESSION?”

Alysia stood forth, her head held high, her eyes blazing, “Well, you phony – you summoned us all here, did you not? We should be asking you that question! We are here to reclaim our birthright! We are here to call you to accounts! We will not leave this place without removing you from our midst How ever you want that to happen, we will gladly oblige you!” There was a sudden slithering sound, as swords were un-sheathed, and the creak of bowstrings pulled taut.

The tall figure drew itself up, looming high over them all. She raised her arm, the thick sleeve of the robe falling back, revealing a tightly fitted under-sleeve of black leather, as a sharp-nailed finger pointed accusingly at the Regent.

“YOU will be dealt with, directly I return! I find I cannot stay to entertain you – I have business elsewhere!” She hissed in a cruel laughter. “Maybe you can find some of what you fancy in your High and Mighty Priestess!” There was a sudden concussion - a deep rumbling sound – a flash of blinding light - and the hooded figure was gone.

The Amazons stood, disbelieving, at the sudden silence. They muttered amongst themselves: “Where did she go?” “Goddess if I know!” “How did she do that?”

Alysia, meantime, moved swiftly, motioning Talia to follow her, as she headed for the Inner Temple. With a cry, she sped to the foot of the statue, where a crumpled form lay on the floor. Gently raising the woman in her arms, she checked for broken bones, and pulled the hair out of her face. With a sharp intake of breath, she shook her head at the state of Galateia's injuries.

"Ikthenia, will you come here please? I want you to carry the High Priestess to the House of Healing, and stay with her while she is being treated. You will be her guardian."

Ikthenia nodded - her face sorrowful at the sight of the injuries to the woman. She sheathed her sword, took the slight figure into her arms, and carried her out of the Temple.

Galateia struggled awake, at first resisting. "What? Where am I? Who . . . ?" She tried to see who was carrying her, but her eyes would not focus.

Ikthenia made soothing noises as she strode along through the streets. "Hush, my Priestess, hush! You are safe now. It is I, Ikthenia, who carries you. I am taking you to the Healers. Fear not!"

She kicked at the door of the House of Healing, and sounds of someone unfastening the door followed. The door swung open. Kallidike stood, blinking, in the light of the lamps.

"Who comes?"

"I am bringing the High Priestess. She has been beaten! Let us through!"

Kallidike backed hastily away, and shepherded them inside. She led the Amazon to the treatment room, and gestured for her to place the Priestess on one of the cots. She quickly began to examine the woman, all along making noises of concern.

"Oh, my dear! What has happened to you? This is terrible! There – don't move. Let me get those bruises treated." She hurried over to the shelves, and began assembling the materials and medicines.

Ikthenia sat on the side of the cot, unwilling to let go of Galateia's hand. The Priestess turned her head, still trying to see the woman who had rescued her.

“Are you . . . are you my savior, then?” she whispered. Ikthenia blushed. She stroked the pale hand gently.

“Only one of them, my Priestess – a whole band of us came in. We scared off that Pretender. She vanished right in front of us – but she left you behind. We would have settled her, if she hadn’t!” Her voice rose sternly.

“Oh, please - no more violence! I have had enough of it!” her voice broke, and tears fell from her swollen eyes.

“Hush now.” Ikthenia said. “I will guard you. That one will never lay another hand on you, for as long as I live and draw breath!”

Galatea moaned in pain, as the two women bent over her.

* * * * *

Gabrielle was the first to feel it: a whiff of anxiety, followed swiftly by a wave of terror. She stopped in her tracks. “Xe!” she said, turning with a look of anguish.

Xena stopped, also bowled over by a wave of palpable fear that washed over her. She saw a kaleidoscope of images – long, excruciating frozen moments of death and mayhem from her past, seen now in vivid focus. The ferocity of them struck her like a sledgehammer. The images of the dead cried out. Her death in Jappa revisited, in all its fury and pain. Her face contorted with dismay, as she stood, rooted, and helpless to stop it.

Gabrielle, too, was visited. Perdicus . . . Her parents . . . The image of herself, ravished by Dahok . . . The terrible drums in the forest of Jappa . . . the memory of Xena’s body, headless . . . she bent over with the sheer weight of the pain, her arms crossed over her head.

Gasping, Xena grabbed Gabrielle’s arm, and pulling her along, backed up slowly. She managed to get them back far enough that the images began to fade. They stood, bent over, trying to catch their breath and recover from the physical nausea that assailed them.

“Augh – Gods, that was . . . O . . . such pain!” Gabrielle moaned. She sank to her knees in the dirt, her hands slipping down her staff. Her heart was still beating wildly in her chest. She tried to calm her breathing, to slow it down.

Xena too was concentrating on her breath. She muttered to herself the words of Lao Ma:

“Be completely empty.
Be perfectly serene.
The ten thousand things arise together.
In their rising is their return. . .
The return . . .
Is peace. . .”

“Are you all right?” Gabrielle asked, looking up at her.

Xena nodded and sat down abruptly. She groped for her water skin, and took a long pull of the cold water. She handed it to Gabrielle, who did likewise.

“Well. Now I understand why there is no easy crossing of the ShieldWall.” Xena said.

“The question is - what are we going to do about it?” Gabrielle said, glumly.

Xena shook her head. “Oh, I expect that you and I could cross through to the other side, all right. We managed to get back from Tartarus. That’s not a problem.”

Gabrielle nodded. “We both know that this is a mental thing – a construct. We know it is not real. We know that we are safe. But how are they doing this, Xe?”

Xena thought hard. “Well, I would guess that the Pretender has woven a binding spell – one that keeps everything massed together – kind of like turning it all into a cloud – all their fear, and all their memories of the bad things they have seen and felt. She has it all concentrated here, along this border. So whenever anyone approaches it, they immediately get sucked in, and it triggers their own memories and fears, and heightens them.”

Gabrielle nodded. “But then, do you think this is what they did to the people on the ships? If that is true, then this is how they are protecting the whole island! We have to stop this, don’t we?”

Xena nodded. “Yes . . . we do.”

“But if we do that, the Pretender will lose control over everyone, won’t she? And the island will no longer be protected.”

“No, it won’t. We can break through, here – temporarily; - but eventually, we will have to break the spell, and return all of it to them. We have to give them a better way, Gabi. It is not going to be easy for them. This has protected them completely. Anything other than this – will be more vulnerable. Less certain.”

Gabrielle nodded. “So, what do we do now?”

“Let’s punch a big psychic hole in the fence. See if anyone notices.”

“And how do we do that?”

“Well you know, love – I have a strange feeling maybe the chakram will work on this. Sort of like it used to cut the heads off all those spears and swords - picture it carving a hole through those collective fears. Shall we try it? Only - let’s this time leave the Dragon to sleep.”

Gabrielle nodded, “Fine by me.”

With that, they stood, and faced the invisible Dread. Xena took two steps forward, their hands firmly clasped. They stopped, as they both felt it growing, once again. Xena took a deep breath, and focused her mind on the chakram. Once again, the eerie swirl of energy began circling around her neck, and then, as she threw out her hand, it traveled down her arm, and flared out from her fingertip,. There was a huge CRACK! A muffled BOOM, A shaft of light came through the clouds above them, and lit the space directly in front of where they stood.

Up on the escarpment, Skylla heard the sounds, and her head came up suddenly. Sunrise barked, a short, high bark, and raced to the edge, looking down into the haze. Skylla followed, and looked. Saw the shaft of light, as it pierced the mists.

“Oye! They have done it, now! Gaia, help them! Oh, damn the Code - I can’t just wait here!” Her hands signaled to the dog, and pursing her lips, she issued several sharp whistles and sounds. The dog stayed behind, dutifully minding the goats. She leapt down the slope, calling out to them as she ran. They heard her, and turned to look back as she closed the distance.

“Wait!” she hollered. “Wait – you can’t get through!”

They stood quiet, as she came up to them, huffing and blowing with the sudden exertion.

“So, Skylla – what’s the problem, now?” Xena asked her face calm.

“You can’t! I heard the noises . . . you cannot get through. You’ll be crushed!”

‘Actually – you’ll be more than crushed.’ A low, exultant voice remarked. “You’ll be annihilated.”

They looked around, to see the towering figure of the Pretender striding through the shaft of light.



Chapter 15

Late that afternoon, the young Amazons decided to purchase some small mementos of their visit. Sappho had directed them to the open-air market, which filled one of the side streets. They were resigned to the fact that Sappho was not about to let them rush back to Lemnos, with or without the Egyptian women. They were restless, and unable to make small talk with the other young women who lived on the estate. They were worried about the events at home, and their InSight was not proving very effective at viewing from afar.

“Do you think the Egyptians are even coming, Paph?” Io asked, glumly.

“Why Io! You shouldn’t even think such a thing – Xena and Gabrielle would not lie to us!”

“Even to protect us?”

“Even so.” Paphos said, with certainty, and a warning note of finality in her voice. “Don’t go there.”

Io sighed. “I suppose not.” She grabbed Paphos’ hand, and squeezed it. “Forgive me?”

Paphos impulsively threw her arms around Io, and gave her a sweet kiss. “You know I do.”

They passed many booths. Paphos was attracted to a one that displayed many kinds of scrolls and strange-shaped objects wrapped in leather. She stopped to look closer, murmuring, “I’ll be here, Io . . .”

She picked up one of the objects, and examined it. The woman minding the booth smiled at her. “Like it?” she asked.

“Oh . . . I don’t know . . . what is it called?”

“It’s what they call a βιβλίον - a *book*. It has many sheets of vellum, so you can write more in it.”

Paphos grew round-eyed with excitement. She could hardly wait to show Gabrielle! “I’ll take it!” she announced, digging in her girdle for her money pouch. “Now, something for Io . . .” and she wandered off down the street.

Io, meanwhile, had drifted to a potter’s display. She saw a woman working at a wheel, shaping a pot. She sang out a greeting, and the woman paused in her work, the wheel slowing to a stop.

“What can I do for you?”

“I like your work!” She said, shyly, looking round at the articles of pottery. Her gaze was attracted by a small, cunningly worked figure of a naked woman, fired and glazed a deep cobalt blue, that hung from a thong of leather. She went over for a closer look. “This is fantastic!”

The woman nodded. “Wearing it is supposed to bring the protection of Artemis.”

Io rubbed her thumb over the figure’s sensuous shape. She would like to get it for Paphos.

“How much do you ask for it?”

“Well, that depends. . .” the woman wiped her hands on a cloth, and swung her leg over the seat of the potter’s wheel. She walked over next to Io, and stood looking on.

“Depends on what?” Io asked.

“Depends on whether it is going to a worthy recipient.”

Io looked at her appraisingly. She seemed a canny businesswoman, but what kind of game was she playing? “I think it is.” She said, modestly.

The woman grinned. “Do you love her *very* much?” She asked, laughing.

Io nodded. “More than my life,” she said, simply.

“Then it is a price you can probably afford.” the woman answered, her voice seductive. She removed the pendant from the hook, and lifted it over Io’s head, to rest on her chest. She smiled at Io, and stroked the figure with one long finger.

“How . . . how much?” Io asked, swallowing nervously. She suddenly wondered if she had enough. Although, they had brought a hefty pouch of dinars with them, from Alysia.

The woman grinned. “Two dinars . . . and a kiss.”

“A . . . a kiss?” Io stuttered.

The woman nodded. “Just a little one.” She moved closer. Io felt the sweat break out on her forehead. She looked down at the pendant regretfully, and pulling it over her head, she handed it back to the woman. She shook her head. “I’m sorry - it is very beautiful – but not that beautiful.”

The woman threw her head back and laughed delightedly. She put the figure back into Io’s hand. “Very well, two dinars, only. It is yours. You have made this day too enjoyable to spoil it with haggling.”

Io stared at her. “Well thank you.” Io scrabbled in her pouch, handed the woman the coins, and then gave her the Amazon salute, as she backed out of the stall. She turned, casting her gaze about for the familiar form of her mate, as she put the pendant around her neck, and stowed the figure under her tunic. She shook her head in perplexity. She was not used to people flirting with her. She just felt too out of it, being in a town all the time. She missed the simplicity of their lives in the Amazon enclave. What a story she would have to tell Paphos, when they got back to the house!

“*Hola, Io!*” Paphos’ mental tug pulled inside her head. “*Here I am!*” She ran up, breathless. Io looked at her flushed cheeks, her dancing eyes, and wanted to kiss her, again, right there in the middle of the street. So she did.

“My goodness! I wasn’t gone that long!”

“Did you find something good?” Io asked, taking her arm.

“Oh yes! I cannot wait to show you!”

They wandered happily back to Sappho’s estate.

When they arrived, there was a hurried bustle of figures rushing about. Young women with armfuls of folded sheets were moving in and out of the rooms. Io and Paphos stopped one of them, and inquired what was going on.

“The visitors are coming! We must make ready all the rooms. It is a very big delegation!”

Io and Paphos looked at one another. “The Egyptians!”

They went to their room, to put away their things. Paphos sat down on the bed. Io came over, and sat down next to her.

Paphos sighed, and laid her head on Io’s shoulder. “I’m beat.” She said, stifling a yawn.

Io put her arm around her, and hugged her close. “Go ahead and take a nap. I will go down and see if I can help. But before I do, I have something for you.” With that, she reached into her shirtfront with her free hand, pulled the small blue figure out, and lifted it over her head. She handed it to Paphos, who sat up suddenly and

looked at the pendant, making a small sound of intense pleasure as she turned it over and examined it.

“Oh! It’s beautiful!” she breathed. “You shouldn’t have!”

“Oh yes I should!” Io laughed. “You don’t know what I endured, to get it!” She recounted the incident of the amorous potter. Paphos blushed prettily at the appropriate moment, rewarded with a tender kiss. Io lifted the leather thong, and deposited it around Paphos’ neck.

“There, now it will protect you.”

“You think so?” Paphos asked, half in earnest, half in jest.

“Absolutely - And, if she doesn’t, I will!”

Paphos suddenly looked panicky, and began to rummage in her pack. “Oh, please! I haven’t lost it already, have I?”

Io watched, mystified. Paphos suddenly smiled, as she triumphantly brought her hand out of the bag, clutching something. She reached out to Io. “Here! I cannot bear to wait any longer!”

Io, her face puzzled grasped Paphos’ hand in hers, and opened the fingers that clasped a small purple leather pouch. She took it up, and pulled open the thong that kept it shut. Upending the bag, she gasped, as a gold ring dropped into the palm of her hand. She gazed at it, dumbstruck. Then she looked wonderingly into Paphos’ eyes. She stood, her shock overcoming her, as Paphos gently picked up the circlet, and slid it onto Io’s finger.

“Now we are one,” she whispered. “That is, if you will have me?”

Io, her mouth agape, and her eyes suddenly blurring, threw her arms around Paphos, and their lips met in a fury of passion.

“O, with all my heart!” she gasped.

* * * * *



Chapter 16

The looming figure stood in the beam of sunlight. Again the rasping voice sounded. “You have done more harm to the Amazons of Lemnos than you can possibly repair. Now the question is - what am I to do with you?”

Xena smiled - her face and body completely relaxed. She gave a slight squeeze to Gabrielle’s hand. “Oh, that will be easy. There is a simple solution to all of this, you know. It requires no mumbo-jumbo, no fancy spells or staged antics. It is a simple thing,”

The figure gave a low laugh. “Oh, Xena – you are such a master at twisting words. You and your golden-haired *puppet* – she who smiles, and speaks her golden-tongued syrupy tales of the great Warrior Princess – the *Destroyer of Nations*, was it? I think not. You never **really** got there, did you Xena? Although you tried hard enough. **I** did what **you** failed to do. I learned it all from Alti, and had my empire! No – I think maybe I should end this here, and now, before you get much further in your little game; before there is any further damage done.” She raised her arm, pointing a gloved finger at the two women.

Skylla, who had been rooted to the spot where she stood, to one side of the Queens, was suddenly galvanized into action. In two strides, she was standing between the ominous figure and her Queens, her sheath knife clutched in her hand, and her black eyes glittering with ferocity.

“You’ll not harm them,” she said, her voice dark and menacing. “I have kept the teachings of my youth. My caste is broken, and my pain – but I still know how to defend myself, and those I love. Touch a hair on their heads, and I will take you - though it should mean my death” She stood, resolute. In the background, a weird howling commenced, as Sunrise, alerted to her human’s danger, expressed her dismay at having to stay behind.

Gabrielle started forward, shaking her head - but Xena held her firmly back. Then she resumed speaking, her low, calm voice a counterpoint to the dog's noise.

“At least, if you are going to attempt my death, I should have the courtesy of knowing who is delivering me to the Blessed Realms.” Her raised eyebrow and ironic smile played belied the seriousness of the situation.

“Ha! I was wondering how long before you would ask me that!” The figure lowered her hand, and stood with both fists on her hips. “You should have recognized me, by now. Perhaps if I reveal myself, it will all come back to you?” With that, the figure reached up, and pulled the hood back from her head. Long black hair cascaded out from the hood. Then she pulled the mask from her face.

There was complete silence, as all three figures froze in stunned shock. The woman threw back her head and laughed. She was Xena's spitting image – a younger-looking, black-haired Xena. The face was harder, though, and bore a livid vertical scar that ran down from the hair-line to the ear on the left side of her face.

Gabrielle stuttered - “Who . . . What is this? Who are you?”

Xena's face had gone deathly pale, at the sight of the woman's face. She took a deep breath, and then shook her head from side to side.

“No. No, you are not going to get away with this. Amateur theatrics time is over. Think about this some more. If you kill us now, how are you going to keep all those Amazons quiet? Even if you work up some fancy tricks, they will be upset at the deaths of their beloved Queens – Queens who were already legends before they even showed up. You are on the edge, here, and it is the sharp edge of oblivion. Think! If you are intent on keeping your power, you will have to face us down, in the presence of the Tribe of Lemnos. If you pretend to be me, you will have to do a better job with the illusion. Can you shrink your height, as well? Can you cast glamour over the eyes of every Amazon – including the Thessalonians? Can you afford to do away with all of them, if it comes to that? Then what good will your ShieldWall be, with the bodies of Amazons once more littering the streets? You have made this infinitely harder for yourself, ‘Gaia’ – and you had better just go off and figure some other way!”

The Xena-like face took on a calculated look. Then she answered. “You have a point . . . very well; I will postpone your demise for a better audience than one smelly goat woman. I am challenging you and your bitch's right to rule over

Lemnos. We will meet in the town square in six sun cycles. Make sure all of the women of this island are present! They will choose. I will make sure of it!” With that, another loud concussion, a sudden rippling of the air, and she was gone.

* * * * *

Skylla was the first to speak. “Ah – she is full of wind, that one - all fury, but no teeth. I am wondering, now – is she some kin to you?”

Xena looked uncomfortable. “I do not think so. As far as I know, I am the only person with this face in this world. I think she is a sorcerer, of some kind, and is messing with our heads. Maybe she thinks it will be easier to control people if she looks like me. Do not underestimate her! She is merely assessing the situation – checking her defenses, if you like. She means every word she has said. We will have to work quickly, now, to be ready for her. She knows the ShieldWall is partly down, here - and it will take some effort to mend that again. So we must act while there is time, and the opportunity.”

Gabrielle nodded, wiping the sudden sweat from her face. “I’ll send word to the women on Lesvos, to come at once to Myrina. We have to hope they will get here before the Challenge. I will also connect with Alysia, and see what is going on there.”

Skylla stood, looking through the yellowish light that marked the breach in the ShieldWall “So, my queens - What would you ask of Skylla and Sunrise?”

“You, my stalwart warrior, will have the high honor of sending word to the TribeMind, to tell what you have witnessed, and all that you know of us and what we are trying to accomplish. I know you are a woman of few words, but you are going to have to dig deep, Skylla, and find them! I expect brave Sunrise may have her work cut out for her – because I am sending both of you back to Myrina, as soon as you can gather yourself together and go. The goats will have to roam untended, until this is settled. We will have much need for you, for a while.”

Skylla’s shoulders straightened and her quick smile flashed out at them. “I am yours, my Queens.” Her arm came up in the Amazon salute. “I will go, now.”

“Skylla?” Xena called her back. “It might be best if you would keep to yourself the fact that she looks like me. Until we know if it is real – I’d rather that be kept

between us.” Skylla nodded, then turned, and set off up the hill. The sounds of Sunrise, barking excitedly, floated down to greet her return.

* * * * *

Gabrielle turned, and stood looking through the breach. “I noticed you said ‘. . . in **this** world.’ Am I thinking what I think you are thinking?”

‘Well, If the Xena in that other probability went on to become whatever she was destined to be – it would make sense that she would be somewhere, trying to control **somebody**, Maybe she had a Gabrielle, and lost her – as you lost me, here – and she got even more out of control as a result. . . anything is possible. If that is true, then we need to add one more person to our rescue list.”

Gabrielle sighed, and agreed. “But can we take a bit of a rest, first?”

Xena smiled, and wrapping her arms around Gabrielle, she gave her a bone-crunching hug. Gabrielle returned it. “What is that for?”

‘I told you – I’m going to make you a happy woman!’

“Oh . . . o . . . okaaay. Can you elaborate on that, just a little?” She nuzzled Xena’s neck,

“Easily, my love,” Xena breathed, and found the waiting lips, and send her questing tongue on a scouting trip of its own. If she hadn’t had to breathe, she could have stayed there forever.

Gabrielle pulled back for air. She looked up and into the dreamy blue eyes watching her. “This is a new trait of yours, Xe. I think I like it, actually.”

Xena smiled again, “What trait is that?”

“Stopping for a kisses right in the middle of the action? Isn’t that a tad – over the top?”

Xena chuckled breathily. “O, definitely - way over the top! Do you realize this is the same Xena who used to watch her back, no matter what she was up to?” She promptly went back for more. She pulled Gabrielle down, coaxing her into the tall grasses.

“Xe? Shouldn’t we be getting on to the Outcasts’ settlement? It is going to be dark, soon.” she interjected, as she was being disrobed.

“Shhh!” Xena commanded. “You’re fussing.”

“Oh . . . Xe!”

“Shhh . . . we’re consecrating this patch of the free isle of Lemnos. We have to get the whole island back to this state. We might as well start here, don’t you think?”

“Mmhmm.” Gabrielle moaned.

* * * * *

Some time passed. There was a rustling of the bushes. The two figures on the ground went still, schooling their ragged breathing into silence.

“There are two of them.” Gabrielle whispered.

“I know.”

“What’s the plan?”

“Let’s try for casual.”

“Okaaay . . . casual. And that would be . . .?”

Xena rolled over and up onto her feet in one fluid motion. “You can come out, now. You have been making enough noise for the last few moments to wake every jackrabbit within half a day’s distance.” She stood with her arms loose at her sides. Gabrielle slowly got up, as well, bending slowly to pick up her leggings, which she proceeded to put back on, pulling them up one leg, then the other, and fastening them at the waist. For the moment, she left her tunic lying where it was - near her abandoned staff, close by the intruders’ probable location. She stood lightly, on the balls of her feet, her hands ready at her sides.

.

The bushes parted, and two fully armed Amazons stepped out into the beaten down patch of grasses. They had on the traditional leather garb, decorated fancifully with beads and feathers. The younger wore a leather headdress with deer antlers and fringed beading. They were carrying short swords, and had bows slung over their backs. Their clothing showed some patching, and the feathers appeared a tad

ragged, but they stood tall and proud, nonetheless. The warriors were staring unabashedly. It was not every day they encountered two apparent tribal elders – especially someone in the garb of the lowlander Weaklings. One had a curious design around her neck, the other a tattoo all across her back. Not to mention that they had interrupted the women as they made passionate love, in the altogether, in the middle of the forbidden zone, in a place they had come to investigate because of the strange glow. It seemed to radiate from the two figures, even now, as they stood so unaffectedly before them.

“So, Xe . . . I’m going to get my tunic and put it on – it’s getting a bit chilly, now that the sun is going.” Gabrielle slowly moved out between Xena and the women, who stood now about five strides away. As she bent to pick up the tunic, the younger of the two women suddenly reacted, flashing out at Gabrielle with her sword at the ready. Before she could move another inch, a body somersaulted up over the bent figure of the blonde woman, and the young Amazon suddenly found herself flat on her back, her sword making a thumping sound as it landed some distance away, in the bushes. Two pairs of hands in an iron grip held her shoulders pinned to the ground, and she was looking up into the fiercest set of blue eyes she had ever seen. She tried not to show her fear. The sight of the beautiful bare breasts mere inches from her did not exactly reassure her. She had a momentary thought of how bizarre this seemed, but could not think what to make of it.

“If you value the life of this youngling, I would suggest that you do not try what she has just attempted. What happens next depends upon you.” This to the older woman, who had crouched in a defensive posture as she watched the blur of the streaking figure disarm and pin the youngster, before she could as much as draw a breath. “Attacking an unarmed, bare-naked woman isn’t in any Amazon canon I know of. Anything jog your memory, Gabi?”

The ash-blond woman with the golden skin shook her head, as she finished putting on her tunic, then retrieved her staff. Leaning on it, she shook her head again. “Nope . . . not a single rule of engagement comes to mind . . . and believe me, I should know!” She spoke again. “Suppose we start over,” she said, in a calm, conversational tone. She walked over to the defensive woman, and clasped her fist across her chest. “I am Gabrielle of Potedeia, Amazon Queen of Thessaly and Lemnos, Chief Bard of Athens, Lion of Thebes and Protector of Pharaoh. This is Xena of Amphipolis, Warrior Princess of Thrace, Redeemer of Chin and Jappa, and Amazon Queen of Lemnos. She gestured at the figure crouched over the prone Amazon, her strong arms pinning the woman down to the ground, Shocked silence

from both Amazons. She waited, calmly, for their response. Assuming, of course, that they had even heard of them.

The woman slowly, as if in a dream, sank to her knees in front of Gabrielle, her mouth agape in wonder. Her throat worked as she swallowed, and her tongue licked her dry lips nervously. “My . . . my a-apologies . . .” she stuttered.

“And whom do I have the honor of addressing?” Gabrielle asked, gently, her face softening.

“I am Atalante, the Liege of Hephaistia. She . . . is Meliai. Are you going to kill us, now?” she whispered. The Liege was an old woman, her face lined, but proud. Her shaved head bore only a burr of hair, silver against her deeply tanned skin. Her eyes were a deep brown, and she would have a kind expression, in repose.

Gabrielle laughed, her head thrown back. She held out her hand to the woman. “Of course not, Atalante! Please – arise. Xe – suppose you let that youngster up, and make yourself . . . less desirable?”

Xena released her grip on the young woman, stood, and proffered her hand. Cautiously accepting, the youngster found herself suddenly on her feet. Her mouth hung open in awe. Xena grinned at her, and she bashfully ducked her head. Xena strolled over to the fallen sword, hefted it, and with a sudden twirl, offered it pommel-first to the young woman. She took it, cautiously, and returned it to her scabbard. Xena then retrieved and donned her clothing.

Xena spoke to the Liege. “So, I would wager that you are here to investigate the noise and the lights?”

“Yes, my Queen. The settlement is less than a half a league from here. We . . . do not usually spend much time in this zone. It is too . . .” she trailed off.

“...Uncomfortable, would probably be a good word,” Gabrielle interjected. “Yes, well . . . We would like to explain all that is going on, here, if you are willing to allow us to speak with you and your Tribe. We must be swift, for there is a time of testing ahead for all of us. That is why we have come.”

Atalante nodded her head slowly. “I would be honored to escort you, my Queens. I have been Liege here since the settlement began, and I can easily command our sisters to assemble in our gathering place, so that you may be heard by all.” She

turned to Meliai, her face stern. “As for you, young pup – you will have to miss the honor of escorting your Queens to Hephaistia. The hills of Lemnos are now sending us apparitions from out of the mists of legend. Did you not hearken to the tales our bard has told us, of the Warrior Princess and her Soul Mate?” She cuffed the young woman’s head. “Trying to attack an Amazon Immortal is NOT the Amazon Way!”

Meliai winced, but kept her back straight, and took her punishment stoically. “I am yours to command, my Liege,” she said, humbly.

“Run before us, and gather the Council in the Meeting Place. Sound the horn, so that all the tribe may assemble as quickly as possible. We will be there directly.”

The young Amazon bowed, fist to chest, and took off.

Xena smiled. “They are quick to anger, but just as quick to devotion, at that age. She reminds me of our wards, and some of our young women.”

“Will you tell me, my Queens, how is it you have come?” Atalante walked slightly ahead of them, to guide the way.

Gabrielle obliged her with their story. “We have this season come to Lemnos, with the remnants of the Amazons of Thessaly, barely escaping the Conqueror Alexandros, who is even now sweeping Greece with his armies and leaving nothing but ruin in his wake. He is annihilating any Amazons he encounters, in the process. As far as we know, there are no Amazon tribes left, from Athens north to Anatolia. We were the Guardian Tribe of The Sacred Grove of Artemis. We came over with the Old Mother, and have now settled on Lemnos. There are some three score of us Thessalonians, not counting Xena and myself. We have landed at Myrina, and have been acquainting ourselves with this land, and the Amazons who live here. We have come in fulfillment of the Prophecy of the Chakram and the Dragon. Has this story been told you, by your bard?”

The elder woman nodded. “O yes! That tale - among others that spoke of your adventures - has accompanied Amazons wherever they roam. It came with us here, too. I only wish that it had been enough, when we were first arrived on Lemnos, to allow its promise to protect us from the fate we subsequently suffered.” As they walked together, they heard the faint sound of a horn, in the distance. “Ah, she has done well.” Atalante smiled. “She will turn out to be of use, yet.”

A few minutes later, they arrived on the outskirts of the settlement. The spectacle of the two strangers accompanying their Liege, and the sound of the gong calling them to assembly, brought out most of the rude settlement that lay nestled between the shoulders of the two low hills and the perfect circular bay. They walked easily, these strangers - heads up, shoulders back, and clearly curious about the surroundings and the inhabitants. There was much whispered comment, and sounds of running feet, as the word passed, and more came out to view them.

The procession came to a halt in the clearing, before a long, low stone building, which seemed to be the main house of the village. Two women had emerged from inside the building, and waited patiently. They wore traditional Amazon headdresses: beaks, feathers and all.

"I wish I still had my headdress." Gabrielle thought. *"I look very little like an Amazon, in their eyes."*

"Ah, but you are every inch a Queen." Xena's mind murmured in her head.

"Yeah, well – we'll see."

Atalante stepped in front of the Queens, and spoke loudly – for the benefit of the gathering tribeswomen who were now pouring into the central square. "You have the honor of witnessing the most important thing that has happened since we arrived here on this island! Behold, I give you Xena of Amphipolis, Warrior Princess of Thrace, Redeemer of Chin and Jappa, and Amazon Queen of Lemnos; and Gabrielle of Potedeia, Amazon Queen of Thessaly and Lemnos, Chief Bard of Athens, Lion of Thebes and Protector of Pharaoh. They have come in fulfillment of the Prophecy of the Chakram and the Dragon! Look long, and look well - and see if you doubt their identity." With that, Xena pulled down the chiton from around her neck, baring the blue scar of the chakram. Gabrielle released the fastenings at her shoulders, let fall the back of her tunic, baring her back, and turned, so the Dragon of Chin was clearly visible to the assembled women. They both turned slowly in a circle, so all could see them clearly. The masked women slowly reached up, and removed their headdresses. Their stunned faces revealed, they made the Amazon salute, and sank to their knees, before the two Queens. The entire village of women did likewise.

Xena and Gabrielle rearranged their clothing, Gabrielle walked over to the two women, and, touching them each on the shoulder, she spoke softly. "Please, Sisters – arise." They stood. Then she turned, and looked out at the sea of women,

kneeling in the dusty yard, their heads bowed. She looked at Xena, whose face suffused with a soft smile – of pride, and even more – of compassion. They were a scruffy lot – worn and haggard, with a look of not enough nourishment about them: a perfect raggle-taggle bunch for Xena to take under her wing, encourage and train, and garner their undying allegiance

The Liege introduced her sisters. “These are Prokne and Hippodameia. Together, we have served Hephaistia since the settlement began – over twelve seasons ago, now.”

Gabrielle nodded to the two women. “I am pleased to greet you. We are relieved, frankly, to see that you have carried on with the traditions, even though we know you have been somewhat – shall we say – cut off from the rest of Lemnos? It is our intention in coming here to see how we can assist in correcting this situation, for the benefit of all parties.”

Atalante clapped her hands and gave a signal, and women came out from the low hut behind them, bringing seats of lashed and woven branches, and cups of fermented goat’s milk. Gabrielle received her cup, and turning, held it up high before her.

“To the Amazons of Hephaistia,” Gabrielle said, and drained her cup. Xena did likewise. There was a roar of approval from the audience.

* * * * *



Chapter 17

The Outcasts of Hephaistia gathered in a large crowd before the building where the Council met with the strangers. The sounding of the horn - which was only for times of extreme emergency - and the word that had passed swiftly that something

very unusual was happening ensured that none would willingly miss the spectacle. It had been years since anyone had come to the settlement, and certainly none from the high hills, past the Wall of Fear. The possibility of something momentous was irresistible. They settled down to sit, and wait for whatever was to come. When the Liege introduced the strangers, their reaction was electric. They bowed, as the emotion of the moment swept through them all.

A hush fell on them, after their acclaim. The sight of the Chakram and the Dragon had been something to cherish, and hand down to their children. They were true Amazons – who always love a good story.

“Amazons of Hephaistia! Blessed are we today by the coming of our Queens! Arise, and greet them with all the panoply of our ancient Tradition! Too long have we dwelt here, leaderless, awaiting some miracle of Artemis to free us from this state of suffering and deprivation, which we have endured for many seasons! For too long, cut off from our kind, and vilified because we refused to give up the Amazon Way. For too long languishing, struggling to keep our trust in Artemis, and our faith in holding true to the Warrior caste! Now, they have come! We welcome them; and turn our eyes to them; and bend our arms to them; and cheer them to their home, and to their people! Hephaistia welcomes their Queens – Gabrielle of Potedeia and Xena of Amphipolis! All Hail the Amazon Queens!”

“HAIL! XENA! HAIL! GABRIELLE!” the voices of the crowd sounded in deep-throated unison; and all gave the Amazon salute.

Xena and Gabrielle - deeply affected by this show of devotion - stood, heads held high, and returned the salute. Then they looked at one another, and Xena inclined her head to her partner. Gabrielle stepped forward.

“Amazons of Hephaistia, We salute you! We have come from Thessaly, bringing the remnants of the Amazons to Lemnos, to make our Last Home here, among the women of the Tribes who have come before us. To make a home for all of us to share – and to ensure that we all flourish here, and live in peace with one another, and without the burden of suspicion or fear. We have come, to that end, to Hephaistia. We have broken through the Wall of Fear, and come with our hands open, and our hearts full. To speak with you, and to listen to you, and hear all that you have endured, so that we may find a way, together, to bind up the wounds that have stricken you asunder from your sister Amazons - that have kept you isolated, and suffering. It is time for the divisions to end. It is time for the healing to begin.”

Xena then stood forth, and spoke in her turn.

“My good Warriors! You have gone through much agony, in your struggle to bring yourselves safely to these shores. We know, for we have followed your example. We experienced suffering - hounded, murdered, and harassed - in our long journey to find you. When we finally arrived, our hearts were glad, and we rejoiced at coming to our new home. Then, we discovered that all was not well on Lemnos. That there was a deep division, here, that had not healed, but had festered – even been deliberately kept inflamed. I, as your Warrior Queen, salute the Warriors of Hephaistia, and pledge to you that you will not be persecuted, from this day forth, for your devotion to Artemis, to your caste, and for upholding the Warrior Way.”

The gathering cheered, and stomped their feet, and whistled their approval of these words.

“But to that end, my Amazons, we must find a way for you to be reconciled with your sisters to the South. This will require some very difficult actions, in the days to come. We have come to enlist your support. We are determined to bring down forever the Wall of Fear., end the interdiction, and revoke your banishment to this area of the island. No longer will you be prevented from living wherever you may, on this island, and from engaging in farming, herding, or any other means of providing for yourselves. Lemnos will have ties with her sister island, Lesbos, and there will once again be a way for women who are still escaping from the persecution of Rome and the marauders in Greece to make their way safely to this island, and to take up life as Amazons. It will mean that some of you, who have held the Warrior Caste, will continue to live with those precepts and continue to practice the Way of the Warrior. It will mean that some of your sisters to the South will reclaim their Warrior Caste, and rejoin the life. It will mean that some here in Hephaistia, who are not of the Warrior Way, will choose to settle in the more peaceful ways of the South.”

Gabrielle watched, as Xena spoke to the women, and saw the wide variety of reactions. She was relieved that there was a range of responses - but that for the most part, they were taking it well, and did not seem to object to what was being said. As Xena ended her speech, Gabrielle continued.

“But before all this can begin, we need your help. We need to tell you what we have found, in Myrina, and what we still must do, in order to bring all this about. We must, above all, ask you to hear what we have to say, and consider it well, and give us your answer. For we are raising an Amazon force, today – one that we will

need to come with us, to Myrina, in order to free your sisters there from grievous bondage – even more insidious, in its way, than what you have experienced. **All of you** have suffered at the hands of one who has had the temerity to call herself the Goddess Gaia! Your sisters in the South, as a result of the Oath-taking, have had their memories and feelings stolen from them, to use in the building of the Wall of Fear – and they now live as pacified women – with no violence or aggression, but likewise with no passions, no strong love, or devotion, either. They sleepwalk through life. The Wall of Fear forms a huge blanket over the entire island – except for your small territory. This action has effectively cloaked the location of the island, and made it impossible for anyone from the outside to enter her waters. The Pretender seeks to maintain her grip over the island, and challenges the right of the Queens to rule Lemnos. We must go soon to face that challenge. We would like nothing better than to go with all of you at our back!”

The audience of women roared once again.

Atalante stood, and spoke to them all. “My Sisters, let us make the Feast of Artemis, this night; and in the morning, let us gather here once more, so that we may have your judgment – whether we will go, or stay!”

“Oh, yeah! An Amazon party! I hoped this would happen!” Xena chuckled in mental communion with Gabrielle.

“You just like parties any way you can get them!”

“And you don’t?”

“Well . . . as long as you keep the raki away from me! “

“No problem – all they have here is fermented goat’s milk. I doubt we can get too far gone on that!”

“Ick – I have to confess I don’t like it, much.”

* * * * *

The sound of drums echoed through the settlement, as the feast continued far into the night. The bard of the settlement had gone first, telling the story of how their tribe had suffered as they made their escape from Anatolia – chased and harried all the way by the hordes of wandering ex-centurions, cut adrift after Rome had fallen,

who were out to pillage and lay waste to the countryside. They had managed to escape to the island, where they had heard that Amazons were taken in, and given refuge, and a new life. There they had encountered the High Priestess, and the shadowy ‘Gaia,’ and been given the choice: surrender their weapons, swear the Oath, and renounce their warrior ways – in exchange for land, and a new start, and all the help they could ever need. It seemed strange, that they had to submit to this arbitrary ultimatum. They asked for time to think about it, and discuss it among themselves – but they were refused this request. They were detained, herded together in an enclosure, and isolated from any other inhabitants. Their food had been drugged, unbeknownst to them. When they had woken up, they found themselves bound and gagged, and on board boats, that were carrying them to the Northern part of the island. Landing in this bay, they were told they would have to live here, and could not expect any assistance from Myrina. They were informed of the existence of the Wall of Fear, which would keep them from crossing into the Southern territory. They were warned against attempting any breach of the boundary. They had pulled together, and done the best they could to make their new life in this meager place – keeping their traditions alive, and their love of Artemis intact.

Then Gabrielle arose, and told them the story of the terrible events in Jappa; of her long sojourn in Egypt; her subsequent return to the Amazons of Thessaly and her Judging; of the return of Xena from the dead, and the subsequent events that lead to the burning of the Sacred Forest of Artemis. The Hephaistian Amazons heard these events with great wonder, and they received the revelation of the withdrawal of Artemis from her sacred wood with shocked silence. Cries of anguish and tears flowed for the Goddess who had informed their lives for so long. Gabrielle consoled them. Then she and Xena told of their own tribe’s experiences in Myrina, the demands on them by the Pretender. They told how they had journeyed north, to find the ShieldWall, break through to Hephaistia; and begin the struggle to free themselves, and make Lemnos whole.

They were sitting, silent at last, watching the flames from the huge bonfire burn down to coals. Deep bonds had formed, in the sharing of their stories, and Xena and Gabrielle were very tired, but pleased at the outcome.

Xena had finally given up her stoical maintenance of an upright position, and had succumbed to Gabrielle’s insistence that she lay down, with her head in Gabrielle’s lap. She looked up into the solicitous face of her Bard, and smiled tiredly.

“You’ve got me down here - now how are we going to find our way to our host’s hut? I’m too damned tired to get up ever again!” she fretted. She turned her head

restlessly. Gabrielle smoothed her hair back from her forehead, and made small shushing sounds.

“Hush! Just relax. I’ll make sure you get to bed.”

“Oh you will, will you? Just how will you manage that? I’m too heavy for you to carry.”

“Well, if necessary, we’ll just sleep right here. The fire is warm enough, and we’ve got our things . . . I’ll pull out our blankets, and we’ll be just fine.”

“Oh, I’m sure our hosts will just be tickled to see that! Talk about a breach of protocol! You should know better. You are an Amazon Queen – you know the rules about hosting visitors. We have to behave royally! They won’t let us sleep willy-nilly in the middle of the street!”

Gabrielle sniffed. “Well, why not? It is a perfectly good street. I am not too good to sleep in the street. We’ve slept in lots of streets.” She yawned. “Queens can sleep anywhere.”

Xena smiled, letting her senses focus on the feeling of Gabrielle’s fingers, stroking her head. However, her mind would not let her sink, yet. ‘Have you send word to the Egyptians?’ Her blue eyes opened long enough to watch the beloved face above her.

Gabrielle nodded. “O yes. Right away – and I heard back from them. They will start tomorrow morning, early. We’ll be seeing Io and Paphos soon, Xe.”

Xena nodded. “I’m glad. I’ve missed them.”

“So have I, love.”

After a good sleep in the house of Atalante, the Queens rose the next morning to a bright and cloudless day. The women of Hephaistia, assembled once again in the central square, were quietly awaiting them.

Atalante raised her staff of office high above her head. She was dressed this day in the feathered mask of her office, as were the two councilors. Her voice rang out in the silence.

“Amazons of Hephaistia - what is your decision? Will you follow the Queens of Lemnos, and free your sisters? Will you swear fealty to them, and defend them with your lives?”

The women, as one, brandished their weapons in the sunlight. They gave one shout – “YEA!” Their arms came up, in the Amazon salute. They stood proud in the morning sun.

Xena and Gabrielle kneeled down at their feet, and humbly accepted the burden of their Tribe. Then all formed ranks, and they began the long march to the south - to Myrina - and into the Crucible.

* * * * *



Chapter 18

The Pretender arrived back at the Temple of Gaia, to find everything in disarray. The Sibyls, who were at best mere animated clay, provided no information as to what had transpired. One of them was completely unresponsive to her questions. Deeply suspicious, she had seized the jaw of the silent figure, and pulled open the mouth. Inside, she spied a small scrap of vellum. Pulling it out, she discovered a bit of mushy love poetry scrawled on it. Galateia was gone. She wondered, fleetingly, if the woman was dead, but then decided that she hadn't been that rough with her. She sighed at the realization that she would now have to find another willing subject, for Galateia would surely have to die with the Queens. It was vexing.

Annoying. She would have to forgo her usual pleasure-taking for the near future. That tended to make her even more edgy than she liked.

“Damned those women!” she raged. “I’m going to tear them limb from limb!” Then a thought came – that she would store up all that sexual frustration, and take it out on those Queens – especially the blonde-haired woman. She looked forward to that – for the blonde reminded her of the long-lost slave she had had so many years before. Her face contorted in an agony of pain, as she remembered the sweet face, and the tender body. The woman had put up with her worst behavior, for those few, fleeting years. The little fool had probably been in love with her all along. Well . . . no matter, now. Alti would have had a field day with it, if she had not already been dead. Yes, that was acceptable. She would not take it out on the white-haired one. She would make **her** watch, while the blonde one would submit. That would do just fine. Then she could kill off the both of them, and be rid of the creepy feeling she had, whenever she thought of those mirror-image faces, looking at her with such pity.. They both looked at her that way, damn them! She could not abide it.

She summoned the Sibyls, and told them they’d have to make all the women in Myrina show up for the Challenge, in three sun cycles time. They bowed their heads, and left her. She sighed heavily. It was much better, having Galateia. The Sibyls just irritated her. She would take pleasure in squeezing their necks until their eyes popped out, if she did not need them right now. “No rest for the wicked,” she grinned, maliciously.

She paced up and down, while she planned her next move. The Challenge! It would be a cinch. All she would have to do is point out how the Queens had damaged the ShieldWall, and how they wanted to destroy it. That would bring the women of Myrina into the proper state of pliability to call for the Queen’s destruction. Moreover, she would be there to do their bidding, after all. She would gladly oblige - anything to “protect” the women of Myrina, and Lemnos. Preserve the status quo, and keep her grip on the island intact. Piece of nut bread! No problem!

She threw herself down on the low cushioned bench; her arm across her face - for the pulling had begun, again. It was vexing. She would become disoriented, and fall down, if she wasn’t already lying prone, and the blackness would sweep over her, and she would be lost in the dreams. She had to do this, periodically – an annoyance, but there it was. It sometimes took her out for a day or more. The price of keeping herself in this focus, when going back to her own world would mean a

return to wretched slavery. “I must find a way to stay here,” she murmured, as she fell into the darkness of the place between.

* * * * *



Chapter 19

Io and Paphos sat with Sappho, Anaktoria, Althaia and the other two Thessalonian Amazons in the gardens of the estate. They were enjoying the balmy weather, and talking together about the contingent of women that had arrived from Athens, Io and Paphos were regaling them with the story of Gabrielle’s rescue of the women, revealing their deep pride at her accomplishments while under such a terrible burden of grief. The Lesbians were very impressed with the story, and Anaktoria asked if Gabrielle had recorded the story, yet. Paphos nodded. “Yes, she did - but it was one of the scrolls that burned, in the Conflagration.” She sighed. “If we ever get things settled, we are going to begin recording them all over again. “ She looked at Sappho eagerly. “That is why I am hoping you will let me come back here, to learn from you! I want so much to be able to help with that great undertaking! Someday, Gabrielle will have made a great library, on Lemnos, of all the tales of the Amazon Nation, and of Gabrielle and Xena! It will be there, for all to read!” Then she looked guiltily at Io, who seemed a little nervous at the thought.

Sappho laughed a deep, melodious laugh. Her arm being around her lover, she languidly caressed Anaktoria’s breast with her fingertips. “I would delight in having you both attend the school! That is for later, when all is at peace with you. We will be patient, and see what unfolds.”

The arrival of the leader of the Egyptians interrupted their conversation. She used the Insight to converse with Paphos and Io. Sappho and Anaktoria were polite, and did not react strangely, or talk over the silent communication. They sat quietly, as if they too could hear, but chose not to speak.

The woman was strikingly beautiful, her skin a warm dark chocolate color, and her head shaved bare, with deeply arched eyebrows painted in, and the black kohl outlining her eyes. Her disfigured ears, scarred in the insides from the molten gold that had plugged them, were the only aberrant feature. She wore a long white gauzy robe, which showed the outlines of her slender body quite clearly. She wore a single gold arm bracelet around her upper arm. It bore a Dragon figure on it, in high relief, and the familiar repetition of circles and squares of the Chakram along the top and bottom edges.

“My young friends, I have received an urgent communication from Gabrielle this morning, and felt I should come to you with its content.”

They both sat up straight, a look of alarm on their faces.

“What is it, Djeserit?” Io asked.

“Gabrielle says: ‘The Wall is breached. The Outcasts are coming with the Queens to Myrina. They will be the Fist of Artemis, as a last resort. The Pretender has revealed herself, and is challenging the Queens to their right of Rule. In five sun cycles, in the Temple of Gaia, the Challenge will begin. Bring the Sisterhood of Corybantes to Myrina, directly. You must be there for the Challenge.’ ”

“Thank you, Djeserit. Will you alert the women for departure? Althaia, will you and the crew prepare the Leto? We will leave as soon as the tide permits.”

“Djeserit?” Paphos pulled her back. *“Will you be prepared for any eventuality?”*

“Yes, Little Sister.” The woman bowed, and hastened off to the house. Althaia made her excuses, and left with the two Amazons, headed for the harbor.

Sappho, her eyebrow raised in surprise, spoke up. “It appears that the time has come for our friends to leave us, Anaktoria.” She queried Paphos. “Is it so?”

“Almost so, my Lady - we will have to depart with the tide. Gabrielle and Xena have asked us to hasten home. There is trouble.”

Sappho bowed her head. “I fear it must always be so, for my dear friends. Tell them I will be praying to Artemis to guide you. I trust they will bring you all through safely.” She clapped her hands, and two young women appeared beside

them. “Our guests must leave us, now. Please give them any assistance they may need.”

* * * * *

Talia came into the room - in the house of the Queens - occupied by the High Priestess of Myrina. The woman had been slowly recovering from the mistreatment she had suffered at the hands of the Pretender. Her face was gradually returning to normal color – the swelling was almost gone, and one eye was only a bit puffy, still. She would have a deep scar though, across the right cheekbone, that would be with her for the rest of her days. She was still unconscious. Talia had kept her on the sleeping herbs, while the worst of the painful injuries were healing. The figure sitting by the bed half-rose at Talia’s entrance, then subsided back into her chair. Ikthenia had stayed with Galateia the entire time, both at the House of Healing, and then, later, had insisted upon carrying the Priestess from there to the house of the Queens, when the Council decided that it would be safer. They were all nervously expecting the Pretender to reappear, and no one particularly wanted an encounter with her, yet. Everyone avoided the Temple. There had been a ring of armed Amazons surrounding the home, ready for any eventuality.

The ordinary residents of Myrina seemed completely oblivious to anything that had occurred. Everyone with the InSight had certainly felt the rending of the ShieldWall, when that had happened; but the women seemed unconcerned. The feeling in the Council was that the Myrinian women - so stunted by the loss of their memories - were incapable of feeling much of any disturbance; or if they did so, they must have thought it was Gaia’s doing, and therefore a protection.

At any rate, Alysia had shared with Talia that she had gotten a message from Gabrielle, saying that they were coming home, and were bringing all of the Outcast Amazons with them. The Council was relieved, and looked forward to their arrival. This had come at a particularly critical moment, because the Council had just received the Sibyls from the Temple, telling them that there was to be a gathering of all the women of Myrina, in three sun cycles, and there were to be no exceptions. The Thessalonian women must come as well. This was by order of the Pretender. The Council was inclined to tell their Amazons not to go, until they had received word from the Queens. Now, with the message from Gabrielle, they felt more confident that they would not be vulnerable at this gathering. The only question now was – would they go armed?

.

Talia explained all this to Ikthenia, since she had been out of the picture, while guarding the High Priestess.

“Well, I’m not going, if it means leaving Galatea alone, and I’m certainly not going to bring her there, in plain sight of that monster. There is no way that is going to happen. I would sooner face that bitch alone, myself, rather than subject Galatea to one more minute of the kind of treatment she has suffered!” Ikthenia was getting agitated.

“Ike! Please! I am not counseling you to go, or to take Galatea there, either! Do you take me for an idiot? We must maintain that Galatea has fled, and that we do not know where she is. If there was somewhere we could actually hide her, I would even suggest that.” She responded, her tone sharp.

Ikthenia, her face changing, rushed to speak. “Talia – I’m sorry. It’s just that I am tired. I haven’t slept, much, since the day of the Temple raid.” She looked over as Galatea stirred, briefly, in her sleep – then sank back again. Talia bent over the still form in the bed, checked her forehead, and listened to her breathing. Then she came around the end of the bed, and put her hand on Ikthenia’s shoulder. “It is only natural. You have fallen pretty hard for her, haven’t you?”

The circumspect Amazon nodded; her face coloring. “I don’t understand it, Talia – but there it is. I accept it. I must be with her, now. It is in my bones.”

“I understand, my dear. Would you like me to sit with her, a while, so you can rest? I will gladly take your place.”

Ikthenia sighed, looked once more at her sleeping charge, and nodded gratefully. “That would be wonderful. I promise I will not sleep long.”

Talia pushed her gently on the back. “Go. Sleep. I’ll have someone call you, if Galatea awakes.”



Chapter 20

“So, how are we doing on that list?” Gabrielle pitched her question to Xena, as they walked along the path taking them all back south. They had passed the old campsites they had used while with Skylla. They had seen the goats, who seemed perfectly content to graze without the company of the herder and her dog. Skylla was somewhere ahead of them, on her way back to Myrina. They, meanwhile, had been keeping to a swift pace, and the long line of Amazon warriors stretched out behind them. There were fifty of them - a good number for a battle; and for helping provide a larger force, should it become necessary. It would be even better, once the women from Egypt arrived. Then let the Pretender come with all her glory. They would have the numbers sufficient unto the day.

“What list?” Xena said, distractedly. She had been playing out alternate scenarios in her head, as they marched.

Gabrielle grinned at her. “Hel-lo, Xena? Are you in there? I’m talking about the list we made of who needed rescuing. Remember?” She waved her hand in front of Xena’s face, playfully. Xena’s head had darted up, caught the offending member, and gave it a squeeze, then laced her fingers together with Gabrielle’s, and swung their hands back and forth as they walked.

“Hmmm . . . let’s see. If I remember correctly, we were to save the Outcasts, the Myrinian women, Galatea, our Thessalonian Amazons, the Egyptian women, Io and Paphos, Skylla, Skylla’s dog, and various goats . . . oh, and the Pretender. Have I neglected anyone?”

Gabrielle gave a pretense of thought - then grinned. “Nope – I think that’s the lot of them.”

Xena sighed. Well, I guess we have saved the goats, so far. I’m not too sure, yet about the others.” She smiled ruefully at her partner. “Wanna quit, yet?”

Gabrielle’s face grew solemn. “Only every other minute - But I don’t count those, anymore. It makes the time go so much faster, you see?”

Xena gave a shout of laughter, clutched Gabrielle to her, and hugged her. ‘You are still the most fun to be with, on a long march!’

“Well, that’s comforting! I guess we’ll just have to keep perambulating around this place for the rest of time.”

“Nah – we’ll stop, occasionally. Remember, we have to consecrate the whole island . . . and we’ve only just started!”

Gabrielle had the good sense to blush.

* * * * *

Later, as they halted for a brief rest period, they sat in the dusty heat of the day, passing the water skin back and forth. The talk grew more serious.

“I wish you would tell me how you think this is going to play out, Xe. I know you have been working it out, in your head. I can see the ‘commander’ coming out of her retirement.”

Xena looked startled, then guilty. “Sorry, love. It’s second nature, now. I don’t mean to ignore you, but I need to be fairly well-prepared for this, and anything I could say now wouldn’t mean much, if I haven’t factored in all the possibilities. She is a cunning opponent. I keep hearing this sarcastic little voice, taunting in my head, saying ‘you are your own worst enemy.’ That doesn’t feel too good!”

Gabrielle nodded soberly. “I know. It is so weird. I wonder if she is going to appear as herself, for this Challenge. You know, unmasked – and looking just like you. It would make sense for her to do that – freak everybody out, for starters. Then she could play all kinds of twisted little mind games with everyone. What theatre! It makes me sick to my stomach, Xe.”

“Yeah, it does me, too – a little. I would never admit that to anyone but you. The ‘teachers’ spoke of this, with me, when I was in that middle place – after Jappa. I never thought my past ‘selves’ would split off, and end up going their own ways; or that I would meet up with any of them. I could only hope that my own redemption would mean a better life for all those other Xenas, too. I guess it doesn’t always work out that way, does it?”

“Well, we don’t really know that, yet – do we? It’s not over, ‘til it’s over. There is still a chance for her.” Gabrielle leaned up against her, and gave her a kiss. “There. Any better?”

“Sure. Always. You heal my Soul, Gabrielle. Every day.”

* * * * *

The *Leto* moved at a fast rate over the water. The wind was favorable, and they made good time on the trip back to Lemnos. There had not been any unusual activity – either physical or non-physical yet – no sign of any attempt to attack or stop their return. Althaia was in her element. She was all over the boat, keeping the crew (which included Io and Paphos) hustling.

The Egyptian women looked after themselves. They had endured the much longer voyage from Thebes to Athens, and so had accustomed themselves – as much as desert-dwellers ever can - to the vicissitudes of long sea travel. Many of them had endured worse, in the ways that they had become slaves of the Egyptians. Some were originally from city-states bordering Egypt, but others were captives from far-flung places. Now they were to become Amazons. Their lives had become strange journeys, to be sure.

Djeserit took advantage of the time by conversing with them mentally and using the finger-language Gabrielle had taught them, to explain all that she understood of the situation on Lemnos. This she had received in long telepathic communion with Gabrielle. She was fulfilling the command given directly to her from the High Priestess of Isis, in Thebes, before they had departed.

“You must fulfill your destiny, Djeserit. You have not received your Temple name - ‘Holy Woman’ - lightly. You and your companions will become the Sisterhood of Corybantes at the new Holy Place – named Poliochni. It shall be consecrated to the Goddess Artemis, the Granddaughter of Gaia/Isis. You will be the Handmaiden to the High Priestess of the new Temple, whose name is Galateia. You and your sisters will have much healing to do, with the women of Lemnos.”

Io and Paphos were awed at these women. They had been through even more than the Amazons, in their lives, and would surely become legendary in their own right. Paphos was already busily composing their story, in her head. She would like to perform it for Gabrielle and Xena, someday. It was hard not to stare at them. They were so beautiful. Even though they all bore the scars of their torment – the solidified gold removed from their ear canals, in Athens – leaving livid scarring. They received cunning golden ear covers, shaped exactly like their own ears - that fit over them, and hid the scars. It was strange to see, but also seemed beautiful, somehow. Only Djeserit had refused them. She bore her scars proudly.

Paphos made her way across the deck. She was on her rest shift, from the sailing duties Althaia had assigned to her. Io was still up in the rigging, as the posted lookout.

“May I join you, Djoserit?”

‘Certainly, Little Sister - I would enjoy your company.’

“Can I ask you something?”

“I am at your service.”

“What do you think will happen, when the women of Lemnos regain their memories and feelings? Some of those will be terrible. I fear for them. I know how it was, for Io, when she had to remember her ordeal in Amphipolis. She was so devastated – I feared for her sanity and for her life. It took three of us – Gabrielle, Xena and I – to help her. There will be many women, going through this! How can it be borne?”

‘We have been specially trained, Little Sister, by the High Priestess of Isis herself. That is why we are now the Corybantes. In your Greek pantheon - Cybele is the name you have for Isis. The Corybantes are her handmaidens. We will create the core rituals for the new Temple. In this capacity, we are the spiritual healers for the Amazon Nation on Lemnos. We will assist Gabrielle and the other healers, when the time comes. Do not fear – we will make sure they are all assisted.’

‘I am so glad – I cannot tell you! Gabrielle is a very wise soul, isn’t she?’

“O yes, Little Sister! She is a Bright Star of the Infinite!”

* * * * *

The ship arrived in the harbor at Lemnos in the middle of the night. They had made amazing time – with two sun-cycles to spare.

* * * * *



Chapter 21

Alysia, the Council (except for Ikthenia, who was protecting Galateia), and a squad of Amazons were at the harbor to receive the contingent from Lesvos. They escorted them quietly through the streets to the House of the Queens, and there made them as comfortable as possible, although it was crowded with so many. They had some food, and then retired for some much-needed rest. Io, Paphos, Djeserit, Alysia and the other women sat up in the meeting hall to await the arrival of the two Queens, and the women of Hephaistia.

Some two candle marks later, Djeserit was the first to receive contact.

‘Hola! Djeserit? It is I, Gabrielle. My Sister, where are you?’

“We are at the House of the Queens, O my Sister. We are all anxiously awaiting your arrival. How long may this be?”

“Not long . . . Are the youngsters with you – Io and Paphos?”

“Yes, My Queen. All are safe. It was a calm journey.”

“Thank the Goddess! We are about two leagues north of the city, now. The women of Hephaistia will camp here, outside the city. Xena and I will be home very soon.”

Djeserit relayed this information to the others, and there was much joy and relief expressed. Even so, they knew they would not rest easy until Gabrielle and Xena were there, in the flesh. While they were waiting, they talked of the situation. Scouts had come in, periodically, to report that there was no sign of the Pretender. They thought she was in the Temple. They had seen the Sibyls, who had gone out in three directions from the Temple, two days before, and had shadowed them. The Sibyls had stationed themselves at the center of the three open squares in the

settlement, and using the TribeMind, called a general meeting of all the inhabitants, for five sun cycles from that day. Gaia was accusing Xena and Gabrielle of treason against the Amazons of Lemnos. She was going to Challenge their rule, before all the Amazon Nation.

Io spoke up, as they all sat around the large trestle table. “How does she think she’s going to get away with that? Xena and Gabrielle have done nothing but good, since we arrived here! Does this Pretender think she can just talk the women of Myrina into this? What sort of treason is she referring to, exactly?”

Alysia, her brow furrowed, answered the young woman. “Well, Io, you have heard about the rending of the ShieldWall by Xena and Gabrielle. Gaia maintains that by doing so, they have gone against the expressed will of the community for safety from all external threat. That was the purpose of the ShieldWall. Since the ShieldWall **is** the collective thoughts, feelings and memories of the Amazons, to destroy it is an attack on them, directly. And that would be treason, according to **any** Amazon Code of Law – including our own, my dear.” She finished, gently.

“But they were only trying to get through – to make connection with the Outcasts! How could that be treason?” Paphos cried, indignant.

“Well, think about it, Paphos. The inhabitants of Lemnos considered the Outcasts to be a danger to the community – that is why they banished them in the first place. Now we have Xena and Gabrielle camped outside Myrina with a force of fifty fully-armed Amazons. Put yourself in the place of a quiet, worry-free woman living in Myrina - would you consider that a threat?”

Paphos looked horrified. “Okay, Okay. I see your point. How in the name of Artemis are Gabrielle and Xena going to show up for this meeting, with all those Amazons – and the rest of us, as well – because even **I** am not going to that meeting without **my** weapons - and come across as anything but in a struggle for power with this ‘Gaia’ impersonator? That doesn’t even begin to explain the appearance of forty strange Egyptians! This is awful!” She clapped her hand to her mouth, and turned with a dismayed look at Djoserit. *“I didn’t mean that to come out the way it sounded!”*

“Well, sweetheart, why don’t you just trust us? I think we will find a way to get us all out of this mess. Now – how about something strong to drink? And then some food?”

The whole group of women gasped, and then burst into a cacophony of voices, as Xena and Gabrielle walked into their midst. They were dusty, sweaty, and looked very tired, but they were home.

Xena slumped onto a bench at the table, and wiped the sweat from her forehead. Hands set a large beaker of mead down in front of her, which she immediately tossed back with a long series of swallows. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she thumped the empty cup down. “Ahhh . . . that’s much better! I am almost human, again.”

Gabrielle was standing with her arms around both Io and Paphos. “I’ve never been so glad to see the two of you!”

“Oh, sure, Gabrielle – what about that time . . .” Io started.

Gabrielle held up her hand, a grin breaking out on the dirt-smeared face. “Okay – I take it back – ONE of the times I’ve been so glad to see you – how’s that? Now, where’s my cup of mead?”

“Right here, my Sister!” Eusta handed her a full cup.

Gabrielle drank hers down, as well. Then she looked over at Xena, who was sitting with a glazed look on her face.

“All right, all of you. I know you have an entire boatload of questions for us, and there is much to tell, before we are able to meet the coming Challenge. Nevertheless, you have to give us some time to recover, here! We have just been on a forced march, and I think Xe and I have been awake for probably the last four suns. Do you think you all can beat down your anxiety and excitement for long enough to let us get some rest? A couple of minutes should do it.” She said this with a wry look, and they all burst out laughing.

Alysia looked around at all of them. “I hereby call this meeting of the Council suspended. We will resume when the Queens call us to order.” They all arose, and began to make their way out of the room. Alysia turned at the archway, and looked back at them. “I know you will bring us through this, my Queens. I would stake my life on it.”

They smiled after her. A solitary figure remained behind - Djeserit. Gabrielle walked over to her, her arms held out, and the two women embraced. “*Welcome,*

my Sister – it has been long since we have met! Are you well – and the others, too?”

“Indeed, my Sister. The ways of Isis are strange – but we walk them together, once again.”

“All Praise to Isis.”

Xena looked on, her face full of emotion. She had not ever seen Djeserit, though she remembered the sweet woman’s mind, when she was inside Gabrielle.

Gabrielle pulled the slight, dark woman over to where Xena sat. *“My Sister – this is Xena.”*

Gabrielle put her arms around Xena’s shoulders. “Xe – this is Djeserit. It’s about time you two met.”

Xena took the woman’s slight hand in her larger one, bowed her head, and kissed the back of it, gently. *“Thanks to Isis – and to you, Djeserit, I have my sweet Gabrielle back with me. Thank you for looking over her, in the Land of Pharaoh.”*

“It is only as it should be, Xena. Isis has placed her hand upon both of you.” The Egyptian woman then bowed, and took her leave of them.

“Food, bed or bath?” Xena asked.

“How about: bath, bed . . . and food tomorrow?”

“Perfect.”

Arm in arm, they wandered out through the adjoining kitchen to the bath chamber.

.

* * * * *

Gabrielle yawned so wide she thought her jaw was going to dislocate. She lifted the sea sponge, and squeezed it, releasing a cascade of hot, scented water over Xena’s head, which was resting on Gabrielle’s chest. They were entwined, half sitting, half reclining, on the ledge that ran around the inside of the big, circular stone bath.

“Goddess, that feels so good,” Xena murmured. “I wish I had enough energy to find the soap.”

Gabrielle yawned again, and Xena followed suit, involuntarily. “Uh-oh. I think we had better get up to bed, or we’ll never find the strength to manage those stairs.”

Xena smiled up at her, blissfully. “We could just go to sleep right here.”

“Oh sure – and drown? No way, Xe! What a ridiculous way to go!”

“Well, yeah, but then we’d be in Elysium, already. And we wouldn’t have to go through this silly Challenge thing.”

“**This** is Elysium. Promise me something, Xe?”

“Anything.”

“After we’ve worked our way down this last list, promise me we’ll never have to go without a bath for more than a day.”

“Done.”

“NOW I’m a happy woman!”

* * * * *

It was sometime in the small candle-marks of the morning when Xena swam up from the depths of wonderfully restorative sleeping. She waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She lay there, thinking about her dark twin, her mirror self - probably lying asleep too, across the rooftops, in the Temple. What was she going to do, to redeem this one? How best to get her to save herself? She sighed. “*Trust in your own self, Xena. The Way will become clear . . . Lao Ma,*” she thought drowsily. “*Lao Ma will show me the Way.*” She smiled; and turning, she nuzzled Gabrielle’s chest, and dove, soul-first, into her sweetheart’s embrace.

* * * * *



Chapter 22

The next morning, Gabrielle awoke to the sound of the birds, chirping noisily outside the window opening to their bedroom. Stretching her arms above her head, she twisted and arched her back, trying to get the kinks out from too many nights of sleeping on the ground. She dearly wanted to burrow back down into the soft bed. Xena was already up, sitting on the ledge of the open window, enjoying the early morning chorus.

“So – are you ready for another exciting day with the Amazon Nation?” Xena asked, grinning at her mate.

Gabrielle sat up in the bed, ran her fingers through her tousled hair, and shook her head.

“Not really.” Her hands came up quickly, to catch the apricot that Xena pitched at her. “What’s the plan, Xe? I have been very good, haven’t I? Let you puzzle it all out to yourself, as we walked back down here. I didn’t pester you, much . . .” She bit into the ripe sweetness, and let the juice run down her chin. It felt so good, as it rolled down her throat and onto her bare chest. She looked down, then over at Xena, who was watching with amusement.

“Want some help, there, partner?” Xe asked, launching herself off the sill and sauntering over to the bed. She sat down facing Gabrielle, leaned over, and licked the sweet juice from Gabi’s skin. “Mmm . . . good. Can I have some more?”

Gabrielle put her hand behind Xena’s head, and pulled her forward, her mouth covering Xena’s, and gave her the bit of fruit from between her teeth. Xena smiled into the kiss, but did not pull away. “Mmm.” She said again. Then her tongue went on a quest of its own. They stayed involved for some time - the fruit got eaten, one-way and another, between the two of them. Gabrielle put her arms around Xena, and pulled her over her own torso and onto her back on the bed. She rolled over, so that she was above Xena.

“I’m going to torment you with love, until you tell me what we are going to do!” She put a mock-fierce look on her face, but could not keep it long – at the look of absolute trust, and complete surrender, on Xena’s face.

“Promise?” Xena breathed.

“Promise.” Gabrielle said, looking deep into those bottomless blue eyes. “I’ll be merciless!” she warned.

“O my sweet woman . . .” Xena murmured, and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

The plan was as good as it could be, considering. Gabrielle understood what part she would play, and agreed to meet with Djeserit and the Egyptians, so they would know what to expect. Xena, meanwhile, would go to the Outcasts’ camp, meet with Atalante, and explain the terms under which they would come into Myrina, for the gathering of the Amazons of Lemnos. They would meet back at their residence, later on that day, for a session with the Thessalonian Amazon Council, Atalante, Djeserit, and Galatea. They would be as ready as they could be, for what was to come.

* * * * *

Xena knocked at the door of the bedroom where Galatea was sheltering. At the murmuring of voices within, she opened the door, and went inside. Galatea and Ikthenia were sitting on a low bench, before a brazier of burning coals. There were the remains of a small meal, on a side table. Galatea looked much better – the dark circles and bruising around her eyes had faded to a sickly yellow-green color, but she still wore a sling cradling the bandaged arm that had been broken. Ikthenia looked rather the worse for wear – she had had some long, sleepless nights, watching over the Priestess.

Xena smiled at them. ‘Mind if I interrupt you, for a moment?’

Galatea shook her head. “Not at all, my Queen. Please – come in.”

Xena sat down on the bed across from the two women. ‘I am glad to see that you are up, now, and that you are on the mend. I am terribly sorry, Galatea, that this happened to you. If I had known, I certainly would have tried to protect you.’

“Ah, my Queen – there was not opportunity for you to know, was there? That was my fault. I hid the fact of my . . . bondage . . . from everyone but Lykia . . . Oh,

Goddess – poor Lykia! No,” she shook her head again, “I should have confided in you and Gabrielle from the beginning. If I had better sense, I would have trusted the Prophecy, and you.”

“Well, you know – that is easier said than done - especially when you did not know us from a hill of beans. Prophecies are always glamorous, and larger-than-life. The reality is harder to trust, when what we want are our fantasies. Don’t punish yourself, Galatea. You’ve suffered enough, already.” Xena looked then at Ikthenia, who had been quietly sitting and listening to their exchange. ”Thank you, Ikthenia, for watching over Galatea. You did a great service in this.”

Ikthenia bowed her head. ‘My Queen, I did what I had to do. There was no choice, for me. I have found that I was following my heart.’ She added, softly. She looked over at Galatea, who returned her look with a sweet, if shy, intensity.

Xena smiled. “Ah! This is good to know! My congratulations go to you both! Now, I have much to tell you, and not much time. I have to go north of town, and meet with the Outcast Amazons, who have come back with Gabrielle and me. They are encamped there; and are waiting for their instructions. We are going to need your help, Galatea.” She looked searchingly at the woman. “I know that the last time you and I had a conversation, we had some pretty intense words. I hope that you know that it is vital that we understand each other, if we are to get through this confrontation with the Pretender.”

Galatea looked away, her face pained. Xena gently prodded her again. “Galatea, I have a much better understanding of this woman than you might imagine, and I have learned much, of late, that I think you should know. The question is - do you feel that I can talk about her, without causing you too much pain? I have some questions that need answers. In addition - I have some answers for your questions. I do not want you to agree to do what we need you to do, unless you fully understand what is likely to occur, and why.”

Ikthenia took Galatea’s cold hand in hers, and gently chafed it. “I’m right here, my love. You can get through this.”

Galatea smiled gratefully at her, and turned her gaze to Xena. “Maybe if you explained it to me, I’d heal up a lot faster. I want to serve the Amazon Nation, and I will bear anything that will enable me to do my best for them! I have much to atone for, so go ahead – tell me.”

Xena looked at her own hands, clasped together as she leaned on her knees. “The first thing you need to know, Galatea, is that this is something that is hard for me to tell. I too have my inner demons – does that surprise you? I think not – if you have heard any of the tales of Xena, Warrior Princess - especially those told by a certain Bard of Potedeia. One tells of the time when a certain rogue shamaness tried her best to enthrall me. Her name was Alti, and she tried for a long time to turn me into The Destroyer of Nations. Well, to make a long story short – I didn’t go there – not completely.” She sighed heavily, then continued – all the while looking steadily into Galatea’s face. “The trouble was, at some point - probably when I took the path away from disaster – **another** Xena - an alternate me – stayed the course. She **did** become the Destroyer of Nations, in her world, and did all the terrible things that I only began to do. Over time, I was able to see that I desperately did not want to be such a person, and spent a good number of years atoning for what damage I had done, under Alti, in mine.”

Galatea looked dismayed. “I am so sorry, Xena. That must have been a terrible struggle!”

Xena nodded. “Oh yes, my Priestess. It was **very** hard. I was lucky – I had the best help in this world – Gabrielle – and a stalwart band of young Amazons, as well. However, that other Xena was not as lucky as I was. She had her Gabrielle, too – but lost her – either accidentally, or because of her own folly. I expect that if she had been willing to admit it, her love for that Gabrielle was the only good thing in her life – and when that love was lost, she had only her anger. It may be that her pain at that loss was too great for her to bear, and all the terrible things she did could assuage that pain. The consequences must have been dire. To escape whatever fate had in store for her, she found a way – probably using the wiles taught her by Alti – to come into **our** world. It was a simple thing: to pose as a refugee among other refugees, fleeing Anatolia, washing up on the shores of Lemnos. That is the way of it.”

Galatea shuddered, and Ikthenia put a comforting arm around her shoulders. ‘And she came to Myrina, and has never left,’ she whispered. “Must I tell you, how she came?”

Xena, a look of deep compassion on her face, nodded. “I think you had better,” she said, gently.

“It was at our first Solstice celebration, after that particular boatload of refugee Amazons had landed,” Gaia said, her voice low and intense.

“How many seasons ago was this, Galateia?”

“Oh, it must be . . . let me see . . . about fifteen seasons ago, now. I was leading the ritual chanting, as I always had done, and in the middle of it all, she stood up out of the throng of Amazons, and began speaking – as if she were the Voice of the Goddess! Even though she was strange –wearing the mask, and hooded cloak – she spoke such words of Power that we were all dumbstruck. It was truly as if Gaia herself were there, come to us in the flesh! We were astounded. She said she had come to spend time among us, and to help us be safe from the world outside, and that she could make it so we would never be angry or sorrowful, or unhappy again. She could take away all our fears, all our memories of horrible experiences, so they would never come to torment us again. We were completely seduced – well, who would not have been? It seemed too wonderful – that this being was from Gaia, sent to protect us. She had power, and mystery.. Everything we would have expected from the Goddess. Look at the power of the Old Mothers! This seemed very like their abilities. So we embraced her with all our hearts, and with a trust that we would be safe.”

Galateia took a moment, and sipped some of the beverage still in her cup.

“She never took away my hard memories and fears, Xena. She said it was because I am the High Priestess, and had to be able to help her maintain the ShieldWall, and that would require me to be apart from the others. Now that I think on it, she also wanted me to suffer. She took some kind of strange satisfaction in that. She brought the Sibyls into the Temple – I do not know where they came from, or how they got here. They just appeared, one day. I think, now, they must have been to there keep me . . . for they are mostly with me when she is not. They . . . they are very strange.” Her voice faltered, but after a pause, she went on. “They guard her, when she is in her own chambers in the Temple, and they always stood . . . stood at the four corners of the room, when . . . when she and I . . .” Galateia broke off, overcome.

Xena was silent a few moments - letting her recover herself. Then she resumed her gentle questions. “So, when she was not . . . demanding your attentions, where did she keep herself? Did she spend much other time with you?”

Galateia shook her head. “No – she would go off into her chambers. She wanted no interruptions. Said she was communing with Gaia. There was always one of the

Sibyls standing guard at her door.” She smiled slightly. “Not that I would have wanted more contact.”

Xena nodded. “Of course you wouldn’t. Now, one last question: did she ever sit down to a meal with you, or anyone?”

Galateia stared at Xena, her eyebrows knit as she thought about it. Then she shook her head. “No . . . I don’t think she did. Even at the Solstice gatherings, she would leave when the rituals were complete. She said it was not seemly that the Voice of the Goddess should be seen as an ordinary mortal.”

“I think that is more than enough, for now.” Xena said, putting her hand on Galateia’s shoulder. “What you have told me is going to be very helpful.”

“I am glad. I want her to stop this! I cannot abide any more of it.”

Xena nodded. “I understand. Know that I will do everything I can to end this. However, it is going to be a very complicated situation. When I break the spell that she has cast over all the women of Lemnos, they are going to experience a very difficult reawakening to their own pains, sorrows and fears. That is not easy for any one person to go through – you know this – and we will have all of them to help. This is why Gabrielle has summoned the forty women from Egypt. They came from the Temple of Isis in Thebes, trained in the Ways of the Soul Healers of Isis. Gabrielle will be working with them to help all who regain their lost memories and fears. These women will help to form the core of the new Temple that we will establish, in a new center east of here. Gaia has commanded that it should be consecrated to Artemis, to replace the Sacred Grove that was destroyed.” Xena paused, looking searchingly at Galateia. “You are to be invested as the High Priestess of that temple, Galateia.”

The woman stared at Xena, a look of amazement on her face. “I . . . I hardly know what to say, my Queen. I would not expect you to trust my ability to fill such a role, after . . . after I have failed so miserably here.” She bowed her head in shame.

Ikthenia rubbed her back, making soothing sounds. She looked at Xena, her head shaking in concern.

“Galateia.” Xena said gently, “You have done everything you could to lead and protect the women of Lemnos. Queen Gabrielle and I have nothing but confidence in your abilities, and we know you will continue to be beloved by the Amazons of

Lemnos. This has been a time for the tempering of your soul. You need not ever fear the Pretender again. She has failed. You have **not** failed. And when the time comes, tomorrow, for us to deal with her, you will play a key role in the liberation of your Sisters.”

Xena looked at Ikthenia. ‘Will you continue to stay here with her, and watch over her?’

The woman nodded - her face full of emotion.

“I must go, now to a meeting with the Tribe of Hephaistia. When I return, with their Liege, we will have a meeting of the Council, to plan what we will need to accomplish tomorrow. I will ask you both to attend. Until then, please – take care of one another.” She put her hands on both their heads, and then left the room, closing the door gently behind her.

Galatea looked at Ikthenia. “I don’t understand how she can be so . . . so compassionate. She was supposed to be such a fierce, wild Warrior.” She shook her head. “Is she always this . . . kind?”

The other woman nodded solemnly. “And then some.” She replied.

* * * * *

Gabrielle stayed at their residence, and met with Djeserit and Talia, to plan for what they would need to do the next day. They expected that the women of Myrina would have a difficult time, when their painful memories and fears came rushing back into them all at once. They would need to pair one of the Egyptian healers with each Myrinian, so that there could be a mental bonding, using the InSight. This way, the Egyptian healers’ goal was to help the women withstand the first wash of emotional turmoil as they regained their senses, and help avoid the expected panic reactions. The hope was everyone would settle down if the psychic net could manage to remain intact until the process was completed. Gabrielle also wanted the Hephaistian Amazons to pair with each Myrinian and Egyptian, so they could also begin the healing of the rift between the Myrinians and the Outcasts. For this to work, she had told Xena that it was critical that the Hephaistians come to the gathering unarmed. This caused a moment of consternation between them. They both knew that the women would loath going without arms. They both also knew that they would not need them. Xena was going to have to find a way to convince them to leave behind their weapons. She was probably the only one who could.

“That’s why you get the hard jobs.” Gabrielle consoled her mentally, as Xena made her way to the Hephaistian campsite.

‘Was that why? I wondered!’ Xena replied. Her wry tone was not audible, but was there, nonetheless. *“Do I get my reward, after all this is over?”*

‘Whatever your heart desires, my Love’

* * * * *

The Destroyer of Nations finally awoke from her long restorative sleep. Technically, she supposed it was more like a trance - whatever. All she knew was it allowed her to stay here, and stay away from there. She sat up, swinging her feet down onto the floor, waiting for the inevitable dizziness to dissipate. Alti had warned her about the consequences of staying out of it for long. It would dehydrate, and slowly starve to death. She no longer cared what might be happening to her body – back in her reality. She was thirsty, and hungry. It did not seem to matter that she neither ate nor drank, here. At least the feeling went away, for a while, when she was in her long sleep. She summoned the Sibyls from their waiting corners, and they stood silently awaiting her pleasure.

“Where’s Galateia?” she growled.

“Do you not remember, Dark One? She was taken away by the Thessalonians. We no longer have oversight.”

She reared her head back, her eyes glittering dangerously. “Do not presume to tell **me** about oversight! I know perfectly well what happened!” In truth, she was disoriented and confused. The trip back this time had been an ordeal. She made a vow that it would be the last time she would have to go through this.

The Sibyls remained silent. They had limited personality. She had constructed them for show, more than substance.

She shook her head, trying to regain her focus. Damned those Queens! She would deal with them, soon enough. “Well, did you do as I commanded, and summon the Amazons to the Trial? Did you at least do that?”

‘Yes, Dark One. We have done, as you required. The Amazons will assemble in the town square this day, when the sun is at its highest.’

She fretted. The ravenous hunger and thirst that were her constant companions surged up in her. No matter - she would feast on the defeat of the enemy. She was looking forward to the confrontation with the Queens. She was going to enjoy crushing them for good. And it would be amusing, to see the faces of all those Myrinian Amazons, when they saw that she and Xena looked the same – well, except for the old woman hair Xena had somehow ended up with. “The Old Woman!” she gloated. “That’s what she is, now. It will be a pleasure to best her! Then Lemnos will have the Xena they should have had, all along!”

* * * * *

Gabrielle was sitting in the courtyard, under the grape arbor, when Xena returned from the camp of the Hephaistians. It lacked but two candle marks until the time set for the gathering of the tribes.

“Here I am, my sweet,” Xena said, bending over her and kissing her full on the lips.

Gabrielle reached up, and hugged her tight. “How did it go? Are they coming? Are they coming with open hands?”

Xena nodded, as she sat down next to Gabrielle. “I’ll tell you – it sure is hard convincing Amazons to do anything without being armed to the teeth! But given the circumstances, they are doing as I ask.”

Gabrielle sighed in relief. “But that still doesn’t answer how this is all going to play out, Xe. How are we going to control what the Pretender does? She could mess up the whole thing!”

Xena got a speculative look on her face. “Well, there is a solution.” She rubbed Gabrielle’s back lightly with her hand. “It’s not something you’d like, very much. But it would do the job, love.”

Gabrielle looked at her searchingly. The silence between them was charged with emotion. Then Gabrielle took Xena’s hand in both of hers, and looked down at it. She gently stroked the fingers, the knuckles, then turned the hand over, bowed her head, and kissed the palm. Then she looked up into those blue eyes once more. “Are you going now? And are you going to let me go with you?”

Xena smiled, and cupped Gabrielle's chin in her hand. "Will I ever go anywhere alone again?"

They embraced, tightly, and sat that way for a long moment. Then they both stood up. Xena held out her hand, Gabrielle took it. They walked to the arched entry, swung open the door, and exited into the street beyond.

* * * * *

Cautious and silent, they entered the Temple. It was dark, after the brilliant sun of the streets outside. They waited for their eyes to adjust to the dim interior; then moved quietly forward, towards the main chamber, where the large statue of the Goddess Gaia sat in all her splendor. They walked to the foot of the statue, then turned so their backs were to it, and stood side by side.

"Are you ready, my love?"

"With all my heart, Xe."

Xena spoke. "Come forth, Destroyer of Nations! It is time for you to answer for your Soul!"

There was a deep silence, and suddenly the four Sibyls glided from each corner of the room, converging on the two Queens. They stopped when a voice spoke, deep and malevolent. "That's close enough, my lovelies. I want room enough to swing their lifeless bodies, before I crush them completely."

The woman strode out from behind the statue, and circled around until she stood directly in front of the Queens, about a sword length from them. Gabrielle inhaled sharply, involuntarily nonplussed by the larger than life Xena she confronted. She looked for any differences - to help relieve the anxiety that rose up inside her. The dark hair, of course . . . No chakram: that seemed strange to Gabrielle. In addition, she was differently dressed, now. All got up in a sort of Tatar outfit, with a close-fitting headdress that had small gold coins dangling from the edges. A wide, colorful sash wound around her middle, with a thick fur-trimmed jacket over a full purple shirt. Tight-fitting leather leggings and high, soft leather boots finished off the costume. She had to admit, the woman was a gorgeous Xena. Gabrielle was almost sorrowful that she was so full of hate.

'She's certainly an eyeful, Xe.'

“You think? I used to have an outfit very like that, actually.”

‘Maybe you could get another one like it, sometime. I’d love to walk down the street on your arm, with you wearing that!’

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yeah - definitely.”

Xena folded her arms casually, her eyes never leaving the face of the woman before them. “You have had a considerable run, here - but it is more than time for you to return to your own life, and your own place in it. Now the only question I have for you, Xena - is how you are going to chose to go?”

The tall dark,-haired woman emitted a throaty laugh. “That’s rich – don’t you find it strange, to be calling me by your name – XENA? Do you think for one moment I will ever go back to that life of slavery?”

Xena shook her white head, her face betraying the sadness she felt. “You don’t understand, do you? You are running out of time here, too. In fact, you have about come to the end of it. Don’t you realize that you are going to die here, Xena? We don’t have to do a single thing – lift a single finger – and it will still happen, and you will have brought it on yourself, by neglecting and abandoning your body in that reality. Alti warned you. In so many things, you willingly embraced her teachings. Why did you choose to ignore this?”

The Dark One shook her head obstinately. “What makes you think I am at Death’s door? I have never felt more powerful, more alive!” She swaggered up to the Queens, putting her face right up into Gabrielle’s face. “Do I look deathly to you, Gabrielle?” She suddenly leaned forward, and kissed the startled Queen full on the mouth – a hard, demanding kiss. Then she backed off, and laughed harshly, as Gabrielle reacted.

“Didn’t turn you on, huh? Well, it was lively enough, wasn’t it?” She stared aggressively at Xena. “Think I can show you up with your Soul Mate, you old has-been? I’m going to expose you two for the frauds you are, in front of all the Amazons of Lemnos, and they are going to denounce the pair of you! They will beg me to remove you from power, and I will be Queen Xena of Lemnos!”

Xena continued to stare at her, making no movement or reaction to the display of aggression towards her partner. She spoke again, pitching her voice low and gentle.

“You are a ghost, an apparition. You have no substance in this world, and you have no place in it. You must return to your own body, and place, and time, and reality. You cannot stay here. You may **appear** larger than life, Xena – and colorful, and solid – but you are not any of those things. You are an apparition of smoke and desire. You are without form. You are just this side of transparency, even as I speak. You have no power here. Your Soul is calling you home – and you must go.”

Gabrielle felt a sudden surge of energy in the room, followed by the sensation that there was not enough air to breathe. She looked at Xena, who was standing quietly next to her, the same look of compassionate sadness on her face. Everything seemed to slow way down, and she felt dizzy, and as though she would have to fight to remain upright. The room seemed to stretch and everything began to bend and distort inwards, curving. The Sibyls, who had all this time been standing by, seemed to melt and run, as if they were being washed away. They dissolved into puddles of swirling colors on the floor. A buzzing sound got louder and louder, and when she looked at the Pretender, she began to see what Xena had been saying. The woman was becoming transparent – like she was a painting in the air. The colors were every bit as vivid, but her image was flat, rather than solid.

The Pretender looked confused. She tried to lunge at the Queens, but could not move. A look of sheer panic washed over her face. She looked at Gabrielle - an anguished, beseeching look.

Gabrielle felt a wash of sadness and pain fully as intense as if this was her own Xena. She felt tears on her face. Almost involuntarily, she spoke to the figure before her. “I . . . I’m so sorry . . . she . . . I . . . she didn’t want to lose you . . .” she murmured, “You must see that, now . . . she **always** loved you.”

Her Xena spoke again. “You can return to your own Self, and become whole again. You do not have to abandon your life. You can find your Soul once again. And if you do, I promise you – you will be reunited with her once more.”

The image of the Dark Xena wavered, and wavered again. The face of the Destroyer of Nations was transfigured. For the second time in her life, she knew the feeling of hope. Her voice, fading now, came through once more. “Promise me, Xena of Amphipolis. Promise me!”

“I do.” Xena said, firmly. “You can go in peace. I will never abandon you. And neither will your Gabrielle.”

The image flickered, once – twice - and then dissolved into nothingness. The surge of power subsided, and the room returned to normal. The puddles of what remained of the Sibyls were now mere shadows on the floor. The silence was deafening.

“What . . . what happened to her, Xe?”

“She died, Gabi.”

Gabrielle turned, and wrapped her arms around Xena. Her tears were coming faster, now, and she sobbed into Xena’s shoulder. “Gods, Xe – that was so sad!”

Xena held her tight. “I know, my love. I know.” Her own tears dropped softly on Gabrielle’s head.

* * * * *

They walked together out the front doors of the Temple, to find a sea of faces. The women of Myrina were assembled, as they had been summoned to do. They were quietly awaiting their Gaia. Gabrielle looked out over them, and saw the Thessalonian contingent, off to one side: - Io and Paphos, Alysia, Talia, Eusta, and the others. She smiled reassuringly at them. In her mind, she spoke to Galateia.

“Priestess – it is time for you to guide the women of Lemnos into their future. The Pretender is no more. Come forth!”

From the back of the throng, two figures appeared. Galateia walked slowly forward, supported by Ikthenia. They threaded their way through the seated women. A hushed sigh rippled through the crowd, as they saw the injured arm in the sling, and the bruised countenance of their High Priestess.

Galateia stood before them, leaning on her new-found love. She looked over the familiar faces. She had been through so much with them, and now it was time to repair the damage, and heal the wounds, and restore them to their rightful selves.

“My Sisters!” she spoke, her voice ringing out. “I look upon you all today, and I say to you – I have missed you! I have missed the wonderful, complicated and above all – unique – women that I have known and loved from your first moments as Amazons on this island. From my investiture as your Priestess, even as a very

young woman, I was the one who received each of you, when you were lost, and alone, and frightened, and pushed beyond all measure in your struggle to reach safety. I was the one who gave you sanctuary, and welcomed you home. I was the one who promised that you would be safe, and secure.”

She paused, and the Queens could see that Ikthenia moved closer, her arm sneaking around Galateia’s waist, to hold her close.

“I am here today to tell you that all this time, you have not been truly safe, or secure. You – and I – have been in a kind of trance, and we have been laboring under a delusion that we were safe. The cost of this has been that you have become mere shadows of your former selves. You have had a spell put upon you, and are walking in a dream. For that, I am sorry. For I say again – I miss the women you were, before the spell. You had fears and dreams, sorrows and joys, ideas and hopes! You laughed with abandon, and cried with sadness, and joked, and told stories, and even showed rebelliousness and anger! You were REAL. After today, you will be real again. I only hope that you will find it in your hearts to forgive me, for the part I played in creating, and maintaining this illusion. I do not ask you to forgive me now, because you would only be reacting to me as you have learned to do, in your current state. It would not be a true judgment. So I will wait, and ask you again, after we are through.”

She turned, and nodded once to Gabrielle, who stepped forward until she stood next to the Priestess.

“Djeserit, please lead the Sisterhood of Corybantes forward, that they may take up their places.”

From the side street off the square, a line of women emerged. They were striking in the high sun – their ebony skin and white form-fitting garments; the glittering of the gold on their ear covers, and the gold arm bands they each wore. They slowly and quietly dispersed through the audience, and each took up her position next to a Myrinian Amazon, and sank down into a seated position. The women of Myrina rustled, as they turned to look at these exotic newcomers.

Galateia introduced them. “These are the Sisters of Egypt, come from their own long journey to safety, being rescued by Queen Gabrielle, and freed by Pharaoh as a mark of his esteem for her. They suffered long under the subjugation of their oppressors – and because of their suffering, they will never again be able to speak, or hear. However, they are adept in the TribeMind way, and have been trained in

the healing arts of the Temple of the Soul Healers, under the High Priestess of Isis. They were invested as Amazons by Queen Gabrielle, and have come here to assist you in your recovery, and to take up their duties in the Temple.”

Now, Galatea turned and nodded to Xena, who also stepped forward, coming to the other side of Galatea and Ikthenia.

Xena’s voice rang out in the silence. “Come forth, Atalante. Come forth, Amazons of Hephaistia! Come and resume your rightful places with your Sisters!”

From the opposite side street, another line of women emerged into the square. They were clad in their Amazon finest: leathers and feathers - bedecked and festooned with beads, coins, and intricate braids. They walked with their hands loose at their sides, and they were unarmed. They, too dispersed through the seated women, and sat cross-legged on the other side of each Myrinian Amazon. The Myrinian women were now swiveling their heads back and forth, as they uneasily viewed this new addition to their ranks. The Hephaistians, for their part, were staring just as hard, and just as uneasily.

Xena looked out over the completed audience. She sought out, and found, Skylla – her dog still faithfully at her side. She smiled at the woman, and got a dazzling grin in response.

“Hola, Skylla.”

“Hola, my Queen.”

“My thanks I give to you for your assistance. My pup’s name will be F?te??? ast??? – Bright Star.”

“Yes, my Queen. I will teach her all that her mother knows.”

Galatea turned and looked at each of them. They smiled at her, and she spoke. “My Queens, we appear to be ready.”

Gabrielle nodded, and Xena stepped forward, so that she was now standing directly before the throng. Gabrielle walked out into their midst, so that she was standing in the center of the audience. They faced one another.

“Are you prepared for this, now, my love?” Xena asked.

“O yes, dear heart.” With loving eyes, she gazed intensely at her Soul Mate.

Xena gathered her concentration deep into her center, and summoned the power that now always lived coiled at the base of her spine. It moved up and over the top of her head; then circled down around the chakram at the base of her throat. From there, it flashed out, arching over the heads of the women in the front of the audience. When it reached Gabrielle, she released the fastenings of her chiton, baring her chest, and it swirled around behind her, and struck her back where the Dragon lay sleeping. Her arms flung out, as she braced herself, for the power pushed her forward with its intensity.. The Dragon again detached itself from her back, becoming three-dimensional as it floated in the air above her. It stretched, and let out a roar, and then it flew up, up with a flash of light and a hissing, as flames roared out of its mouth, and steam shot out of its nostrils. It flew high, to gather the remnants of the ShieldWall, and return them to their hosts.

There was stunned silence, as none dared move - caught up in the power of the vision materializing before their eyes. In what seemed like only moments, they could hear the Dragon returning. It flew back overhead, red eyes glowing. All heads craned upwards, as it swooped above them. Xena flung her arm up, finger pointing at the apparition. She summoned the power once more, and hurtled a stream of the lightning energy at the Dragon. It burst apart, showering down upon all present, the shards and pieces of its multi-colored, glowing body floating down and landing on them, each one. As the substance touched them, they slumped forward.

Gabrielle refastened her chiton, and gestured to Djoserit. She started, and each Corybant followed her move, by taking the hand of the woman next to her. The Hephaistian Amazons followed suit, taking the other hand of the prostrate Myrinian next to them; until throughout the entire crowd of women, all hands were clasped in an unbreakable chain. All connected, each to the other. Galatea and Ikthenia to moved down, and joined the chain. Gabrielle and Xena closed the gap.

Now all the Amazons of Lemnos were One. As the memories and emotions came flooding back into each woman, they had the help and strength of the entire Amazon nation to reintegrate themselves. The Hephaistians, Myrinians, Thessalonians, and Corybantes – all embraced the returning thoughts, memories and dreams. Great waves of emotion swept over them – fear, anger, sorrow, wonder, joy and hope. Then, overarching all these, love came. And - with the love – something else. A great glowing, pulsing light began to form, inside of the

Temple. The great doors swung wide, the light brilliant and streaming out at them, and they all heard the gentle, infinitely loving, infinitely powerful true Voice of the Goddess in their minds:

I who am the beauty of the green earth, and the white moon among the stars, and the mysteries of the Waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me.

Mine is the cup of wine of life and the cauldron . . .

. . . I am the Desire that is in the heart of woman.

Let there be beauty and strength, power and humility, mirth and reverence within you.

Before my face, let thine innermost self be unfolded, in the raptures of the Infinite.

Know the Mystery: that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, thou wilt never find it without thee.

For Behold!

I have been with thee from the beginning,

And I await thee now!” **

The Amazons of Thessaly rejoiced, for they suddenly understood that the first time they had heard the Charge of the Goddess, they had not understood how it would change them. Now, with it echoing inside them once more, the peace they felt in their hearts told them they had not lost their Artemis, after all. She was all a part of Gaia, and they were, too. The Amazons of Hephaistia had reason to be glad, for their minds were suddenly opened to the TribeMind, and they saw that they were no longer Outcasts, in any way. The Amazons of Myrina were healed, knew they had regained their own unique personalities again; and that they had very little difference from, and much in common with, their sisters from the North. And the Amazons of Egypt were welcomed, and cherished, for their great compassion and skill in helping those in need of solace.

There was much laughter, not a few tears, and a groundswell of voices, as the women shared themselves with one another, and began the project on which they were now begun – to knit their lives together in a rich web of interdependence. The Amazons of Lemnos had endured the Crucible, and had come out whole.

Gabrielle turned, her eyes moving to Xena. She started, and a look of wonder came into her face.

“Look, Xe . . . the chakram!”

Xena glanced down.. Above the edge of the chiton, the skin was now smooth - bare - and unmarked. She looked back up and over at Gabrielle. Her eyes formed a question. Gabrielle, never letting go of the hand clasped in hers, turned her shoulder towards her Soul Mate. Xena looked, and nodded.

“Yours, too.” Xena said. “Will you miss it?”

Gabrielle stared at Xena. “I know I will.”

* * * * *

After the excitement had died down, and the chattering voices grew silent with the predictable exhaustion they all felt, Galatea, Xena and Gabrielle took turns, telling all of them their story. From the beginning, the whole tale of the Pretender – how she had come there, what she had done, and how they had all fallen under the seductive delusion that they were secure. They told of the way she had gone, as well. A sober tribe listened intently. They were perhaps not ready to forgive, yet – but at least they understood the way of it.

They determined, in the end, to have a series of feast days, to commemorate this day as the Consecration of the Tribe of Lemnos. They would have one feast for each tribe, and each tribe would tell their story to the others, and thereby gather their individual strands of Amazon history into a braided whole. Gabrielle was delighted at this, for the suggestion came from the women themselves. Her eyes sought – and found – Paphos, who was sitting nearby with her back against Io, up against one of the walls of the buildings surrounding the square. She grinned, and Paphos made the hand sign for scribing.

“Are you ready for this, my dear?”

“Can’t wait, Gabrielle!”

“Good – because I am delegating the writing of it to you.”

Paphos stared at her, open-mouthed. Gabrielle blew her a kiss, then turned to Xena, who was contentedly sitting next to her on the stoop in front of the Temple. They were completely absorbed in each other’s face, when a small clearing of the throat distracted them. Eusta stood, somewhat diffidently, before them – her hands clasped behind her back, and an odd expression on her face.

“Yes. Eusta?” Xena said. “What is it?”

The woman cleared her throat again. “Well, my Queen. I have an apology to make to you.”

“To me? Whatever for?”

“Well, I was wrong about it. I can see that now, of course – what with the Goddess speaking, and all the care that was taken with the minds of these women, today. That’s all I can say – it chokes me up, quite – to think that I was being such a stubborn old fool for all this time!”

Xena and Gabrielle looked at her, amusement flickering in their eyes, but not a hint of it in their expressions.

“Well, if you need me to accept your apology, I will – and gladly. Will that suffice?”

“No – no it won’t, Xena.”

“What more do you ask from me, Eusta?”

“Well, I think it is about time I let you do that hand thing you do – you know, to wake people up. I reckon it’s time I woke up, too.” She said, slowly. “Way past time.”

Gabrielle held out her hands, and Eusta took them in hers, and sank down on her bony knees between them. Gabrielle was radiant. Eusta thought how fine she looked – even considering all the hardships she’d been through- and even though she felt shy so close to the both of them. Xena smiled at her, and the deep blue of her eyes sparkled in the sun. She seemed so vibrant – Eusta felt like a dusty old woman, next to her. But a happy, dusty old woman. And proud of them both, Her mind ran on with all these thoughts, as Xena put one large hand up, cupping her forehead. She looked deep into Eusta’s eyes, murmured, “All right, now, Eusta, just take a deep breath. This will only take a moment, and you will be just fine.” The woman did as she was told, and a sweet jolt of energy swept through her, from the crown of her head to the toes of her feet. She opened her eyes, swayed a moment, and then a huge smile cracked her face, and she held both their hands gripped in hers.

“Thank you, my Queens. Now I am a thoroughly awakened old Amazon Crone!” They both stood, and then helped her to her feet. She walked off, heading for where Alysia stood - smiling broadly - waiting for her.

* * * * *

As the afternoon waned, and the sun began its descent, the women wandered from the square, headed for their homes. The Hephaistian Amazons went to their camp. They would be there a while, then planned to return to their settlement, to determine who would resettle, and where. A contingent were interested in helping build the new settlement - to be called Poliochni – and to help with the building of the new Temple to Artemis there. The Sisterhood of Corybantes made their way into the Temple, where they were to reside, under Galateia’s sure hand, until the new Temple was ready for them. Then Djeserit would become the Chief Corybant there, along with half the group. The others would stay in Myrina, under Eusta, who was going to take the same position in the Temple to Gaia.

Io and Paphos set off for the Queen’s Residence, to prepare the evening meal. They were entwined so tightly that Gabrielle had to smile at them – so young, so passionate - so very blessed. She turned and looked at Xena again, marveling at the unblemished skin of her throat, looking now so lovely in the blaze of golden light that heralded the setting of the sun. She stretched out her hand, and her fingers gently grazed the soft skin. She leaned closer, and pressed her lips to the tender hollow at its base.

Xena bowed her head over Gabrielle’s, her hands sliding under the chiton and gliding down the expanse of the Bard’s back, feeling the smooth skin, the ridges and welts gone. The Dragon . . . gone. The pain . . . gone. She pulled her close, and gasped, a little, with the sudden burst of passion in her, for the love of this woman. This woman, who meant her life, to her. Who gave herself completely, and held nothing back. Who had put away her entire childhood, to come with her, and be by her side, through all the trials of their days, and all the agony of her redemption. Who would be with her, now - to the end of time. Xena, who had only ever prayed once before, in her life, whispered her thanks.

“My Goddess – what ever your name – and in whatever guise you choose . . . thank you from the bottom of my Soul, for testing us in this way – and for finding us acceptable in your sight. Thank you for my Gabrielle. And for my own life. I will do my best to make all that you have foreseen come true. Give us the wisdom of your council, and keep us always in the palm of your hand.”

~ Epilogue ~

Gabrielle and Xena lay, their bodies close as skin can get - for the moment sated from the long night of love and tenderness they had sweetly employed. Tender as never before – even in the most passionate of times between them – for this was the first time, knowing that they would be one another’s Greater Good for all their lives – however long they might be.

“Xe?” Gabrielle had said, as they sat together, bare as the way they had both come into the world.

“Yes, my love?”

“How is our list?”

“I think we did the whole thing.”

“Are you sure?”

Uh huh. There was save the Outcasts, the Myrinian women, Galateia, our Thessalonian Amazons, the Egyptian women, Io and Paphos, Skylla, Skylla’s dog, and various goats . . . and the Pretender. I think that was it.”

“Nope – there were two more.”

“Two more?”

“Uh huh. There was you and me.”

“Always.”

. . . And they lived forever after, for the rest of their days.

~ *Finis* ~



**The End
Of
The Crucible**

*There is no living so sweet,
As the visions of
These two, who have loved . . .
Passions universal to us all.
Myths tho' they be,
They have illuminated me . . .*

*-Pysta
25 December 2006*

*** Excerpts are from *The Book of the Goddess*, © 2002-03, by Anna Livia Plurabelle**

<http://sacred-texts.com/wmn/bog/index.htm>

**** From: *The Charge of the Goddess*. Unknown origin.**

[Pysta's Scrolls](#)
[Main Page](#)
