

Evolution

By Link

Disclaimer:

This is the last installment of the Kaija and Tai'gee trilogy. It spans the fifth season of Xena: Warrior Princess, beginning after the uncertain end of Caesar's and Pompei's battle on Amazon Land and continues through the middle of Season 6 with the final destruction of the Greek Amazons. The characters and story lines belonging to the creators of Xena: Warrior Princess are well known at this point. My own characters weave into those initiated storylines and build out into my own and historical fact/potential; the first two installments do not have to be read to understand this story, but it would probably help. If you're interested, the first story is called "From a Dark Wood Rising" and the second "When There Were We".

There is significant violence in this story, as is required for evolution to occur.

If you have any comments you'd like to share about my work, my e-mail address is ee_2_me@yahoo.com. If they aren't positive and life-affirming comments, that e-mail address won't work... ☺

As a point of clarity, longer strings of italicized areas are typically Tai'gee's thoughts or memories – unless otherwise noted – and what I consider she would have written in a journal.

Wikipedia has an excellent section on the Amazons, including an updated section describing a PBS special on the myth and legacy of the ancient warrior women. Some of this story incorporates that research.

PART 1

I

Ephiny is dead. Solari is dead. Gabrielle and Xena are dead. Our gods are gone, subdued by their own concerns, they no longer have any particular affection for us. Artemis has gone. All of those who would advise me are no more. My Nation has been disbanded; there are so few of us we cannot even recognize tribes or villages. We've become nomads, a wandering, rootless people – the great Amazon Nation, protectors and portrayers of women's strength, independence and passion, worldly advisors, reduced to shifting skulkers. Our great alliances have dissolved. The centaurs have practically been exterminated; the Romans have decapitated Greece; our country is overrun; we have no more supporters. This is my inheritance as the ruler of what is left of the Amazons.

The cave the thirty remaining Amazons slept in was cold. Though two fires burned brightly, they had to be placed near the entrance because the enclosure was small enough to be suffocating without open ventilation. With the wind blowing aggressively, the fires' heat was quickly swept away, and, beyond finishing the roasting of a young doe, they were of no real use to the shivering inhabitants. The deer would feed all of them and provide intestines for bows, bones for needles and tools once they dried – it was unfortunate the hide would be wasted, but there wasn't time or resource for tanning. Everyone was too hungry to complain of the lack of vegetables, herbs and spices, though as Queen, Tai'gee was concerned for the nutrient intake of her citizens.

Most had spread their sleeping skins for the night, sat quietly upon them, focused on getting as settled and comfortable as possible. The few remaining children sat in resigned despondence with their mothers. Tai'gee wondered, worried, if those youthful souls could still be recognized as innocents with how fast they'd had to grow up. When the Capitol finally disintegrated, most families chose to join other towns and villages, even some of the nearest cities, so they could raise their children in a house rather than a tent or cave. Their decision was hard, but Tai'gee thought those mothers may have made the better choice. Sure they had to give up their Amazon heritage and identities so they wouldn't be betrayed and sold into slavery, but they had the security of a town around them, other children to play ball with in the streets. Their family's scratchings for survival did not include finding a safe place to sleep at night, or hiding from yet another contingent of Roman soldiers and mercenaries. They had the trials of conformity and Roman cultivation to deal with, and while those would be strenuous and oppressive challenges, *'out here we are endangered. We're running for our lives and preservation, like the last of all things.'*

Tai'gee's sleeping pile was at the back of the cave in the coldest, darkest recess. The walls were damp, dripping in some places, ominous green slime seeped from crevices making that part of the cave the most inhospitable. Tai'gee insisted on taking it; as Queen, she felt she had a responsibility to the health and comfort of her citizens. Her few belongings were tucked under the left end of her blanket. She spared a wistful thought for the nice house, a gift from Gabrielle and Xena, left in ruins, destroyed; most of her belongings she carried in her two saddle bags – necessities more than furnishings for a new home.

Despite the misfortunes of her people, Tai'gee felt blessed in a way that most of her sisters were not. Her beloved Kaija was still with her, still providing all she could to her, still doing her best to defend Artemis' charge to her as a protector of the Amazons. Had the tribe not been in such desperate tatters, they would have sung high praises of Kaija who had once again performed a miracle.

Pompei had had a reserve legion poised to sweep the remaining Amazons one day after his initial attack – the day after Xena and Gabrielle had left the village for the last time. That reserve didn't know about Brutus, didn't know about Pompei's loss to Xena, didn't know of Pompei's death not long before they made their move. They had their orders, and they were to wait until mid-morning the day after the Great Roman Amazon Battle, as it had become known, to march onto Amazon land and capture any survivors. Tai'gee was returning with Kaija, Mixan, and Emelia from a rescue mission of the first wave of captured – the group Xena didn't quite catch up to – when Kaija got wind of these troops hovering just off the borders to Amazon Land.

Emelia, of no particular bardic skill, sung so: *Oh, the four of us were a sight, charging into an entire platoon of bewildered Romans, Kaija at the lead, fearless and wild. As in the Battle of Traitors, the Lioness loosed a roar of power, petrifying all in her path, and amassed a kill count unheard of by our people.* Mixan was lost that day, but they managed to save what was left of the tribe. After the three triumphant returned to their beleaguered, embattled Capitol they learned of Ephiny and Solari's deaths. Not knowing where Tai'gee was – or even if she was still alive, Gabrielle had no choice but to appoint Chilapa as Queen before she and Xena left again. Tai'gee did become Queen not long after that; Chilapa was killed by a renegade soldier turned bounty hunter and a very lucky arrow.

Tai'gee wouldn't have considered that Kaija could become more beautiful than she was when they were joined. By all accounts, Kaija had in fact grown into the Amazon Protector – she was The Lioness: dangerous, noble and wild, her presence possessed a regal bearing equal to any natural-born ruler. Her wild, brown-blond mane was kept from her face by a thin circlet adorned with the seal of Artemis – her crown as the Consort and Champion of the Queen. Thin lines and creases from worry, strife and work, and a few from smiling and laughter accented her face, and gave her outward expression a depth the smoothness of youth could betray. Tai'gee was happy and proud to claim responsibility for those lines, as well as the deepening bronze of her wife's eyes. It was a darkness borne of care, Tai'gee thought.

“Kaija loves me and love like ours will show in every feature, especially in the eyes. She cares for our people, for what children we have left; she cares for our happiness as well as our pain. She has grown into her humanity and it would seem her humanity, in all of its partial biology, exceeds most others I've met,” she would later explain to some doubting townsfolk.

Tai'gee took the moment to consider her own appearance as she'd last seen it hovering in a small pool of water. She'd watched the gloss from her hair fade, several strands of gray coming to nest in the tresses. Hard work, running, fighting, a demanding life on the road had built muscle beyond the training and exercise she'd received in the village. As she sat quietly, considering, her heart started to beat irregularly; it wasn't uncommon, and she reasoned that it was stumbling over unexpected calmness after beating so hard in stress the rest of the day. It took her breath away momentarily, but it was fleeting and there was always something else with which she could occupy herself to steady it. She only wished the same remedy could be used for her joints and bones, which had new aches since they'd begun their evacuation. She felt old. Peace was becoming unfamiliar, and she thought she saw that very tragedy in the heaviness under her eyes and wrinkles starting to crease her forehead.

As she sat on her sleeping pile, she had a nice vantage to see most of the cave. They were twenty-five adults and five children, all tucked into that cave like wintering bears. She wondered how they, a stumbling band, could hope to become an establishment again; and if they did, what form might their new identity as a people take? They had lost their craftswomen and priestesses. They no longer had blacksmiths, jewelers, painters, sculptors, carpenters – their artisans were dead, enslaved or repressed, and therefore they no longer had any fine expression of their civilization. They had no tailors nor seamstresses nor weavers; all they could do for themselves was sew together fabrics in a way that might make a tunic or pants. They dared not frustrate

themselves with decoration or fine stitching. It made her so sad to look at their children and know they no longer had an option of what to be when they came of age; they had no trades or castes to offer anymore – they couldn't even offer the hope of coming to age. She sighed deeply as she thought of Pi.

They lost her as well. Tai'gee and Kaija had adopted the runty blonde as their daughter and for little more than a year they were gloriously happy as a family, even while their tribe continued to scrap and battle. She had grown almost a foot in that year, her corn silk blonde hair thickened to a strong, healthy wheat; her almost transparent blue eyes darkened to a clear azure. She was going to be an incredibly attractive woman had she gotten the chance.

Pompei's first strike was a complete surprise; he acquired the most slaves in that attack, beyond the group Xena and Gabrielle were able to rescue. With scouts running thin and pulling double shifts, Amazon defenses were compromised and Pompei managed to make it almost to the mainstay before they were able to gather a defense. Pi was in that first group of captives.

In their time together, Kaija and Tai'gee had given Pi a tremendous education in fighting and defense. Pi took to it like a frog to leaping. Kaija and Tai'gee had enormously different fighting styles, so they were able to teach Pi a wide range of strategies and maneuvers. Pi had an innate motivation that would keep her out past dark practicing, turning herself into a fighter, not just a child good at fighting. Tai'gee was positive that as the Romans tried to take them away, Pi, in her seven year old might, fought, rebelled and incited as much as she possibly could. They found her beaten to death, her body discarded by the road just outside their borders. Tai'gee would spend the rest of her life struggling with regret that their training and indoctrination had gotten Pi killed and pride that she died like an Amazon Warrior in battle.

She couldn't cry there in the cave but that was all Tai'gee wanted to do. If her women had seen or heard her crying, she feared what little morale they had would have evaporated. She'd gotten a lot of practice in the art of false expression over the years, learning to wear a face she didn't feel. Being untruthfully friendly to hunters coming for her woodland friend, silently disapproving of her aunt and uncle's criticism of Kaija and her father, pretending she didn't know who would succeed Ephiny as Queen were all challenges; necessary but hard. The face of stoic perseverance, however, was the hardest she had to hold. She missed her daughter and pain like that was hard to hide, even when it was to save the rest of her family.

She took a breath to remind herself of the present and noticed people stepping aside, making a center aisle through the cave. Her lips pulled into a small smile which grew as she watched Kaija approach. Her great hunter's stride smoothly shifted to a four-legged stalker's crouch as she got nearer and the cave ceiling got lower. Kaija had an alluring glitter in her eyes and a warm smile that was all for Tai'gee. "Hello Wife."

"Hello Wife." Her kind, loving smile was infectious. Tai'gee often wished Xena and Gabrielle were alive to see it. "Are we safe here?"

Kaija nodded. "The hunting is good here. I will keep an eye on the upper ridge. We should not have anything to worry about."

“I love you, you know.”

“I do know and I am happy for it.” Her smile widened, which revealed her sharp canines. If it weren't for the intensely caring gaze, her expression could be most intimidating. As it was, she leaned forward to give Tai'gee a light kiss, still smiling. “The deer should be done soon,” she said as she pulled back slowly.

Sure enough when Tai'gee glanced past Kaija to the rest of the cave she spied several people moving towards the entrance and dinner. “Good, let them eat first; we can rest a bit.”

To Tai'gee's satisfaction, Kaija moved behind her, encouraged Tai'gee to lean forward slightly then proceeded to give her a very nice backrub. It may not have been the most professional massage, but from loving hands on aching muscles in need of attention it was everything Tai'gee could want. “You always know,” she moaned in pleasure.

“I make it my business to know,” she purred in her ear. That sent a different sensation to her aching muscles.

After several tender and sultry minutes of ministrations to her sore body, Kaija pulled Tai'gee back to lean against her and wrapped them in their marriage blanket. Encircled like she was made Tai'gee incredibly happy; there was nowhere else she could have felt more safe or comfortable. Barring, of course, sharing a cave with twenty-eight other Amazons.

“We can't keep living like this,” Tai'gee said quietly. “We've been moving for moons. This is not who we are. This will kill us just as surely as another attack – more slowly, but just as surely.”

Kaija gave her a reassuring squeeze under their blanket. “I know. But we must stay away from the Romans.”

“Staying away from them and running from them are two different things.”

“You are right.” She took a breath, “We could go where they are not.”

“And where is that? Rome is everywhere. Xena and Gabrielle found them in Gaul and Britannia. Besides, Greece is our land, our home. We don't belong anywhere else.”

“My love, we no longer belong here. We will be destroyed here.”

Tai'gee shuddered. The fading flames from the cave entrance served to remind her how cold the place was; the inconsistent flickers reminded her of their hopes. Candles were being lit, signaling the coming dousing of the main fires – no need to keep them burning once everyone was served and risk prolonged announcement of their presence. The twins' mother, Dotra, brought a candle and some venison to her daughters as the extinguishing hiss assaulted the cave.

In the dim and uncertain light she could be seen speaking softly to them, apparently trying to encourage them to eat. Meica shook her head and Seema began to cry. "I want to go home!"

Tai'gee's heart broke at the desperation in her wail. Throughout the cave she could feel her women stiffen and could swear she heard teeth gritting. Tai'gee wanted to take her home, to give her back her bed and toys and lessons; she wanted to give her her life back. But she retreated farther into Kaija because she could do none of that. She hid her face behind the blanket and her tears behind her eyes.

"Kaija," she whimpered, "how can I lead these people when I have nowhere to go? I have nowhere to take them."

"We will find our place." Kaija was never a woman of many words; she wasted no breath. Her succinctness lent confidence to her words. The strength in her body was also reassuring to Tai'gee and her gentility gave a great power to her conviction. Tai'gee wished she shared that conviction.

By the third day of their stay in the cave, it was known by the closest town that they were there. Emelia brought news that the townsfolk were getting restless.

"They want to come expel us," she said.

Beckries snorted. "They can try."

"We will leave in the morning."

"Tai'gee!" Someone cleared her throat and Beckries adjusted herself. "Queen Tai'gee, this is our fourth move in a half moon. No one here would complain of evading the Roman soldiers, but now we are to flee from common villagers? It's absurd!"

"They are a people too, Beckries. We will not usurp their lives as ours have been."

Tai'gee made sure to hold her young warrior's gaze. At night, or in a shadow, Beckries' eyes could be as dark as her Queen's, but they didn't have the hardness Tai'gee's could possess. Beckries was a good woman, an excellent guard with a sure shot with bow and arrow, a year or so older than Tai'gee. She wore her dark hair in two plaits and held the wisps back with a plaited headband. Tai'gee had come to know her and trust her. Beckries wasn't spoiling for a fight, but she was anxious to preserve their honor.

"We are not fleeing them my friend," she said tenderly. The others moved closer, offering their quiet support to each of them, understanding and faith. "We must find a new home. We must find a place where we can rebuild. We must leave Greece."

The response was what she expected. Gasps and breathless protests were her answer. "No." "No Queen Tai'gee." "This is our home." "We can't."

“My ladies, this is no longer our home. Amazon Land is overrun. We must recreate ourselves, rebuild... somewhere else.”

Ghiran, who was a couple seasons older than the twins, looked to her with angry tears in her eyes. “But where can we go? Artemis gave us that land!”

“I know, I know. I don’t want to leave either, but if we try to stay... we don’t have the protection we once did.”

“What about her?” Ghiran shouted as she pointed to Kaija, who was sitting off to the side skinning a rabbit. “She was charged to protect us! She should get our land back!”

A child’s passion can be a very inspiring thing, but at the moment it did nothing but drain Tai’gee more. She never understood why it was so much more difficult to explain things to children, but when she looked into the girl’s frustrated young eyes she got an idea. Tai’gee wanted her reasons, her explanations and justifications to make Ghiran happy. As an adult, Tai’gee had to find contentment with whatever explanations she could get or create for herself, especially for those events and situations she couldn’t control. She was responsible for her own happiness and satisfaction – with children, adults want to bestow happiness on them. Tai’gee wanted Ghiran to be satisfied with her choice just because Tai’gee had managed to make one, that she had a gift of direction for her; if Ghiran could just accept it she wouldn’t have to struggle with understanding and why’s.

Tai’gee knelt before Ghiran and placed a hand on her strong shoulder. The youth’s hair was a dark brown, and a sort of curly that would have been darling if the loops and whirls weren’t so frizzy. She was tall for a ten year old – tall and stocky. Tai’gee thought she looked like a grown, grumpy, plain woman in a child’s body. And all of that plainness and stockiness was focused around angry confusion which Tai’gee had to address... a child’s plain, grumpy, angry confusion, which was all the more difficult. “That land was given to us by a goddess and all the while we were there we had Her enchantment to protect us. Kaija is not a goddess. She’s just like you and me.”

Ghiran shook Tai’gee’s hand off angrily. Her dark, fuzzy curls shook with her fury. “She’s not like us. She’s The Lioness. If she can destroy armies why can’t she take our land back for us? Why can’t she bring back our people?” Ghiran spun around, thrusting a forceful finger at Tai’gee’s wife, who had set her rabbit aside to listen. “You’re supposed to be so great – why haven’t you saved our people from slavery? My mother – she could be waiting for us-” here she spun back to Tai’gee with just as much accusation, “and you want to leave her!”

Kaija rose and walked over to the circle, a silent movement amongst a silent crowd. She sheathed her boot knife, then leveled her golden gaze on the girl – it was neither angry nor hard, but intense all the same. “If you have not noticed,” she said, her rich voice filling the cave, “I was not able to save my daughter either.”

Everyone, including Tai’gee, lowered her head. It was a hard truth to swallow and they all wanted to make their attempt without scrutiny. Tai’gee forced herself to continue. “As you all

know, you are free to make your own choices, even the children. You are virgin, as the Goddess made us, and that will not be violated. Any of you may stay, try to save our sisters and parents from their slavery. It is my opinion that this will be futile and wasteful. None of us are so great we can take on Rome. We are survivors – what have we survived for if only to throw ourselves onto their swords or into their hands?”

Tai’gee paused, waiting for some reaction, waiting for some expression she could identify and respond to. She didn’t receive one however, so she went on. “Sisters, if it is what you wish that we thirty go back to our land, go against Rome and die trying to restore what was once ours, then as your Queen I will be glad to lead our last charge. But... I think we would be truer to ourselves, our creed and our teachings if we try to re-establish ourselves. I think we should fight to be a people rather than sacrifice ourselves into legend.”

They all remained quiet. Their silence was discomfiting to her, but she accepted that it meant they were thinking hard on what she’d said. Then she saw what was really weighing so heavily under all of their eyes.

“We feel guilty,” she said plainly. This got their attention – they looked up. Ghiran let heavy tears fall. “We feel guilty for not trying to rescue those we’ve pledged battle oaths to. We feel guilty for giving up the land gifted to us, chased off of it like we were the trespassers. We feel guilty that we survive while our grandmothers, children, friends died and remain unhonored, rotting instead of burning while we dance their souls to the Land of the Dead.”

“My daughter will be taught Latin, maybe even forget the songs I sang to her by her bedside,” Drexia said heavily.

“They crucified my wife – I watched her soul leave her body – I hid in the woods and watched her die and ran when I heard a sentry approach. Seven years of marriage – a pledge of life together, of love and commitment, and I didn’t even dare to whisper how much I loved her for fear of being heard and caught.” Minyosh shook her head, disgust dripping from her words.

Latrez spoke next, one of their finest swordswomen. “I am the only one left of my family. Both of my mothers, my three sisters, four aunts, eleven cousins, four nieces – all warriors, all dead. We were the largest family in the tribe, now there is only me – who retreated while the others died.”

Kaija’s were the only dry eyes in the cave, and that was only because she didn’t have the ability to cry like the others did.

When next Tai’gee spoke, her voice cracked in her attempt to control the emotion coursing through her. “We must deal with our guilt. We must each find our own justification and acceptance. If that redemption is at the hands of our persecutors so be it. We’ve done what we could do for the past. We must consider our future now.”

Silence again. Everyone was absorbed in her thoughts. As she looked around at each of her Amazons, Tai’gee felt there was less desire to go barging into Rome and more a wish to get re-

established. She met Kaija's gaze, and golden eyes smiled at her, giving her an obscure wink. Tai'gee reached out to her, inviting her over to stand with her while their people chewed their decisions. Tai'gee took Kaija's rough, square hand in hers and encircled her waist with her free arm.

Finally a throat cleared. Shingari stepped up to speak. She was one of the tallest of them all, with mousy brown hair she kept cut short and a prominent scar tracing from the top of her head and straight down the left side of her face. "We were not the only tribe of Amazons. There may be more of us wandering in search of a new home. We could join together."

Tai'gee nodded her approval of the insight and there were several other murmurs of agreement. "If there are others out there, if we find them, that will only serve to strengthen our numbers," she added. "And there's always the possibility of our sisters escaping and coming to us."

Shingari continued, but somewhat enfeebled, "Xena talked of Amazons to the north and east, perhaps..."

There was a tense moment of silent rejection followed by acceptance. No one liked the idea of Capitol Amazons running to other regions in retreat, but when one has to admit defeat there are only choices of more and less degrees of humiliation left to pick from.

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They left the cave in the morning, headed for the town that had wanted them to leave. They brought them business: the Amazons needed food, clothes, and horses and they traded what valuables they had left for them. Most said goodbye to their swords and jewelry that had been with them for generations. Tai'gee gave up the Circlet of the Queen. It bought all Kaija and she could need for a year, but as she handed it to the merchant she felt the last of Artemis' presence leave her.

As they were reassembling themselves and arranging their new gear for travel, the magistrate and a contingent of hastily gathered militia approached them. Tai'gee made no quick assumption about the man, but she did think he carried an air of noble judgment in the energy surrounding him. She stepped over to meet him.

"Do you lead these women?" he asked in the frank way of government officials.

"I do."

"We want you to leave. We want no trouble from your kind."

Behind her, the Amazons bristled, and Tai'gee found it amusing that this man and his guard would wait until they had sold their arms to confront them. "We bring no trouble here other than to laden your merchants with money and treasure. If you have no desire for money, we'll be happy to take our business elsewhere."

“We have a great desire for money, which we could get a lot more of turning you over to the Romans. We have already notified them of your presence.”

‘So much for noble judgment.’ “You presume much to think we are defenseless just because we traded a few swords. And let me remind you that those swords served to protect this town under treaty with our Nation.”

“That treaty is dead,” said the magistrate matter-of-factly. “And we are now under the protection of Rome. It is out of honor of our mutual history that we offer you this chance to leave immediately. But if you stay any longer we’ll be happy to sell you to them at whatever price.”

The militia brandished their weapons attempting to highlight his point. The dark haired Queen stepped up to him, disgust shining freely in her dark eyes. He made a valiant attempt to hold her stare but failed after only a few moments. Tai’gee drew herself up to her full height, which brought her dark, pebbly eyes level with his much softer browns. He took a step back. “You cannot sell what you do not own,” she said with slow clarity.

Beckries came over, leading Tai’gee’s newly purchased mare. “We’re ready my Queen. We just finished loading the last wagon.”

As she took the reins, Tai’gee couldn’t deny a smirk at Beckries’ own glare at the magistrate; a dangerous challenge many Amazons wouldn’t dare to take. The man began to squirm, like a child caught but not yet addressed for his wrongdoing.

“Come Beckries.” Tai’gee outright laughed at the multiple sighs of relief from the militia and turned her horse towards her gathering group.

II

They traveled along the rutted road in a relatively quiet line of women, horses, wagons and a couple stray dogs that had taken to them – Tai’gee suspected under encouragement of getting food from the children. Being on the open road was uncomfortable, to say the least. While their clothes mostly matched those of any they would chance to meet, they still felt obvious. Without their swords they felt vulnerable. Without their home they felt foreign.

Tai’gee often found herself oscillating on how best to ride across the country – or whatever territory they found themselves crossing. They still had some of their fine clothes, several of those who had served in the Elite Guard also remained – perhaps making themselves look like a royal caravan would be more appropriate and to their advantage. It wasn’t like any of those remaining were ashamed or leery about faceless others knowing they were Amazons – those who harbored those particular fears had already defected and joined other communities. But then again, finery would draw attention to them, would make them targets at the most and conspicuous at the least – the town they had just left, for example, would be only the first of many they would pass through on their trek north. The fewer people that recognized them and remembered who they were and with what they traveled, the less they would be able to tell anyone that might come to ask about them once they’d gone. Safe passage didn’t just mean

arriving at their destination intact, but staying safe from those who might follow behind and attack later.

‘Not that a change in clothes alone would keep us safe. That’s not going to draw away from the fact that we’re a group entirely of women... A person would have to be blind not to notice.’ Tai’gee thought on this some more and wondered if it wouldn’t be prudent to have some of the women dress as men and perhaps make them look more like nomads rather than a questionable expedition. ‘It’s not like some of us would have to try very hard to pull off a manly facade,’ she added to herself with a smile. Still, while they had packed away their fighting leathers, tight halter tops and heavy hide pants, put away their war masks and armor for linen tunics and woven traveling pants, Tai’gee had to admit all any of them really had to do was cut their hair in the fashion of men to really make themselves convincing – few were dressed as the average woman anyway.

Of course, to the small tribe itself, their safety was directly related to the protection of their Queen. Tai’gee had gotten beyond being flattered or embarrassed that she had guards. Once Ephiny had announced her Heir Apparent and appointed her her own personal entourage of Guard, Tai’gee’d had to get comfortable very quickly with having accompaniment that wasn’t particularly company. Of course, while they were inside the Capitol walls, the Guard backed off in deference to Kaija’s protection – but whenever Tai’gee ventured outside of the walls a silent circle of security joined her. There were only a few trained Guard left after all their battles, and none were Royal Guard, so Beckries rode beside Tai’gee in the open when Kaija wasn’t by her side. She examined every person they passed with intimidating scrutiny. But Tai’gee felt her greatest safety ran along beside the convoy, just inside the woodline, scouting ahead for trouble.

“Should we not be moving faster, my Queen? If the Romans are coming-”

“They aren’t Beckries, don’t worry.”

“How do you know?”

“Those merchants wouldn’t have sold us as much as they had if they really intended to ambush us. If the Romans were to come they’d want an explanation as to why all of our weapons are there and we are not.”

Beckries smiled. “Wouldn’t do much for their great alliance, would it?”

“Not at all.”

After a few moments of quiet riding, Beckries decided to voice what was really on her mind. “My Queen, at the caves when Shingari mentioned other tribes – what if there are other Queens? Artemis gave all the Regions Queens. It doesn’t seem we should consider ourselves the very last of all of us.”

“You’re right.” Tai’gee looked up to the cloudless blue sky above them, then off to the distance where great thunderheads were building over the distant sea. They were high up in the inlands of

Greece, the Great South Sea stretched far behind them in a thin, hazy line, to lands none of them had ever seen. “Though the Romans have spread far, I doubt they’ve touched this last band of Amazons to the north: they may yet still be established.”

“But you don’t think so?”

Tai’gee took a breath, deciding on her words. “I think they’re probably more like we are now. Xena said the last time she was there, there were only a handful of women, young and wild. That was about a year ago, year and a half maybe but not really long enough for things to change greatly if they’ve been left alone.”

The creaking of the cart, the hooves against the hardened dirt and rocks of the road, the murmur of various conversations all seemed loud to her suddenly. ‘No wonder Kaija chose to go on foot away from us; her sensitive ears probably jangle with the sounds.’ Tai’gee didn’t bother hiding a shy smile. ‘My Champion’ – and she had been her champion since they were children.

Tai’gee considered this, considered ‘Kaija, The Being’. Kaija had inherited many great qualities from her feline family: she was able to see clearly in darkness, she was deceptively and amazingly strong, an incredibly fast healer, and possessed a critical and discerning judgment that didn’t waver in heated circumstances. But there were other things she’d inherited as well that would have made any human obscenely vulnerable, if not maddeningly frustrating. Kaija slept a lot, for example, averaging about twelve hours a day, and if she had been particularly taxed during her hours of wakefulness, sleeping two-thirds or a full day wouldn’t be unexpected. She was also feline independent, and almost everything involving some minute level of social interaction incurred cursory incomprehension. Leading hunting parties, speaking to groups, telling Tai’gee that she loved her all were missions for Kaija to come to an understanding of how and when.

Riding a horse was another – being somewhat of a beast in her own right, riding another beast was outside Kaija’s initial consideration and comfort. They’d had to get her the most complacent, uncaring horse they could find, because all the horses picked up on Kaija’s animalistic base. The poor beasts would shy and jump from Kaija like she was a snake, poisonous or no. The first time Kaija sat atop Mylo, both horse and rider looked unquestionably uncomfortable.

“I feel like I am playing with my food,” she mumbled the first time she seated.

“I promise you Kaija, if you eat this animal my Amazons will not be playing when they beat you. Horses are too expensive to be eaten.”

Tai’gee suspected that was another reason her Consort and Champion chose the woodline for her scouting trips – less temptation to consume her vehicle...

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to return to Greece?” asked Beckries tentatively, pulling her Queen from her reverie.

Tai'gee had briefly asked herself this once she had decided Kaija was right and they needed to leave. She still didn't have an answer. "I don't know, my friend. It's been my experience that changed things can never go back to how they used to be. If we do go back, it may not be us, but our great-great-granddaughters. Even then, they will need a means and reason to come back; as well as the acceptance of those who are already there."

The warrior ground her teeth. "It's not right."

"No, but it is the way survival works. As long as you can defend it, you can have whatever you want."

Tai'gee dropped back to walk beside the first of their three wagons. This wagon was their "people cart" – any wishing to sleep or rest their horses would ride in this cart. The second was their long-term supplies: food, water, clothes and fabric, tools – all those things they would unpack as their need became dire. The last wagon bore their daily supplies, tents and sleeping rolls, cookware, things they unpacked every day. The women did a good job switching driving responsibilities, taking turns throughout the day. Turtle, their sovereign elder, was driving the people cart at the moment.

"Hello Lady Queen," she greeted as Tai'gee pulled next to her.

Even though Turtle was the oldest among them, she was not, by any of their opinions, old. She wouldn't clarify her exact age, getting some kind of pleasure to have bouts of guessing games, but Tai'gee wouldn't say she was older than forty-five seasons. Her granddaughter, Seti, laid across the buckboard with her head in her grandmother's lap, sound asleep.

"Hello Turtle."

"You look a little...chaffed."

Tai'gee shifted uncomfortably in her saddle and reached to rub her lower back. "My butt hurts. I'm not used to riding this much."

"Would you like a seat? This little bag of bones is re-arrangeable," she offered with a smile.

At her nod, Turtle shifted the reins to one hand, and used her free hand to scoop the slumbering form close to her side, the girl's head resting on her ample bosom. Tai'gee sighed relief as she sat on the flat board. She enjoyed riding, but her lower half wasn't entirely used to the position for unending hours.

"I always hated caravans," Turtle said. "Jada was Queen before Melosa, and that woman loved traipsing across the country in all Amazon fanfare. Liked to go to Athens – I think she had something with the governor myself."

"Not all Amazons are women's women."

“Some are for neither,” she said with a wink. “Even still, it never mattered to me who a woman likes. I just hate traveling. Boring. Bothersome.”

“True. But I’ll wager you wouldn’t really want excitement while traveling like we are.”

She spat something dark over the wagon side; probably blackroot – there was a lot of that particular commodity at their last camp. “Not now, no, traveling like this. But then, armed and decked out as we were with nothing to do and energy to spare... different story.”

Tai’gee glanced at the sleeping Seti. She was nine and solid as a nineteen-year-old. She was every bit the brawn of her grandmother, and the resemblance in their faces suggested Seti was a late born daughter of Turtle’s rather than a granddaughter. “How is she doing?” she asked with a nod to the girl.

Turtle grinned, black bark streaking her teeth. “Bored.” She smacked the reins against one of the horses which apparently wasn’t doing what she wanted. “She’s confused mostly. Angry. Still upset having to give up her mother’s bow.”

“Did she? We all had to make sacrifices but that was a real treasure.”

Turtle nodded her big head, her hand patting her granddaughter’s side lightly. “Yeahp. None to match that one for miles – maybe not in all Greece. I heard someone say Hephaestus himself helped my daughter carve that bow.”

Tai’gee had seen Gina’s great bow several times, and it was a true beauty. It wouldn’t surprise her if the rumor of Hephaestus’ help was true. He was a master of metal, as most knew, but he was a lover of weapons no matter their stock. If he had helped Gina make it, Turtle’s daughter must have come up with a truly magnificent design.

“She’d gotten quite good at using it,” said Turtle with a waggle of eyebrows to indicate Seti, “but I think she’s better with throwing knives. Archery was in her mother’s blood and Seti wants to be like her despite her own talents.”

It wasn’t long before Tai’gee was dozing and, truth be told, she needed it. Beckries woke her once they reached the crossroads, with the expected question, “which way?”

It was an inconvenient tri-way – both directions continued north, but one way went west-ish, the other east-ish. There was a prominent road sign indicating cities in either direction, however since none of them recognized any of the names that wasn’t much help.

“Well,” she concluded, “we know to the west is the ocean and Britannia and we know nothing of the east. I think we should go east.”

“It’s getting late,” Sheika pointed out. “Maybe we should camp.”

“Not here,” said Kaija from her awkward position atop Mylo.

“Yeah, we shouldn’t camp at a crossroads,” agreed Tai’gee. “We can go for another candlemark or so before we stop. Let’s go.”

~

Tai’gee took her plate and joined Beckries and her clique by a small fire they’d built. When not riding by her side, Beckries tended to spend time with Latrez, Shingari and Emelia; a formidable group of warriors. In fact, all of the cliques seemed to be formed between members of the same castes. Minyosh, Cheelopi and Sheika were all archers; Blue-wren and Eutries were the only remaining scouts; Rikel, Tristan, Mépol and Rosa were all Yearies, unfinished in their training; Sheikel, Drexia and Dotra all mothers.

There were those others who belonged to no group in particular: Alcai, for example, who was a big woman, tall and wide. There were some whispers that she had a giant ancestor somewhere in her family line. Alcai was also deaf, something that probably saved her from the Roman slavers. She’d had a very good friend who acted as an interpreter for her. They had developed a series of hand signals and a special relationship that helped keep Alcai connected and communicative with the tribe. She was killed however and the loss of that friend left Alcai mute and fairly inconspicuous for her size. Noki, was another relative loner; a beautiful knife fighter – a beautiful Amazon by anyone’s definition. Kaija liked her and they spent some time in each other’s company occasionally, but that seemed to be Noki’s only friend in their small group. In fact, Kaija and Noki were sitting together at that moment sharpening their daggers, silent and focused. Tai’gee noticed Seti wasn’t far from them, sharpening her own, surreptitiously stealing glances to make sure to do as they did.

“Do you think we’ve left Greece yet?” asked Emelia.

“We’ll have to ask someone on the road,” Tai’gee said. “None of us have been this far away from Amazon Land to even begin to know Greece’s borders.”

“It’s a shame none of our Traders returned before we left,” Emelia tried to say around a mouthful of food. Beckries elbowed her and nodded towards Tai’gee.

“It’s ok, Beckries. There is a time and place for formality and now doesn’t qualify. Besides, Emelia grew up in a barn!”

They all laughed as Shingari gave her friend a playful kick. Emelia kicked her back before repeating herself.

Their tribe had many Traders, Amazons who roamed all over the world bartering Amazon goods for those of other nations, returning once to several times a year to sell and trade their finds. Traders were a great source of information, from reports of births and alliances to disasters and threats. When they evacuated the Capitol all of their Traders had been abroad. One or two may have returned since then, but the refugees had no destination when they’d left – if any Trader

found their wandering band, Tai'gee would guess it was through great luck despite the signs they were trying to leave in their wake.

"I don't think we are still in Greece – look at this place; boring for miles," said Shingari. "None of Gabrielle's stories about their travels said 'boring' about Greece."

"No, but there are quite a few of her stories that had nothing to do with what was really out there," Latrez countered. "Take Gabrielle's man-eating rabbit, for example. That's no Greece I've ever known."

They all chuckled at that. "Not to mention," added Emelia, "that as a bard, Gabrielle would only tell the interesting parts. Who would pay to hear, 'And they kept walking, walking – they kept walking for days and nothing changed, and so they kept walking and walking and walking.'" Emelia got more and more dramatic as she went on, finishing with an exaggerated tone of exhaustion, chin sagging heavily on her chest. Slowly she lifted her head, eyes first. "The end," she said flatly. "An encore will cost you double."

They all looked at each other then back to Emelia, who sat waiting patiently.

"Boo!" they shouted and picked something from their plates to throw at her.

In the midst of their gaiety, two cricket chirps sounded and Blue-wren skipped up to them. Like many of them, Blue-wren had tattoos of power needled into her skin. The dark lines extending from the corners of her eyes towards her ears were for squint-eyed speed, and these pinched together now as she stood flushed and anxious to give her report. "My Queen," she panted. "Someone is coming."

Their group set aside their plates, reached for their weapons. "One person," Tai'gee asked. "Why are you alarmed?"

"It's someone who cannot be, My Queen – someone who is dead."

"Kaija!"

Kaija looked up from her sharpening and sheathed her knife in her boot right away before coming over. Noki followed close behind.

"Blue-wren says she saw someone coming behind us," the dark haired Queen told her once she was close enough. Kaija nodded and gave Noki a look to follow her. As Kaija's powerful form slipped into the night, a flash of firelight against the unique, ivory-handled knife strapped, handle down, to her back left a last brightness before her disappearance. Kaija didn't use the knife often – she preferred killing with her bare hands, and her boot knife for dressing. But when she did wield it, Kaija would pull the big blade from its sheath and it was like her arm had grown by a foot – the exotic knife was an extension of Kaija, as though she'd grown up using it and not only gotten it a couple years ago. 'But then, maybe with something stabbing in a person for hours and hours, their connection changes, blade and person become more intimate if they survive each

other,' Tai'gee philosophized. Hopefully, whatever danger Blue-wren suspected would not require Kaija unsheathe that particular weapon – that meant it was a grave danger.

Tai'gee refrained from telling everyone to douse their fires – they were already low enough to not be seen through the brush, and the hissing of sudden extinguishing might betray them. They had made camp in a depression about fifty yards from the road; nothing of their caravan could be seen by anyone walking by between the thick brush, and the deceptive drop off. But they all waited with whatever arms they had in tense silence, none-the-less.

Noki re-entered camp first, signaling her return with two cricket chirps as Blue-wren had. Her face was a mixture of surprise, disbelief and confusion.

“What is it?” demanded Beckries.

“Ep- Eponin.”

Noki stepped aside, allowing Kaija to enter. The Lioness led a horse, on which rode none other than Eponin, one of Queen Ephiny's royal entourage.

“Eponin! How – where?” Tai'gee couldn't voice anything that was racing around her mind – bewildered muddle was her best.

With a grimace, the great warrior dismounted, latching on heavily to Kaija's shoulder. She hobbled forward using Kaija as a crutch. They all surrounded her, examining her realness for themselves. Her right leg was a mangled, withered mess and her body was littered with scars; several on her face looked particularly angry and painful. With a great deal of effort she attempted to kneel, but was only able to sit with her bad leg folded beneath her. Her face expressed shame of her weakness and she bowed her head to hide it and the tears that were beginning to trickle down her cheeks.

“My Queen. I've found you,” she said hoarsely. She pulled her sword from her side and held it out to her. “My sword – I pledge my sword to you.”

Immediately Tai'gee dropped to her knees in front of her. “Eponin – We thought you were dead. We danced your spirit to the Land of the Dead... What happened?”

“Well – it didn't get very far, did it?” she chuckled. Someone brought over a water skin and Kaija helped Ep reposition herself so she could drink and sit more comfortably. Eponin was a small, strong woman, best described as fierce. She was so in all things as Tai'gee knew her: love, life, fighting; she laughed hard, played hard and her enemies fell hard before her.

“In the battle that ki-” she bit her tongue at her rising emotion, “-that killed Ephiny, I took a crossbow bolt to my shoulder. I made it back to the village just in time for the ambush. My leg – I was wounded. At first they took me with the others to sell, but once my wounds got infected, they threw me away.”

“That was moons ago, Eponin,” said Tai’gee.

She nodded. “I fought the infection and fever under some debris. I was so weak and disoriented by the time I recovered I couldn’t make it back to the village. I didn’t know where I was, my leg was useless. Some people found me, fed me, helped me heal. By the time I could travel again, the village had emptied. I found some of our sisters in Trinka and asked what had happened. They said you had gone north, and that they chose to stay behind. I followed as best I could and made it to Leesonina, the village where you picked up supplies.” Here she looked up to Tai’gee with a particularly wicked grin. “They weren’t showing enough respect to Amazon finery, so I relieved them of some of it.”

She made a motion to her horse and Cheelopi and Latrez began stripping the animal. They found Shingari’s sword, Rikel’s sword, Mépol’s fighting staff, and-

“My bow!” Seti jumped forward to grab the bow from Latrez. “Thank you so much!” Tai’gee caught Turtle rolling her eyes.

Cheelopi brought Eponin her saddle bags. She opened them and pulled out Tai’gee’s circlet. “They didn’t feel worthy enough for this – asked me to return it to you.”

“Eponin, we traded these things fairly,” she said slowly taking the crown. A gentle tingle moved up her arm, and regardless of what she said, Tai’gee was glad to have it back.

“I know, but they weren’t comfortable with having any of it. Some said they felt they dishonored our treaty, others were worried about the Romans asking questions – they really wanted us to have these things back.”

It was the grin that kept Tai’gee unsure; she couldn’t decide if Ep’s sly smile was from returning valued objects to them, or if it was that she’d sneaked off the things she didn’t think the vendors should have... In either case, “Thank you my friend. Welcome back.”

A great cheer went up and one by one everyone went to congratulate their newest arrival; that is, once Tai’gee was able to release her from her own bear hug. They brought food and skins, tried to make Eponin as comfortable as possible given her injuries. She slept next to Kaija and Tai’gee that night, and, crippled though she was, Tai’gee thought they all felt safer having her there.

~

They were happy to stay in their camp for several more days to give Eponin time to rest. One early afternoon, Tai’gee brought some tea to Eponin, who sat propped against one of the wagon wheels. Kaija was under the wagon, fast asleep.

“So this is all that’s left of us, huh?” At Tai’gee’s nod she took a sip of tea. Over the rim of her cup she said, “I know it’s their choice, but I still feel betrayed by the ones that chose to stay behind.”

“It is their choice – time will tell if they can live with it.”

“I don’t know that time will tell anything,” she said with a grin. “When you and that wild thing came to us I would never have suspected I’d be calling you Queen or witnessing her battle miracles.”

“Eponin, I’m so glad to see you. I’ve been Queen for four moons and I feel like such a tremendous failure in so short a time.”

“Well,” she said after draining her tea, “your reign’s been a bit unconventional.”

“Quite,” she agreed contritely. “There are those of us... who would support your ascension to the throne,” Tai’gee said quietly.

Eponin gave her a grave look, and Tai’gee could feel a burst of anger from the warrior’s eyes. “You have Ephiny’s rite of caste, and Artemis has blessed you as her own heir. Do you dare forsake it?”

Tai’gee hung her head in shame of her suggestion, and let her own insecurities wash over her in an overwhelming tide. “I lapse in my courage. I’m afraid... I’m afraid I’ll destroy what’s left of us by sheer ineptitude.”

“No one here thinks you’re inept, Tai’gee – we’re all just as afraid and unsure as you are. If anyone thought she could do better, I would have been asked to choose a side as I entered this camp the other night. No mutiny – I’d say you’re doing just fine.”

A wear-worn but graceful hand ran over Tai’gee’s face, as though trying to massage in Eponin’s compliments. “But leaving Greece... this is crazy.”

“No, it’s necessary.”

“All the same,” she said with a sigh.

“Look, this isn’t school anymore Taig’. Out here there’s no more right and wrong answers; just choices you may never know were the best or worst. A good Queen considers before making those choices. Seems you’ve done just that to me. I’m happy to have you as my Queen.”

“How can you say that when you knew Ephiny so well? I’ll never be the Queen Ephiny was.”

“Nope,” she drawled. Eponin took a long stretch, reaching her arms as high as her shoulders would allow. “Gods that feels good. No,” she said again and resettled herself. “You’ll be your own Queen. Don’t forget, while Ephiny was a good Queen, as was Gabrielle for her part, Melosa was the last Queen ordained by Artemis, until you. I was there, you know.”

“Artemis is gone now.” Tai’gee shook her head.

“Doesn’t change anything. And She’s not gone; maybe diminished, but we are Her children; as long as we’re here, She’s here. You should know that above anyone.”

“Yeah, I suppose I do. I don’t mind hearing it from someone else though.”

Eponin handed Tai’gee her empty tea cup with a lopsided grin. “Any time;” then on a hefty gust – “I’m bored.”

“You’re resting.”

“I’m bored,” she rolled her eyes. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“But your leg...”

She waved her off. “Exercise is good for it.”

Tai’gee would never know how much pain Eponin might have actually been in because as a warrior she’d never admit to a pain she was inflicting on herself. Ep had carved herself a very clever crutch and they headed towards the road and back in companionable silence.

When they returned, Kaija was still sound asleep under the wagon while all the camp was busy around her. The children were sitting in the people-cart taking lessons from Drexia. Tai’gee was pleased with this; even as they traveled they were doing their best to keep up their children’s education. Cheelopi mentioned using this dense terrain for tracking lessons in the afternoon since it was too close to do weapons training. Everyone was making an effort to keep up with elements of their daily lives, and that made Tai’gee very proud. Others were making use of the time to mend clothes, Dotra had started chronicling the last days of their Capitol and their exodus from Greece. The warriors worked over their weapons, leathers and armor.

The sky was an unhindered blue, a gentle breeze tickled the tops of the scrub brush they sheltered in, making a pleasant, constant hiss. It was an easy environment to take a nap in, so that was exactly what Tai’gee did. Scooting underneath the wagon where Kaija was sleeping, Tai’gee lied down and was quickly encircled by her wife’s strong arms. They both rested peacefully till early afternoon and continued on the next day.

III

“Do you recognize this area?”

“No.” Kaija leaned her head sideways, lifting her upper lip just a little – she was scenting the air, tasting it. “But it smells...familiar.”

“I think we’re close to Cresca,” Tai’gee said, and with a fair amount of flatness, too; it surprised her. Kaija was also surprised, but more so by where they were, and not so much at Tai’gee’s tone of voice.

“Are we here on purpose?”

“No,” said Tai’gee truthfully. When they had left Cresca close to three years earlier, Tai’gee wouldn’t have known how to get back. But as they left, despite all the chaos, she was trying to memorize as much about their route as she could... just in case. Some of those memories were making a reappearance – like the tree they had just passed, huge, and split right down the middle by one of Zeus’ thunderbolts; half of it sprawled along the ground, completely prostrate but green and growing while the other half stood straight, gray, dead. And a curiously dry pond bed, surrounded by smooth rocks and nothing else. Tai’gee thought perhaps the rainy season filled the barren bowl, and local people had brought smooth stones to sit on while they partook of the fresh water in whatever way they partook of it – but that was really just a guess. She hadn’t thought when Xena and Gabrielle had brought Kaija and herself from Cresca that her hometown was really that far from Amazon Land...but it appeared that it was quite far indeed. ‘Or maybe, I made a much more scenic route, and they brought us directly...’

Tai’gee thought of returning to Cresca if these landmarks proved to be those signposts to her hometown. Not very much of her missed much of Cresca, though. She had spent so little time at her Aunt and Uncle’s home by the time she left for the Amazons, that she didn’t even have much of a bond with her remaining family. On occasion she missed something her Aunt Mian would cook or surprised herself by saying something in the same way her Uncle Patrach would have said, but she had yet to feel any longing or homesickness for any part of her old life there. In contrast, she was often longing for her life back in the Amazon village; mourning for that life. Still, now that she was thinking about it, she didn’t think she would mind going into town to see what had become of the place after she’d left.

“We could stay on my father’s land,” Kaija suggested tightly.

When Tai’gee glanced at her, she could see tension lines around her eyes and lips. Then it occurred to her that while she might look back on Cresca with some offhanded curiosity, a trip there might be painful for Kaija. Tai’gee was a restless nobody-child there – Kaija had been hunted. Tai’gee could fit in amongst the fairly mundane townspeople if she wanted; Kaija had to be invisible for her own safety.

“Perhaps, but we should send an emissary first to make sure the land is still uninhabited.”

One of the large muscles in Kaija’s jaw twitched at that. ‘Hm...,’ Tai’gee mused. ‘I don’t know that she’s ever felt offended before.’ She signaled for Eponin to ride up and asked her to pick someone to act as envoy. Eponin in turn called Cheelopi and Mépol, two young, proud warriors that would do well carrying a message from the Queen. Tai’gee described her old house to them, told them who may be living there. “Tell them we would like to stop over on the Sphinx’ land and in turn bring business to the town. Do not let them know I am Queen. Understood?”

They both nodded and set off for her aunt and uncle’s house. Tai’gee thought they were close, but it turned out they were really close – Cheelopi and Mépol returned within an hour.

“Were they there?”

Cheelopi nodded and Mépol gave her their reply. “They said no one from Cresca lives on that land and we’re welcome to whatever we want of it as far as they’re concerned.”

“They spoke for the whole town?”

“The man did,” said Mépol. “He seemed to be in charge.”

‘Interesting. Well – it really wasn’t like Thalkus could possibly still run the village given the condition Kaija left him in.’ Even if the town had forgiven and absolved him of all he had done, Kaija’s enraged mutilation had not left Thalkus with much to work with. Patrach seemed a likely candidate for a mayor – he had always been outspoken at town meetings and events, took charge easily. Tai’gee smirked. ‘It was pretty much only me that made a habit of defying him.’

“The woman, Mian, asked if we had any news of a Tai’gee that was brought to us some years ago...” Cheelopi extended. “We said she is alive and well.”

Tai’gee nodded her approval and complemented them on the handling of their mission. As the two folded back in amongst their sisters, the young Queen gave instructions for everyone to follow Kaija and her. “This land is familiar to us. It’s free for our use, but it is dense and can be treacherous, even if it is uninhabited. You can get lost easily, so everyone needs to keep up.”

“You hear that girls!” Dotra called to her twins, who mumbled a begrudging “Yes Mama” and bowed their heads like scolded puppies.

In truth, Tai’gee had forgotten just how dense Cerebrius’ woods were. Once they left the main road into town, they found very quickly that they wouldn’t be able to take the wagons with them; the jagged rocks and rugged footpaths would have broken the axles or split a wheel in no time; besides that they were traveling trails much too narrow for anything the size of a wagon. They unloaded everything and made hasty litter drags for their supplies. Eponin found a suitable hiding place to store the wagons and after a half-day delay, they pushed into the sanctuary of Cerebrius’ former domain.

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As they stood studying the river charging between its banks, Tai’gee’s attention was likewise funneled and set awash in memories. She’d nearly drowned in this river. She could see herself hurriedly crossing slick stones in a long, heavy skirt she didn’t belong in, before foolhardily diving in head first to save an unseated Warrior Princess. There wasn’t much Tai’gee could do for her though – once her dress was soaked it pulled her down the same as she’d had rocks tied to her feet.

“What now?” Eponin hobbled over. The trek had to be difficult for her, lame as she was, and Tai’gee offered her a sympathetic look.

“I’d prefer we put the river between us and the village, but that’s out of the question at this point in the day. Let’s make camp here tonight and see what would be more suitable in the morning.” Tai’gee knew there was gratitude and great relief in Eponin’s eyes, but the older warrior was too proud to admit to it. That was alright – if Tai’gee was wrong about the difficulty on her, Eponin would be up all night trying to get a party started. She’d see how Ep was doing once her tent was pitched.

Construction of the new Amazon home base began in hurried, orderly chaos. They’d done it so many times by that point everyone had down to rote what needed to be done in neat mental lists. Eponin had taken it upon herself to oversee set-up and Tai’gee doubted anyone would have seriously begrudged her the position. There wasn’t much she could do otherwise after all, and Tai’gee thought allowing Eponin some supervisory powers let all of them ignore her otherwise grossly demoting injuries.

Eponin’s overseeing also allowed Tai’gee the freedom to peruse as she liked. Setting the Queen’s tent was regarded as an honor, and until it was up, Tai’gee had no job until she had a space to organize. So, she took the time to reorient herself with her former home. ‘Well, Kaija’s former home,’ she corrected. The woods were her wife’s realm – Tai’gee just strayed there, dallied, played, slept over on occasion. And thinking of her wife, ‘I wonder where she’s gone off to...’

It turned out Kaija wasn’t far away. She had moved upstream, all the way to the stone crossing steps that were currently the only way to the other side of the river. She stood alone, staring across the rolling waters, into the woods stretching from the far bank.

~They won’t dare cross it – it’s Cerebrius’ final border! ~

The last days of her life in Cresca came flooding back to Tai’gee, the last moments before they entered Amazon Land. Their small group, herself and Kaija, Xena and Gabrielle, had been only a half day from the Amazon borders before they made Kaija aware they’d taken her from Cresca. ‘We didn’t really ask her permission, didn’t set it before her for consideration, didn’t even give her the chance to say if she wanted to leave. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time, the only thing to do.’ Kaija’s father was dead, Kaija had all but killed Cresca’s high priest, everything was in complete disarray, and Kaija’s fragmented, sleep-deprived mind had shut down. As Tai’gee slowly approached her wife’s somber figure standing by the riverside, she wondered if Kaija regretted being taken away so uncompromisingly, without even the chance to revisit her father’s den for belongings or keepsakes; without the chance to say goodbye to her life. Tai’gee was suddenly regretful, sad, wary of her choice to return to Cresca rather than bypassing it.

Before Tai’gee was close enough to call out to Kaija and not shout, the younger woman tucked herself to the ground, drawing one knee up to her chest and sat on the other folded under her. Her arms wrapped around the shin of her raised knee, and she looked very small. A wave of worry lapped at Tai’gee, making her hurry to her wife. By the time she stood by Kaija, the fine spray from the small river rapids had dewed her wild hair, gathered heaviest on her eyelashes. She looked like a jewel, sparkling and distant.

Tai'gee knelt beside her, also facing the river, but sat back on her heels, her hands placed flat on her thighs. "Are you sad to be here, Kaija? Is this hurting you?"

Kaija blinked, an elongated and heavy movement, and one of the heavier mist-beads broke from her eyelash and dropped to her cheek, rolling in a dwindling streak until it exhausted itself by her upper lip. "The last time I was here," she said quietly, "my Pawpaw was alive. The last time I crossed this river he was on the other side. ...I...feel...if I cross it again and go to...home, he should be there. He should be there because that is where he always was. But I know he will not be. I do not know what that is – I want to see him and I cannot."

Tai'gee took a breath to explain that what she was describing was grief, but Kaija shook her head to stop her. "No – I do not want a name for it. It just is and is how I am."

The setting sun stole the glitter from the mist spraying across Kaija's face, leaving shadows to play on her chiseled planes instead. 'She could be a mystic,' Tai'gee thought. She wasn't sure where that thought came from; she'd never met or known a mystic to be able to make a comparison. But still, at that moment, like in so many others she had witnessed in Kaija's presence, there seemed to be something prophetic about her wife. Tai'gee reached her fingertips up to stroke the grain of Kaija's coarse hair pulled back over her ear, a gesture to make her real again.

"Would you like to go back and look around?" She sniffed as gathering droplets tickled the underside of her nose. "It might help."

"I want to sit. When I am done we will see." Kaija was neither flat nor cold nor angry – just matter of fact. That was a particular charm of her honesty, in Tai'gee's opinion – she made statements, whole, succinct, and usually without meaning beyond the words she spoke. It was a small irony that a behavior so stunted was what made Kaija seem so large.

"Alright," Tai'gee agreed as she rose. "If you need me I'll be at our tent, ok?"

Kaija nodded and remained as she was as the dark haired Queen walked away. Tai'gee took comfort that there was nothing there to harm her wife in her grief – no hunters to take advantage of her lowered guard, no one conniving her undoing. Kaija had space and opportunity to be open and thoughtful without harassment. For whatever reasons, Cerebrius' legacy was strong and lasting enough to keep the townsfolk of Cresca away from his claimed territory – that legacy was working as a gift to his daughter, perhaps not in the way he had intended, but none-the-less. For that, Tai'gee was grateful to him.

"She alright?" Ep leaned over her crutch and lifted her chin in Kaija's direction. One could barely see her now in the wood's twilight without already knowing she was there.

"I think she will be. How are things here?"

"Just about done. All your things are in your tent awaiting your dispersal," she grinned.

Tai'gee nodded but didn't say anything more, didn't make a move to do something else. Ep stood with her for a quiet moment then asked, "Are you going to go see your family?"

Tai'gee started to say her family was right there but checked that sentiment. It wasn't fair of her not to acknowledge the fact that her aunt and uncle had raised her. She wasn't abused or neglected, wasn't ignored – 'Ha! I couldn't be ignored, they were always yelling after me, looking for me.' Memory of her Aunt Mian's face pinched with worry flashed across her mind's eye. Her relatives had loved her in their own way, there really wasn't a reason for her to feel such animosity towards them. 'So why do I?' "Yeah, but not tonight. Probably tomorrow sometime."

"You don't seem real excited about it," Ep pointed out.

Tai'gee shrugged. "I don't know. I'm standing here asking myself why I feel so resentful of them when I don't really have a reason to."

Ep nodded and hunched further on her crutch, pressing the top into her chest. "I don't think I had any outside family. Bred, born and raised an Amazon." She scratched behind her ear. "Well, that's not possible then is it? Gotta have a father somewhere – or at some time at least. Anyway – what I'm saying is you've got a history here. Your story started here. It's got to feel pretty weird to bring a whole new story to face off with your old one."

The darkness gathering around them was beginning to be punctuated by several fires along the river bank. There would be no hunting tonight, unless Kaija did it, but Tai'gee didn't suspect Kaija was really in a mood for that. Dinner would be whatever they had and hopefully some peace. Tai'gee patted Ep's shoulder and walked on to her tent.

'My new story...' Eponin was right, Tai'gee wasn't a queen when she left Cresca – she was a wild, disobedient, covert assassin who –

'That's it!' Tai'gee picked up a bright, heavy blanket draped carefully over a trunk and hugged it to her. It was the blanket Kaija had given her when they were married. Several candles lit the rather dark hued interior of the Queen's tent, and Tai'gee thought until everything was unpacked it felt very uninviting. And uninviting was exactly the problem.

Her life now had nothing to do with her old one, there were no similarities, no interactions. That Tai'gee wasn't the same person was a blatant given – one look at her clothes alone was more than enough proof of that. Current casual attire found her surrounded by woman with bared breasts, if not all together topless, wearing leggings and the soft underskirts of a warrior's armor, laced with weaponry of some sort, and – above all else – being comfortable.

Not once did Tai'gee feel comfortable in Cresca: not in her clothes nor her town nor her own home. Her only solace and real happiness was in Kaija's arms, as true now as it was when they were children. Her aunt and uncle had never accepted that – well, they'd never known because she knew they wouldn't accept it. She couldn't tell them about the one thing that made her

happy in her whole life. Tai'gee was forced to hide her joy and then to defend it without their support. They would be shocked to know how many people she'd killed in an effort to protect her future wife. There were so many discussions and tirades of condemnation of Kaija and her father that Tai'gee couldn't really single one out – their pervasive attitude toward the woodland menaces was ill and hateful. Tai'gee had no hope of looking for support for Kaija in their home.

By extension, Tai'gee guessed she didn't feel much support for herself either. Sure they raised her, sent her to school, didn't force her to do chores, or anything really. She didn't know who she was or who they expected her to be. Her only requirement was to be home before dark and to obey any specific directives that came up – and even those she obeyed at her own discretion. She didn't know if they hoped for any particular life for her – 'maybe they just wanted me to get married and have my husband work everything out.'

She hugged the blanket in her arms, with a strong wash of desire to be hugging Kaija instead. She could hear the din of their camp beyond the heavy walls of her tent – pots clanking, open conversations, horses moved about... comfortable sounds. She smiled – 'yeah, I'll go see my aunt and uncle tomorrow, and come back to bathe in who I really am.' She continued smiling as she began unloading various crates and trunks – the first time she'd gotten the chance to do so in deference to a longer settling rather than a night or two camp.

Kaija came in some time later that night, much later. Tai'gee was already sleeping, the camp was very quiet, their tent very dark. She could hear her wife undressing, and moved to make room for her in the sleeping skins – which she immediately negated once Kaija was tucked in, by entangling herself around her. Kaija's body felt so good to Tai'gee. She made a brief comparison to her ex-lover Amana. Amana was much taller than Kaija, slightly taller than Tai'gee, and had a tendency toward wrapping Tai'gee up when they'd lie together; which Tai'gee didn't really like. Amana's body was a fairly hard flatness: she had a strong body but no real curves or definition, no... punctuation. Kaija, on the other hand, was one exclamation mark after another. Corded muscle ran the length of her, smooth and curving, and when relaxed as she lay down to sleep, Kaija was a nest of sinew, warm and strong. Kaija and Tai'gee tended to weave themselves together overnight and somehow would usually both be lying on their stomachs with an arm stretched out to the other in some way by morning. It was an absurd arrangement, unyielding towards any rapid position of protection – but given Kaija's sensitive awareness, Tai'gee'd never really been concerned that she wouldn't be awake before trouble got to them.

“Ok?” Tai'gee mumbled sleepily.

Kaija made some general sound of agreement. “You will go to see your family tomorrow?” Her voice, though quiet, was clear, indicating she had yet to go to sleep.

“Mm. Owe it to them. S'plain things.” Tai'gee snuggled tighter, languishing in her drowsy happiness.

“Alone?”

“S’better for first visit. Haven’t talked to them since we left.”

Kaija gave a narrow nod and then was still. She wasn’t sleepy yet, Tai’gee could feel it in her body. Her own begged to differ – or rather, would have begged if it had the energy. She hoped Kaija hadn’t tried to continue talking to her because she fell back to sleep barely a moment later.

IV

Tai’gee had to admit, she enjoyed the double take from her aunt. The older woman had emerged from the low door to the house hearing a rider approach. Even through the shadow Tai’gee could see her aunt’s eyes squint in question and then suddenly widen in recognition.

“Tai’gee?”

Tai’gee smiled as she dismounted and held it firm as she trailed her horse behind her the rest of the way to her former caretaker.

Mian leaned forward as she took tentative steps toward her niece, almost to the point of bowing. There were wrinkles furrowed in confusion or disbelief that Tai’gee didn’t remember from her last image of her aunt. Her mouth moved in questions her voice never asked, her hands moved at her side in motions her arms never made. By the time she was close enough to reach out and touch Tai’gee she was standing upright again, and Tai’gee realized she towered over her aunt now – Kaija probably would too. Mian’s plain dress hung limply off a frame that seemed thinner, slight towards frail. Her hair was a dull gray, unchanged from Tai’gee’s memory other than to trail a few more wisps to the wind. But her eyes hadn’t changed in the slightest – they remained clear and full of expression, and the sparkle in them let Tai’gee know her aunt’s real joy to see her. Tai’gee smiled in earnest.

“Hello Auntie.”

“Oh my Tai’gee!” Mian started to reach for her niece with one hand, the other going to her mouth to stifle an emotional sob, but the elder held herself back, fingers curling in restraining hesitation just inches from Tai’gee’s arm. The hand that had gone to bar her mouth dropped instead to Mian’s chest as if to help her body hold onto both her breath and heart from escape. “Is it... can I...”

Tai’gee opened her arms, inviting her aunt to her and the thinness she saw was confirmed by the feel of bone through unfilled fabric.

“You’ve grown so.” Mian stepped back to look Tai’gee over, still holding onto Tai’gee’s arms with cold, trembling hands. “Look at you. My girl. Oh...” she finished on a weak breath. “I’m so –” she paused in breathlessness, replacing a hand to her chest. “I’m so happy to see you – I’ve missed you. I’ve worried.”

Tai’gee motioned to some hay bailed against the house and led the excited woman to sit in the sun. “I’m sorry Auntie. I should have sent word.”

“You look – the ones that came yesterday said you were well. I tell you I wanted so much to follow them, find you for myself. Why didn’t you come with them?” Her trembling voice settled as she spoke, but Mian’s hands, clasped firmly around Tai’gee’s obliging left, remained cold and shaking.

“There were things I needed to take care of in setting up our camp first,” Tai’gee answered in apology.

Mian smiled. “Oh? Some responsibility for you? So these Amazons have gotten you to settle yourself some,” she said with a mischievous grin. “Oh my girl.” She released Tai’gee’s hand to hold her face instead, and though they chilled Tai’gee’s cheeks, she let them stay there freely.

“Where’s Uncle Patrach?”

“Oh – your uncle went to town this morning to let them know your Amazons are here. He should be back any moment.” Her eyes twinkled. “He’s Governor now – has been ever since...” Mian lowered her eyes sadly. “Well, you must know your Uncle Thalkus died. He... he didn’t survive what... what happened.”

“No... I didn’t think he would.”

Thin hands reached out to Tai’gee in earnest, but didn’t touch her. “But you mustn’t bring that up with your uncle, Dear, it all still upsets him. He-”

“Mian! I’m home!”

There was nervousness in the loud call from Tai’gee’s uncle, but the deep bark was the same she remembered. ‘Probably a strange horse out front of his quiet house making him tight.’ Mian called out to him to let him know where they were and together Tai’gee and her aunt stepped around the corner of the house.

Tai’gee surprised herself – she was as tall as her uncle and just as broad. They stared at each other wide-eyed for several moments, measuring strength of will, noting changes, differences, assessing who they had become.

“Hello Uncle,” Tai’gee extended.

“Well. You certainly look like an Amazon,” he said with half a smile.

‘And you look like... a man.’ Ephiny and Solari’s lessons rushed forward, lining up for roll call. Tai’gee was glad to see the Roman influence hadn’t extended to her former home in so far as encouraging the shaving of beards and cutting of hair to near baldness. Her uncle sported a thick, patriarchal beard, trimmed neatly. He chose to forgo a return greeting in favor of an attempted condescending statement. He pulled his head back, lifting his chin slightly higher in an effort to regain some advantage in height. *“Of course all men aren’t despots,” Ephiny*

explained, “but when you come across one with all these traits, be aware that he’ll be insulted by your womanhood. He’ll think you want to match him point for point on the things he feels are rightfully his by virtue of his genitalia-”

“-And that doesn’t just mean women,” Soalri elaborated.

“Right. Strength, endurance, accuracy: a man like this will assume he is better at everything, smarter at everything than you. You can’t be goaded into trying to prove him wrong or change his mind.”

“But...but we’re Amazons. Proving ourselves beyond the roles of men is a part of who we are,” Tai’gee insisted.

Ephiny accepted that and countered with frankness. “Negating a man like this will only bring you trouble. Strength of judgment is our fortitude beyond anything else.”

“So you’re saying what? I should play the game just to keep from making waves?” Tai’gee could feel herself bristling indignantly at the thought.

“Not at all,” Solari interjected. Her smirk was truly impish. “We have tricks, too.”

Tai’gee offered her arm in greeting – a warrior’s greeting to an equal. He looked at her another moment then at her arm. “Xena teach you that?” he asked flatly before grasping her forearm tightly.

“No one had to teach me how to say hello. It’s something you learn with a good upbringing,” Tai’gee returned as flatly.

Patrach squeezed a little tighter before releasing her then a hesitant smile parted thick lips and slightly rotting teeth peeked out. “You’ve got your father’s mind,” he said.

Mian stepped up, waving an arm towards the dark doorway. “I’ve got cool water and figs inside. Some cheese?”

“Come on,” Patrach huffed. “We can talk about this caravan of yours.” He moved into the house without another word, or waiting for an acceptance on Tai’gee’s part, and her aunt followed without a second thought that her niece might not come along. Tai’gee considered it... ‘*Strength of judgment...*’ Tai’gee had a purpose there, and it wasn’t bringing her haughty uncle down some pegs.

It wasn’t that dark inside, just dimmer than outside. Clean swept, orderly, just the same as when Tai’gee’d last been there. The table was new; the wood was still quite bright against the aged and worn chairs. Patrach pulled back one of those chairs and seated himself, waiting for Mian to serve him whatever she had. Happily, quietly, the elder woman arranged figs on a wooden plate and brought a clay pitcher of water to the table, along with some pieces of flat bread and cheese. “I have a goat stew simmering, but it’s not ready yet. If you stay for dinner-”

“Actually that’s a good idea. This Queen of yours – you should bring her over to discuss this whole moving in thing.”

Tai’gee was very conscious of the tightness of her braids, pulling her facial skin taut and making any expression she might make very obvious. She chose not to wear her circlet, or the silver belt and sash that marked her position – even if she had, without her sisters there for comparison, her aunt and uncle wouldn’t have known what the regalia meant. Tai’gee kept her face impassive. “Our messengers gave the impression the Sphinx’ land was free for our use. Is that not the case?”

Water dribbled down Patrach’s beard as he pulled his cup away after draining half its contents. “I just want to be sure these people will be bringing enough business to make their stay worth our while.”

“You’ll get more business than if we weren’t here at all,” Tai’gee said carefully. “Those woods are deserted.”

“They’re cursed,” Patrach spat.

“Oh Patrach...”

He gave Mian’s negating sigh a stern look, discouraging any further commentary from her. “Cursed, I said. That beast defiled them, left some spell over it. No one who gets into those woods can hunt anything in them, and more often than not those that make it back come back with something... wrong in them.” He wiped his face down past his heavy beard with a rather elegant and manicured hand. “But never mind that for now. Tell your Queen to come here. We should have a meeting – all of us, so we can lay ground rules.”

Tai’gee leaned her head to the side in question. Her uncle had never proclaimed any particular opinion regarding Amazons that she remembered. His current demeanor suggested disapproval. She hated to think him a misogynist but Tai’gee was beginning to wonder.

“So... Tai’gee, how is your life there, with the Amazons?” asked Mian. “You look so... so different. Is it what you want?” Her voice and tone were gentle, concerned, but Tai’gee could hear a thread of doubt that she could possibly be truly happy.

For the first time since her uncle had arrived, Tai’gee smiled. “It is everything I want.”

“Then why are you here? I mean... I don’t know where Amazon Land is but for your company to need an entire wood you must be a huge group. You’re not...” She looked nervously at Patrach who busied himself with cutting some cheese. “You’re not going to war or something are you?”

That brought a frown and a heavy sigh. “We’ve been to war, Auntie.” Emotion, emotional fatigue made her chest heavy. “We’ve been through several wars.”

“My child!” Mian gasped.

Patrach stopped chewing his dry bread to look at Tai’gee interestedly. “With who?” he asked, pumping crumbs out like he’d sneezed.

“Romans mostly.”

“Romans?” Patrach and Mian looked at each other, surprised. Patrach swallowed his mouthful whole. “Greece has fought the Romans back for years. They have no hold here.”

Tai’gee shook her head. “They have a firm hold, actually. The city-states are giving way, usually without a single voice of protest. They – the Romans – make attractive offers for allegiance.”

“Athens would never submit to Roman rule – they aren’t a democracy.” His face was proud and defiant, adamancy displayed as he rapped the table shortly.

Tai’gee smiled sadly. “Athens was the first to submit. That’s how the Romans have gotten so far so quickly. There’s little else to stand in their way.”

“I don’t believe it,” the man concluded, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned back in his chair.

“If that’s true,” Mian continued, “then is that – did you lose your war? Are you fleeing? Is that why you’re here?”

Tai’gee regarded her aunt thoughtfully. She was quick. Tai’gee pondered an image of her traveling with them – she might like being an Amazon. “Some of us stayed behind to make out what they could on the remainder of our land. Our former Queen, Gabrielle, extended a peace treaty to Rome and they have superficially backed off for the time being. I am leading the rest of us to our northernmost region in search of a new home.”

“You’re leading them?” Patrach’s bushy eyebrows crawled up to his thick hairline like two caterpillars with burning feet. Mian’s brow contracted with lack of understanding.

“Yes,” Tai’gee said. “I am Queen.”

“You?” It was as much exclamation as question, and Tai’gee was glad her uncle wasn’t eating or drinking anything at the time or he’d have choked. He wasn’t sure if it was all a joke, and therefore wasn’t sure if he should be laughing. “And how’d you manage that? You’re not even an Amazon.”

There it was – all the proof of her suspicions, her judgments about the content of her upbringing. ‘He can’t accept who I am – he won’t accept it.’ She thought a moment more and felt something

shift inside herself, between her heart and brain. ‘The pity for him.’ ‘I am an Amazon, and I am Artemis’ Chosen,” she replied distinctly.

“Queen? What – what does that mean?” Mian’s eyes were wide with fear. “Are you fighting, Tai’gee, in these wars?”

The narrow wooden chair was uncomfortable and Tai’gee shifted in it to find a measure of relief. “I have,” she admitted. “I’ve been in several battles. Amazon Queens are as much warrior as religious leader, politician and diplomat.”

Tai’gee’s aunt’s eyes glowed with frightened tears, and a tender but hard worked hand lifted to cover her mouth as she absorbed this news – sad news to her. She swallowed thickly and forced herself to speak. “And – as Artemis’ Chosen – does she offer you special protection?”

“How much protection can she be offering if they’ve gotten booted off god-gifted land,” Patrach inserted contemptuously. “By Romans,” he added. A deep, derisive breath lifted his chest and he folded his arms over it again. “Well... I guess this means you won’t be looking for a husband – getting married any time soon.”

“I am married.”

If they were surprised before, they were shocked now. Mian had started to push herself from the table to get more bread and water, but now stood hovering only inches above her seat before sinking back into it. “Married to who? When?”

“A couple years now. Her name is Kaija.”

“Her?” ‘My poor aunt...’

But Tai’gee watched her uncle closely. Familiarity, recognition teetered at the very edge of his awareness. He knew he should know that name...

“We are staying on her father’s land, currently. It’s not just my homecoming.”

Her uncle’s face froze. Tai’gee continued to look at him, solidly, unflinchingly in the eyes. She would not deny or sugarcoat the one thing in her life most important to her eternal being. She didn’t care if he accepted it or not, but she did think he had a right to know – here and now – not when they came into town, his surprise open for public display.

“How dare you?” His lips were parted, but they played no part in forming the words – they came out on a deeply disgusted breath from far within his barreled chest. “After what she’s done – how dare you bring her here? How dare you call yourself married to her?”

“I don’t seek your approval or blessing Uncle. I love Kaija – have since we were children –”

“Be quiet,” he hissed. Skin peeking from underneath his whiskers pinked then reddened in his building rage.

Curiously, Tai’gee wasn’t particularly perturbed. While she did come armed, she was sure her uncle underestimated her defensive skills as much as he underestimated every other development of her life. “I wanted you to know this now, so you will not find out when she accompanies me as my Consort.”

“She is not welcome here. If you bring her here we will – I’ll kill her for what she did to Thalkus!” He stormed from the table, his chair flew back from him, and he banged the tabletop hard with the flat of his fist.

Mian also moved back from the table, more from trepidation at the escalating situation rather than agreement with her husband’s sentiments.

Tai’gee remained seated and casual. Discreetly she moved her feet into a position that would allow her a quick defensive posture and leveled a firm gaze on her enraged relative. “I see you’ve forgiven or ignored Thalkus’ atrocities, but I will make you aware that Kaija is royalty among our people; my Consort and Champion. If you make any advance upon her, you will get the full retaliation of the entire Amazon Nation.” She paused, then, “If Kaija gives them the chance to retaliate.”

“That filthy beast –”

“Yes Thalkus was and he deserved everything he got. I hope more’s the torture for him in Hades for what he’s done –”

“Tai’gee!”

“– But that doesn’t change who Kaija is, or who I am, or what we will do if you stoop to some misguided vengeance.” Tai’gee’s voice dropped several levels as her pride and anger rose. “I guarantee you, Uncle, you don’t want to go there. Kaija isn’t the same person either – if she feels you’re trying to harm her or me or any of us, she will terminate your threat.”

Standoff. Tension. The amount of energy passing between them could have fired one of Hephaestus’ kilns.

Nervously Mian stepped back in, placing newly shaking hands on the back of her abandoned chair. “There’s no need for such challenges, Tai’gee. Surely... surely you can understand your uncle’s feelings – Thalkus was his brother.”

“And he killed Kaija’s father. He murdered her mother. He kidnapped twelve innocent children and gave them to Aries. He robbed this town of a fortune and your sympathy is with *him*?” Tai’gee’s open palm slapped the table and she, too, rose agitatedly from her chair.

“This is the repayment you give your family?” Patrach heaved. “This dishonor, disrespect? You impudent –”

Tai’gee’s hand cut the air to silence. “If you choose the road Thalkus and my father chose your end probably won’t be much different from theirs – and there’s nothing to respect in that.” Tai’gee rested her hand on the hilt of her long knife, and stared at her uncle until he looked away. She shifted her gaze to her tearful aunt and felt true sympathy and respect for her. “I’m sorry this reunion has gone this way,” she said to her quietly. “I am glad to see you though.”

Mian’s mouth opened and closed a couple times in an effort to say something but either she couldn’t think of anything or didn’t want to say something that would further fuel her husband’s anger.

Tai’gee turned back to him, who still had his bearded face turned away from her. “If you still want a town meeting, we can come tomorrow. Two fingers before noon.”

She watched his eyes, dark as her own, shift about, his beard twitched as he ground his teeth. “Just leave,” he said finally. Tai’gee obliged without significant hesitation.

~

Tai’gee took her time riding back to camp. The air was clear, the sun shone brightly. The field stretching behind her relatives’ house was exactly the same as it was during every other late summer season she’d spent there. The grasses were browning but still thigh high. Their dryness made a bristling rustle as either her horse or the wind made them move. Above them the wind pushed thick, puffy clouds with as much laze as the grasses below. Tai’gee directed her big mare across the field with loose reins, letting her lip at the grasses as they moved. She’d never ridden across this space – walked, run, crawled, skipped. High above the grasses like she was felt strange... further testament of her maturation from the poor little country girl she had been. She paused before entering the wood and looked back at her former home. It looked... well, smaller than it used to – but it looked small to her then, too.

‘Damn... sure hate to miss her goat stew.’ With a shake of her head, Tai’gee pulled her horse’s head and they walked into the cool shadows.

After Tai’gee met Kaija, she spent some part of almost every single day in those woods. She’d spend hours looking for her if Kaija didn’t know her friend was coming, hours playing with her if she did. They had so many secret trails Tai’gee could forget sixty percent of them and still cut across the forest and not once bisect one of the trails the other villagers may have used. Tai’gee would help her practice the moves Kaija’s father taught her and brushed her wild hair; in return, Kaija would show Tai’gee how to track every animal she could run across in the trees. Of course Kaija was much better than Tai’gee ever could be, with her super sensitive nose and ears and eyes, but she taught her what she could.

It turned out Kaija's lessons served Tai'gee best to find other humans. She pulled her mare to a stop and looked around. The horse tugged back, agitated, but stayed put, shifting her weight impatiently.

'I watched a man die here in this small space – the first man I ever killed.' She'd poisoned him. For weeks Tai'gee had tested a concoction she made from the extract of leaves from the red flower bush, disguised as rose-hip tea in the summer and an apple tea in winter. It took her months to work out the strength of the potion. Sadly, many animals were committed to her studies, but she would have said it was worth it. She'd still say it. When the well-decorated bounty hunter stopped for directions, a moment of batted eyelashes and a hastily drunk tea was the last cordial interaction he would get in this life. He was sick by the time he reached the forest, staggering a few steps in, and collapsed one graceless stumble after that. She wasn't sorry... just watched with studious detachment. She needed to know if it was going to work and how – he was alone, others may not be. Poison was Tai'gee's usual method, the least messy; the villagers attributed those deaths as the target of the curse of Cerebrius.

Traps were Tai'gee's next line of defense if poisoning didn't present feasibility – and for those she caught, she let them rot. Either they'd die of exposure or Cerebrius would find them – either way they'd be no more threat to Kaija. Eventually Tai'gee got weaponry, though she rarely engaged someone directly. Things she could throw were her greatest tool, and in combination with the stalking and hiding skills Kaija helped her to develop, those types of weapons were the most practical. Later she was given a bow, and Tai'gee knew her eyes must have gleamed with the true joy of an assassin with a new toy. She didn't recognize Aries as her benefactor – she could only think 'Now I can just sit and pick them off like fish in a barrel!' "Perverse," she now muttered to herself, but she was a girl on a mission and she justified it as one murderous intent for another.

Her mare thrust her head forward sharply wanting to move on – Tai'gee didn't want to go yet, however. It was sad to her, in a way, that being at her aunt and uncle's home again felt out of place, but being in the woods she was comfortable. Understandable, but sad... a happy childhood should include a happy family and happy homecomings.

Still, she let the horse move them on. By the time Tai'gee's wandering way returned her to her newest camp she was sufficiently reconnected with who she had become and what was her focus. Several of her Amazons bowed as she moved through the camp, there were several murmured respects, dipped heads, and she returned their greetings with a light smile.

"I see you've made yourselves at home for the most part," Tai'gee acknowledged with a satisfied look around. Several fire rings had been erected, dispersed neatly amongst the tents. Lean-to's with efficient grass mat coverings sheltered their stores. Some hasty tables and low benches were set up around the largest fire ring and would serve as the community center. Tai'gee nodded approvingly and smiled at them again, complimenting their good work.

Seema and Meica pushed through the loosely gathering crowd. "Queen Tai'gee," they called together. "We like it here. Can we just stay?"

“We’ll see girls,” Dotra said behind them. “Like I told you.”

It was a nice thought, and one Tai’gee had considered herself – not only was the uninhabited land convenient, but also still in Greece, and recognizably owned by her wife... But even considering how large Cerebrius’ territory was, Tai’gee didn’t think it would have been enough to support the size of their caravan for an openly extended amount of time. Maybe a winter camp at most, but more than that? The Romans were still pushing across Greece... Plus there would be the sour feelings from their new neighbors, if Patrach made good on his attitude of unwelcome. Which reminded her: “I need half of you to come with me. I need to show you the boundaries of our new home.”

~

“He must have been huge...” Beckries ran suddenly small fingers over the time-roughened gashes made by Cerebrius in an old, fat pine. Four distinct streaks marred the bark – not going deep enough to open the tree to disease, but gouging to the point that would prevent an erasing re-growth.

Others gathered to study the markings. What they imagined Cerebrius looked like Tai’gee would never know, but their musings scared them into making involuntary shivers. ‘Can’t blame them – the real thing was pretty scary, too.’

“These marked trees are in eyesight of each other – you can see the next one over there –” Tai’gee pointed with a lift of her chin.

“If we’re going to claim this as Amazon territory, shouldn’t we put up some of our totems?” That came from Mépol, and the small group of Yearies around her nodded in agreement. “Maybe a shrine to Artemis,” she added, encouraged by their support.

Tai’gee nodded. “But nothing permanent. If and when we leave, we’ll need to take any remnants of ourselves with us.”

The closest worn trail was on the villager’s side of Cerebrius’ markings and fifty feet off. Those willing to enter the woods clearly only came up as far they could see the signs and no farther – or if they did, it wasn’t with any regularity. Most of Tai’gee’s group was walking, only a few, like Eponin, were on horseback, and they made a significant tramping line that the next group would have an easy time following.

“Is it true sphinxes can breathe fire?” asked Reena as they turned to go back to the river. She was one of the teenagers.

“I heard they can make a person’s brain explode with their riddles,” Dove confided. She was another of their teenagers, young, impressionable and – to Sheika’s immense chagrin – totally submerged in hero worship over the master archer. “And they –”

“That’s enough.” Sheika stopped the youngster’s fantasy-spinning with a heavy hand on the girl’s shoulder. ‘Heh – careful Sheika, she looks like she might melt.’ “That’s the Lioness’ father you’re spouting off about.”

Prudently, the girl clacked her mouth shut, but Tai’gee noticed she sidled a little closer to her idol.

“Did you ever see him?” Rickel looked up at Tai’gee briefly.

‘Not if I could avoid him,’ she thought. “Not often.”

“But you’ve seen him – what did he look like? What was he like? Did you like him? Was he – ow!” Sheika’s grip on Dove’s shoulder had tightened to a clamp.

There were going to be questions – they were in Kaija’s homeland. But talking about Cerebrius made Tai’gee uncomfortable, not only because he was Kaija’s father, but because her relationship with him was a strained tension at best. The group was quiet, wanting to ask the same questions and more.

“He was... no one to be trifled with,” Tai’gee finally said.

“Come on Tai’gee,” pushed Beckries, “you gotta give us something!”

“I do not,” said Tai’gee with authority and watched the warrior’s cheeks pink with embarrassment. The others were silent but it was a weighted silence. Tai’gee sighed. “Cerebrius...” What could she say? ‘He killed my father with the same ease I’d kill an ant.’ “Cerebrius was a creature of the gods, and he was Kaija’s father – for all of the implications those carry.”

Eponin leaned over her saddle and whispered to Tai’gee. “You sure he wasn’t your father, oh Cryptic Queen?”

“Maybe I’ve learned a few things.”

“Apparently.”

The woods fell away from them as they came back to the riverbank. It was quiet at the camp with half its occupants away. The coarse river sand shifted and crunched under their boots and hooves, punctuated by the deep thump of a rock being kicked from hiding. Tai’gee noticed Seti crouching riverside tossing pebbles into the water, and she looked up with eagerness, rose and jogged over to meet them.

“My Queen – there’s a woman here looking for you.” She pointed to the central fire ring where a drably dressed form sat, back to them. “She said she’s your aunt.”

‘Color me surprised.’ Swinging down from her mount, Tai’gee handed the reins off to Beckries and left the rest of the group to meander as they would.

Mian turned and stood from her bench at the sound of her approach. “It’s really true – you’re a Queen... They looked so angry when I just called you ‘Tai’gee’.” The smaller woman’s face held a look of slowly rising belief and wonder at how to renegotiate their relationship.

“How did you find us?”

“You weren’t the only one to play in these woods as a child, you know.” A defiant and mischievous glint lit the elder’s eyes. “Before I was grown and married I used to spend quite a bit of time in the forest.” After a thoughtfully reminiscent pause, her eyes lowered. “Tai’gee... some of the things you said to your uncle were ... very upsetting.”

Tai’gee could feel her face harden. “I’m sorry Auntie, but I meant what I said. We will not suffer attack on any of our citizens.”

“What? No – not that. Of course you’d protect your own.” The small woman wrung her hands together nervously. Tai’gee lifted her head indicating they could walk as they talked. “No... I meant what you said about Nadiah; that Thalkus killed her. I... I just didn’t know that.”

They followed the treeline upriver, watched sunning lizards scurry to darkness as the vibration from their footsteps disturbed them. “Cerebrius said he bashed her head with a rock as she lay recovering from childbirth,” Tai’gee elaborated frankly.

Mian visibly paled and for a moment Tai’gee thought she might throw up. But she took some steadying breaths. “Gods. I had no idea. We weren’t friends really – we knew each other and were... you know, good acquaintances. When she disappeared with the Sphinx I just assumed she didn’t want to face us again – I didn’t realize sh- ... she was dead. Thalkus never said – well, of course he wouldn’t if he had – but still, it never occurred to me she might be...” Mian looked skyward and took another breath. Her pale, faded dress edged closely to threadbare and hid nothing about her body or expressions. Her back was beginning to bow at the base of her neck and Tai’gee wondered if it was giving her trouble. Mian turned clear eyes to her. “Patrach doesn’t speak for the entire town as far as these woods and... and other things go.”

Tai’gee raised an eyebrow at her and felt a little like Xena would look when she did the same thing.

“He’s got a blind spot where his brothers are concerned. When Thalkus and your father went off to become mercenaries he was the only one cheering them on. Everyone else thought it was a shame. But I guess that’s what happens when you’re the youngest and can’t do everything your older brothers can do.” Her eyes became apologetic. “I wasn’t trying to defend Thalkus back there – just let you know where your uncle was coming from.”

Tai'gee nodded. "I'd like to trust that my family wouldn't succumb to its feelings of bitterness, but the men have a history of abuse towards my wife's family. I'm not going to take the chance and give him the benefit of the doubt."

"You'd be a fool to do otherwise," she agreed. "He's a passionate man, not necessarily reasonable." She pulled them up and peeked at Tai'gee with something of shyness. "This – you know this is the first time I've ever *talked* with you Tai'gee. I feel like – seeing you now, like this, I don't know that I've ever known you."

Tai'gee didn't know how to respond to that. Her first reaction was a shy guilt; she didn't want to be unknown to her aunt, or feel like she should be unknown to her. Her aunt had raised her after all. 'But... no, she hadn't.' If Tai'gee thought about it, Mian was no more involved in raising her than her uncle had been. They fed her. Gave her clothes. Provided a roof and bed. But that was all. It was a very technical arrangement – Tai'gee found no guidance from her aunt and uncle, no cultivation, no real familial interaction or direction. Kaija had raised her. Maybe they had raised themselves. Tai'gee knew as much about her aunt as her aunt knew of her, which, in sum, was very little. Tai'gee nodded after mulling these thoughts. "Then we'll have to meet each other first as women."

Mian nodded as well, studying the aged face of her niece – yes, she was a woman now, wholly and indeed. A very powerful woman, with or without her Amazons. 'I think that was there in her childhood,' the elder thought. 'Maybe that's what all that wildness was.' She felt some remorse and regret – she'd missed nurturing the child, missed out on it; there was no chance of that now, they were both too old. But maybe she could get to know her, and about her; starting with, "Could... could I meet her? Nadiah's daughter?"

Warning bells, loud and brazen, rang in Tai'gee's head. A wisp of her hair blew astray from her headband, but she ignored it to study her aunt instead. "Why?"

"Well, several reasons really. I didn't know you two were so close growing up. I'd like to know who my niece spent all her time with, who she's chosen to marry. I'd like to know if she looks like her mother." Again she lowered her eyes. "Mostly... I just... I want to apologize... I'm sorry for being a part of the group that made her mother feel like she could only retreat into the woods rather than bring her love to the town. I feel... well... responsible... in a way I guess for everything that's happened to them. No woman should have to bear her child without another woman to help her."

Tai'gee studied her longer, scrutinized her really. She remembered a woman coming to retrieve her child from Kaija's arms, smacking her weakened friend hard across the cheek. Tai'gee wasn't sure her aunt wouldn't pull the same stunt. Somewhere above them a raven clacked and cawed and all the woods grew silent. She took a moment more before deciding it wasn't up to her to decide the strength of her wife for challenge. And Kaija had just accepted it.

Tai'gee lifted her hand and raised her voice. "This is my Aunt Mian, Kaija."

There was a neat scrambling in the branches overhead where the ‘raven’ had been, a few dislodged leaves, and then her wife – in comfortable light leathers – dropped from the canopy to perch on the biggest bough close to them.

“Oh!” Mian gasped. “I didn’t know you were there.”

Kaija’s eyes were wide in the shadow, her lips pulled tight over the canines most feared more than anything. She took her time studying Tai’gee’s relative before swinging one-armed around the tree trunk to land cleanly by Tai’gee’s side. Tai’gee smirked. “Are you quite done showing off?”

Though her face was expressionless, Kaija’s eyes smiled at her wife, and she gave her a bare wink that made Tai’gee’s heart skip. Feeling a blush coming, Tai’gee turned back to their guest. “Aunt Mian, Kaija.”

Sometimes I wished I could meet Kaija for the first time. I wanted to know the awe and shock and complete rapture she wove over her new acquaintances; the breathlessness, the lack of composure, the thrill and trepidation and dumbfoundedness must truly be what people called magic.

Mian’s enchantment lasted a little longer than most, but once she realized she was staring she had the grace to drop her eyes. Tai’gee decided to give her a moment to regain her composure. “How long have you been up there?”

“I saw you coming and stayed put.”

“You don’t look anything like your mother,” Mian blurted and her tone suggested a real disappointment. Kaija just looked at her silently. Her pupils had slimmed considerably in the brighter light, leaving much more of her golden irises to stare into.

“I did not know her. I remember you. You came to the woodline to look in the woods.”

That got a startled look from both the elder woman and the dark haired Queen. When Tai’gee looked back at Mian, she saw a gentleness to its shock. “That’s right. When Tai’gee was late I would.”

“Not always,” Kaija replied with a steady gaze.

Tai’gee’s aunt’s eyes became glassy. She thought she might wait out her new acquaintance’s suggestion, make her spell it out so she could be sure if Kaija and she were thinking of the same thing. But this wasn’t a creature she could wait out. Golden eyes studied her with honest ease, a lack of judgment that accompanied The Truth. Her voice hoarsened around a growing lump in her throat. “You saw me? You knew?”

“Uh – knew what?” Tai’gee interjected.

Mian's face twisted into disbelief – ‘no, wait... that's shame’ – before she was able to tear her eyes from Tai'gee's straight-backed spouse. “In the evenings I...” Her eyes became soulful. “We couldn't have children. Before you came to us Tai'gee, there was nothing I wanted more – and even after... well you weren't *mine*. All these years I've never gotten pregnant, never even a miscarriage so I could have the hope of a child. Sometimes I would get so desperate I would just come up to the edge of the woods and throw out my prayers.” She blinked at Kaija, eyes still tearful but nothing yet spilling over. “When the rumors started of Nadiah getting pregnant with the Sphinx, when I saw her belly full of child that last time she came to town... I prayed more...” Her whole head dropped and she covered her face. “I wanted a child. I was so jealous she could mate with all things a sphinx and have children but I – I who married a normal man, lived a normal life – I had nothing! I was angry, and envious, and... and I cursed her.” Mian's face reddened with the heat of shame, hot tears finally spilled over. “I cursed your mother for being blessed with my biggest wish. Even years after, when no word came from the woods of how the child fared, if the child fared at all, I would go to the wood's edge, and hope... I hoped it had died. I saw that as the only justice to soothe my longing.” She looked back to Kaija who just watched and listened. “You heard me and said nothing, did nothing. Why didn't you say something?”

“Such as?”

Mian blinked again. She rubbed the palms of her hands along the length of her dress to dry them. “Well... I don't know exactly. You could have let me know you were there. I wouldn't have said some of the things I did.”

~There are no secrets here.~

“And what release would you have had?” Kaija's question, true to form, was plain – Tai'gee admired the lack of antagonism and judgment. She didn't think she would have been so accepting – she knew she wouldn't. Even now, finding out this new part of her aunt made her mad; to find out that she, like her uncles, and father and every other towns person and hunter, had wished Kaija ill. ‘What if I had heard her? As hot-headed as I was?...’

“I said some awful things, and I'm sorry I said them. I regret them the more if they had anything to do with the harder outcomes of your life.”

Kaija's strong gaze continued to connect with Mian's clear eyes, seemed to hold her there, to hold her up, keep the elder woman standing under the weight of her guilt. ‘Holding me up – me who cursed her because she was what I wanted for myself.’

Kaija blinked and was done.

Mian and Tai'gee stood still in something of an awkward silence, which the elder broke at length. “Well... I should be getting back. But I wanted you to know – both of you to know – we want you in our town. We want you to come tomorrow and meet with us so we can welcome you.”

“What about Uncle Patrach?”

“Like I said before, your Uncle doesn’t speak for everyone on all things. The word from the town is that they are expecting your visit – we’re planning a celebration tomorrow night after all your talks are done.” She winked at Tai’gee. “If you come by the house first I’ll have some stew saved for you.”

She left them standing there, Tai’gee in a fair stupor. “Well that was strange.” She replayed their conversation in her mind before looking at her quiet wife. “She was asking you for forgiveness.”

“I do not know this. What is forgiveness?”

Tai’gee took a deep breath. ‘Wouldn’t now be a great time for Gabrielle to jump up? Advanced Emotion, Seminar I.’ “It’s kind of like accepting someone’s apology. She felt she wronged you, and she is sorry for it. But forgiveness is deeper...she wants to know that you don’t carry an anger for her because of what she said. I don’t really know how to explain it other than that. It’s tricky.”

Kaija raised a lopsided grin. “Like love?”

A blush crept up Tai’gee’s neck. She hummed, but said nothing more.

“Do you want me to follow her back?”

“No, I don’t think she’d appreciate that. Besides –” she wrapped an arm around Kaija’s shorter frame, “I haven’t gotten to see much of you lately.” They started a slow walk back to the tents. “Where did you disappear to this morning?”

Firm muscle twitched under the places where Tai’gee’s arm ran across Kaija’s body. “I wanted to be outside.”

“Did you go to your father’s?”

Kaija answered with a head shake.

“Kaija, I know you’re upset, even if you don’t say it. If it bothers you too much to be here we can leave. Do you need that?”

She shook her head again. “They need a break from moving. This is a good place for a break.” Her words, though strong, were laden with a heavy undercurrent of discomfort.

“What can I do for you Love?” Tai’gee pulled them aside from the first of their tents and ran a hand softly down Kaija’s muscled arm. She liked Kaija’s current outfit – loved it actually. It was her fighting leathers, the ones she wore when she intended to stalk the woods. They were highly pliable black leather, molded to follow the contour of every curve of her body – much like

Cerebrius' own skin. It rippled with her muscles, made her look very powerful, every bit the untamed lion and cultured royalty she was. Tai'gee shivered – and when she put on her armor over top of it... whew...

But now, in the building twilight, the leather looked soft, the opalescent feathers from Cerebrius' wings mounted on Kaija's necklace picked up the blue light of the dusk sun and glowed fluorescently. The strange red-amber glow from deep within the onyx arrowpoint between them marked the middle of Kaija's chest. Tai'gee reached up, hooked two fingers into the V of Kaija's vest and pulled her close. Kaija's hands lifted to rest on her wife's hips.

“Play with me.”

Tai'gee lifted an eyebrow at Kaija's answer. ‘I'm sure she did not mean that to sound as sexual as I heard it... but still!’ “What would you like to play?”

Golden eyes flitted around them quickly. “We have no more hunters to tease... no more traps to break.”

“No.”

“There is hide and seek.”

Dark eyes rolled. “Kaija, that can't possibly be fun for you any more – you always win. You take no time to find me, and I can never find you.”

Kaija thought some more. “Well... then... Tag.” A broad hand patted Tai'gee's backside. “You are it.” The tip of a pearly canine was peeked in a suggestive smirk.

“Why, my wife, are you trying to seduce me?”

Golden eyes rounded in innocence. “I do not know this.”

Tai'gee shook her head. “Oh, I think you do. And now, you're it!” Tai'gee pushed off and ran for the woods. Her main goal was to get far enough away from the rest of her Amazons so that whatever she and Kaija ended up doing, they would not be overheard – or, more importantly, interrupted.

V

“We'll stay through the winter rains,” Tai'gee said clearly. “I think that is as long as the Sphinx' lands will support us.” ‘And as long as we can afford immobility,’ she added to herself, but she didn't care to put that forward for Cresca's council if they weren't already thinking something along those lines.

Cresca had come out to cheer the Amazon parade into town that first day. When Tai'gee rode in, bedecked in all of her finery, head high and proud, the cheers redoubled – this was one of their

own, now royalty, now someone. For her part, Tai'gee wore her finest pants and tunic – which was actually her wedding outfit. Evergreen silk flowed smoothly over her sun darkened skin, rippling in shadows and light like heavy pond water. The deep green fabric made her accoutrements all the more stunning: the silver link chain gleamed against it, the bright feathers tied into her long hair seemed taken from parrots rather than eagles and blue-jays, the paints on her bone necklace shown like the colors of a rainbow, and her circlet a glowing, silver halo. Tai'gee felt the sunlight heat the silver medallion, making it burn against her forehead, which meant it sparked and glinted in the eyes of those watching her. She looked like a queen, and she knew it.

Every warrior, every child, every Amazon had worn her best: polished, hemmed, sharpened, repaired, tooled, generally gone out of her way to display her might and sophistication. The warriors were somber, surrounded their Queen at attention, sported their black sashes in a manner that wouldn't leave outsiders to guess their role among the tribe. The girls smiled shyly, waved to the other children of Cresca who waved back, some with equal shyness and some with wild excitement, pulling on their parents' hands and pointing – “Look, look! She waved at me!”

Tai'gee spared many moments to glance at her wife while she looked over the crowd, favoring a wave or nod here and there. As she looked around, she also noticed Kaija was stressed. She looked damn good, but Tai'gee knew every indication of tension in her wife, and every indication was there. “You're going to wear your armor? Kaija, I'm not sure that's the message we want to send.”

“I do not know the message I will receive.” Kaija lifted the heavy chest plate over her head easily and set the shoulder braces to rest in their places, pulled the strappings tight to secure the back plate. “Your uncle is still unhappy with me. I do not intend to leave him a soft target.”

Tai'gee winced at the subtle reference to her uncle Thalkus' attack on Kaija's unguarded father, her precious Pawpaw, who had dropped, exhausted, from the sky, while trying to stay at the ready for his daughter's escape. A heavy lance secured Cerebrius' final breath in Cresca, his blood parching the dry town square. Kaija knew Patrach was not happy she would be coming to town, and while Tai'gee might not want to present her wife as overanxious, defensive, and adversarial, Kaija had every right to expect treachery. But now Tai'gee reconsidered her initial disapproval – it was actually quite fitting for Kaija to wear it: the armor announced her as Tai'gee's Champion, the circlet announced her as Tai'gee's Consort, and the brilliantly unique necklace was a brazen icon that shouted as well as any herald “I am The Great Sphinx' Heir.”

Kaija's armor was just as brilliant as the rest of the tribe's. The silver-glinting chest plate wasn't as bulky as many of the men's armor in other Greek armies, much lighter in fact. Most other armored soldiers wore heavy, solid bronze chests and backs, but men could do that – waste energy wearing and moving under the weight of something so incommensurate. But Amazon armor was smarter – thick dials of tooled leather overlaying each other, much like the scales of a snake or lizard, was the choice construction for body protection, and Kaija's was no different. One plate adorned the middle of her front, protecting the core of her chest. The front plate was a silver-plated bronze disk, embossed with a falcon. The back plate spread in an arch across her back in the shape of great wings, protecting her lungs and down her spine, but leaving her plenty

of motion through her shoulders. The thick leather dials grew from these plates like skin to cover the rest of Kaija's torso, giving her all the range of motion she was used to having.

Their blacksmith, Hepidius, had outdone herself, in Tai'gee's opinion, on Kaija's armor – her tribute to her Queen-to-be's wife. Kaija's prize knife was strapped, as always, to her back, cutting a diagonal across the broad stretch, easy for her to reach with either hand. The ivory handle stood out sharply against the gleaming silver and oil darkened black leather. Her circlet – a simple, fitted silver band – stood out sharply against her grease darkened mane, which was secured in a tight braid like Tai'gee's. Gold eyes stood out in relief from Kaija's own bronze skin, a dark slit stabbing each flaxen lake, with spears of darker gold spiking off to flex the iris as needed.

Those flaxen lakes were greatly diminished in the dimmer interior of Cresca's biggest tavern, which also served as the town hall, but they were nonetheless attentive and alert. They scanned the room repetitively, as well as each member of the council; all men, but to be expected. Crescan government only followed the traditions of the larger Greek city-state governmental structures. Men voted, men governed, men ruled. Powerful, advisory women were the exception and even then in the back of all things. Still, it was only Patrach who seemed ill at ease with his surroundings; the rest of the men who ranged in age from quite old to doe-eyed young, were all excited and eager for the Amazon entourage.

“We do not want to stay so long that we strip the forest – it is you who live next to it and will need it whether or not we are here,” Tai'gee concluded her answer to the middle-aged man across from her about the intended length of their stay. She thought he looked disappointed.

“So, you don't mean to stay permanently?” he asked, confirming Tai'gee's assessment. “Aren't you seeking a new home?”

Tai'gee nodded. “We are. But I don't think Cerebrius' woods would be able to sustain us long term. We are – as you've noticed – quite a large group.”

The men nodded, but another plain looking man spoke up next. “But you wouldn't have to stay confined to the woods – we're a whole town – a whole city. We could be an even bigger city.”

Tai'gee wondered about this insistence on their tenure. “If you want to build out your town I don't see why our presence or absence should be related to that endeavor.”

“You could help us,” said the man that had asked Tai'gee how long they were thinking of staying.

“We aren't architects or engineers. We don't have any construction artists left.”

More disappointed nods. “What was it these men really wanted here? The last town we left had been overjoyed at our departure, and this one is begging us to stay...”

“We aren’t in a rush to go,” Tai’gee offered, hoping to end that particular line of discussion. “We just got here. I’m glad you’re so interested in having us – I worry about town fears of being usurped by such as we.”

“I have a concern,” Patrach huffed from his position. As Governor, he sat in a high chair, elevated above the heads of everyone by a couple feet, much like on a throne. His lesser officials and council sat in front him, facing a long table where Tai’gee sat with Kaija on her right, Eponin on her left, Beckries, Cho-chin, Blue-wren and Shingari spreading out behind her, and all the rest of the Amazons and townsfolk in the audience arranged in what was left of the tavern. Tai’gee thought the room winced with his first attempt to join the discussions, but she just looked at him and waited.

“The last time something like her came here,” he said with pointed enmity at Kaija, “seeking asylum, it brought a world of trouble behind it.” He paused for effect. The men sitting in front of him, facing Tai’gee and Kaija and the others of her entourage, lowered their eyes in discomfort. “We have women and children here to protect.”

‘He’s trying to bait you, Kaija,’ Tai’gee thought to her wife. ‘Don’t let him.’ Tai’gee saw Kaija’s chin lift; she remained quiet as she turned her great golden eyes fully onto Patrach.

“We all seek protection,” Tai’gee said. “We can help each other.”

“Yes but do you have all of your... all of your elements under control? I have a town to protect. I don’t want some wild beast coming in amongst us who’ll threaten our officials or approach our youth with false intentions.”

“Patrach,” one of the men hissed over his shoulder.

“What? You’ve elected me to speak the mind of the town, and I am.”

“You’re speaking your own mind,” a woman called from the audience, and there weren’t just a few hums and murmurs of agreement.

“That thing has yet to be tried for the murder of my brother,” Patrach finally burst. His officials looked at each other in a range of embarrassment and indecision. The Crescans shifted uneasily. The Amazons’ ire spiked profoundly, but they remained restrained while their Queen remained seated and calm.

“Patrach, this is not the time or place –” the middle councilman tried to say, but Patrach wouldn’t hear him. He slapped the arm of his chair impatiently and started to shout some other angry sentiment over the murmurs and hasty whispering of the crowd and council when Kaija spoke.

Her voice lifted richly through the room, cutting across all surrounding commentary, neatly commanding silence. “Uncle of Tai’gee.”

Patrach looked down at her, stunned and quiet, as did the rest of the room.

“Try me.”

“What?”

“You wish to try me. Try me.”

“This is absurd!” Beckries jumped forward.

Eponin also rose swiftly from her chair, outraged. “How dare you seek to try a member of the royal family during a meeting of peace?”

“Silence,” Tai’gee commanded from her place at the table. They both bowed and returned to their places, Eponin still muttered angrily under her breath.

The middle councilman looked apologetically at them all. “I – we do not wish this. We don’t want-”

“He wasn’t your brother, was he Arteminius? Perhaps if he was you’d be the one demanding justice! I am owed a trial!”

Kaija rose. “We cannot continue until you are satisfied. Try me and be done.”

Tai’gee stood as well, and immediately all of the Amazons knelt in respect, Eponin slid from her chair to join the others, careful of her leg.

“I do not approve of this,” Tai’gee said. Her own cheeks were burning with fury. “I will not approve of this. You have no right to this demand.”

Kaija smoothly turned her head to regard her wife. “It is my wish,” she said lowly. “I wish to end this tension with your family.”

“Kaija, a trial won’t end it. It doesn’t matter if they find you guilty, it’s not going to end,” Tai’gee countered just as quietly. “He’s trying to undermine my authority. I’m not going to let that happen.”

“He does not care about your position,” said Kaija plainly, not to hurt Tai’gee, though she knew Kaija was right and it did hurt. “He cares about me. Let me have him.”

Tai’gee’s nostrils flared. She was angry – she was incensed. Her temper flared in her eyes, too, and she wanted to lash out at her. ‘He’s doing it – he’s trying for his misguided vengeance and you’re letting him make us a public spectacle!’ Tai’gee looked up to the dark ceiling, closed her eyes, and clenched her back teeth. When she opened her eyes again, lowered her head to look at Kaija’s face something else caught her attention. Kaija’s arrowhead had also sparked in outrage; it glowed angrily, pulsed with irritation. Tai’gee looked back up, into her wife’s clear, golden

gaze. There was something there, something... ‘sphinxy’... Tai’gee agreed by regaining her seat. The other Amazons took their positions again, looking at each other in question.

“You may try me,” Kaija said clearly. The Crescan councilmen shook their heads, Patrach had a satisfied look upon his face, and the room again muttered and mumbled. Patrach started to say they needed a judge, when Kaija continued: “You have a choice to make, Uncle of Tai’gee.”

The room quieted yet again, waited, watched. Patrach asked the obvious, “what?”

“I have said you may try me, but you must choose which it is you want: a trial or a tournament.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You may try me by court or you may try me by combat. It is your choice to make.”

‘Ah.’ Tai’gee hid her grin. Her uncle was in checkmate and he hadn’t even realized he’d started a game. Kaija was going to play his passion against his reason. Kaija knew what Patrach really wanted, and it wasn’t a trial – the man was angry and affronted. He wanted blood for settlement, not judicial reparation. If he had a trial, he would have to face Thalkus’ crimes and stand against a town full of people his brother had betrayed, defend why what Kaija had done to Thalkus was unjust: which he could do, if he put a little craft to his method. But craft took time, it took patience, and it took insight – and the outcome of a trial wasn’t really what Patrach wanted, even if the court found her guilty, like Tai’gee had said. Patrach wanted physical revenge – both of his brothers had had a go at Kaija and Kaija had been the reason for both of their demises. It was his turn now – and he was a much bigger and stronger man than either of his brothers. Kaija knew what he wanted, and Tai’gee knew she would give it to him. “I’ll have you myself,” Patrach huffed.

“You may even be as your brothers – you may have a weapon, and I will not.”

“Confident little bitch, aren’t you?”

Beckries and Eponin started to jump forward again, but Tai’gee half turned her head, gesture enough to make her order clear.

“I am neither a dog, nor have I had children, so no – I am no bitch.” Giggles tittered all around the room, joined by a few more manly huffs of humor. “There is one requirement,” Kaija continued unfazed. “You must find satisfaction, no matter the outcome.”

“That will not be a problem,” the big man smirked. The two went outside, followed by a clambering crowd. Every Amazon knew he wouldn’t win the fight – many of them had seen for themselves, and all had heard, of the damage Kaija could do to multitudes; they hadn’t the least concern for one puffed up man. They weren’t surprised when an unarmed and unarmored Kaija stood bravely before her opponent. They were surprised at Kaija’s bared body; Kaija had removed her leather under-armor, had stood bare before Patrach from her hips up, skin, muscle and grace. Before then, it was more than anyone other than Tai’gee had seen of Kaija, and her

body was every bit the stuff for sculpture. They were puzzled that she made minimal movement to defend herself, and shocked that she continued to stand rather apathetically while he ran her through – even Tai’gee, who suspected something of the sort, balked and turned away.

Kaija sank to her knees before Patrach, either end of his sword sticking from her. The town was silent, appalled, bewildered. The pulsing red arrowhead flared like a hungry fire tossed a dry log. Patrach grinned with wild satisfaction. “Now you can die, you worthless abomination, and suffer the ghosts of my brothers in the underworld.”

But Kaija didn’t die. She reached for the sword hilt, slid the blade from her body and stood to hand the red blade back to him. “You have drawn more blood from me than either of your brothers. May you find peace with that knowledge.”

Everyone watched as she walked back to Tai’gee’s side, watched as the gaping holes in her body poured her blood, then leaked, then trickled. In a few more minutes, the holes themselves would be completely gone. By that time, they were all sitting back in the tavern, discussing what bartering they could do amongst them and the respect of Crescan and Amazon boundaries. Patrach was silent, and did not attend the welcoming celebration that night. Mian made sure to come directly to Kaija to see if she was alright, and all the rest of their time in town was spent in gaiety and relaxation.

“That was damn clever,” Eponin reiterated. It was early in the morning, almost day light, when they rode back from their party. “You know what this means right? They’ll leave her alone. They think she can’t be killed, they’re not going to take the chance. Even your uncle.”

Tai’gee nodded. She was hungover. The sight of her beloved wife being driven through had required a drink, and a drink after that for her nerves, and another to work on the memory of something so awful, and after that she was just thirsty. “What were you thinking?” Eponin had bellowed at Kaija earlier that night.

“I was thinking I hope he does not decide to cut something off. I cannot re-grow limbs I do not think. Or a head.”

Tai’gee was drunk at that point and so she’d laughed merrily with everyone else and rubbed Kaija’s back in pride and happiness. Now she was sick, both from the alcohol and the thought. It was a good plan, but Kaija had taken a gamble. ‘As soon as I’m done being hungover, I’m going to make her promise to never take a chance like that again. My liver can’t take it.’

VI

“No! No, no no no NO!”

Tai’gee was absolutely astounded. It was a full fledged, screaming, stomping, totally red-faced tantrum. She couldn’t believe it.

“Kaija, what’s going on here? Eponin.”

Eponin stood with about ten other Amazons, back from the river by the crossing stones. They had heavy ropes in their hands, some stretching across the river in damp, wavering lines. Kaija stood between them, yanking on the ropes, trying to sever their connection to the other side. Eponin had been just as surprised by Kaija's reaction and still hadn't quite pulled herself together from her leader's outburst. "We're trying to build a bridge," Ep said at last.

Kaija's heavy chest still heaved, her hands – which should have been ragged with rope burns – were clenched into tight fists. "You may not!"

"Kaija, calm down. Come with me," Tai'gee beckoned.

But Kaija didn't come; she had established a defensive position and she wasn't leaving it until she was satisfied the threat was gone. "They can NOT!"

Tai'gee tried a different route. She waved her hand at Eponin and called her over for a quiet and hasty council. "What is going on here? I haven't seen her this upset in a long time."

"I don't know. We've been here for a month now, and I think we need to cross the river for more hunting. Especially with all the new arrivals – we're getting too big to just stay on this side between this and the village." Eponin threw her hand back to indicate the river. "We just got the ropes tied off when Kaija came out of the woods and went nuts."

Tai'gee nodded, then sighed. "Ep, her father's den is on the other side of the river."

Eponin's brown eyes widened with clarity. She rubbed the back of her neck, leaned heavily on her cane, which she preferred to her crutch when not going to do a lot of walking around. "Well..."

"Back off on this for now. Let me talk to her."

Eponin gave her head a jerk for her other carpenters to follow her back to their camp. They all bowed to Tai'gee as they shuffled by, leaving the couple to their own discussion. When Kaija was sure they were leaving for good, she picked up the rope she had dropped at her feet, and gave it another forcible yank, snapping it off at the knot tied on the tree of the opposite bank. Angrily she threw the whole mass into the river.

"Kaij' we're going to need our supplies, please don't be careless with them," Tai'gee said calmly.

"They cannot go across! They are not allowed!"

"I understand Kaij', I understand why you're upset."

"They are too nosy!"

“Kaija, please. Come here.” Tai’gee reached a hand out to her wife, beckoning her away from the river. Kaija was deep within her sulk, but she came to Tai’gee and they went to sit together, back against one of the river trees, the same Kaija had climbed down to meet Mian. “They aren’t being nosy Love. We need food and we need space. We’ve had more than twenty new mouths join us since we arrived – we need more resources. Can you understand that?”

Tai’gee could feel Kaija’s irritation – it was like electricity, it charged all the air around them. She wanted to soothe her, but sometimes a raging fire could not be soothed, it had to die down on its own.

“I do not want them there.”

“You need to go back there Kaij’. You need to go to your den, and you need to mourn for your father. You won’t find relief until you do.”

“Has anyone been to your house Tai’gee?”

‘Ouch.’ The answer was no. Besides Mépol and Cho-chin that first day acting as envoys, no one besides herself had been to Tai’gee’s house. It was somewhat hypocritical of her, she admitted, to expect Kaija to be ok with Amazons poking around her home while no one was poking around her own.

“It’s your choice Kaija, and you know I’ll support you. If you don’t want us over there, I’ll make it a mandate that no one is allowed. But we’ll need to leave soon if that’s the case. Your father’s land won’t support us if we don’t spread out more.”

Kaija ground her teeth, hard; Tai’gee could hear them scraping against each other, and she really felt for her wife. As far as Kaija was concerned, these woods, all of them on either side of the river were her home – the canopy was her roof, the debris strewn trails her floor, the river her bath, and her father’s den was the inner sanctum. Kaija had more people in her home now, to stay, than she had ever before – she had to welcome them. Before they had left Cresca, anyone that entered the woods, besides Tai’gee, was unwelcome and therefore subject to different rules of engagement. For Kaija, it was like having to entertain a party that she didn’t want, forced to have guests she wasn’t sure she wanted to receive.

‘In the homes of others tread light, for while the hearth be warm and bright, what burns is none to sight.’ For a moment Tai’gee considered that bit she’d remembered from some song or play she’d heard – she didn’t remember which exactly – but she remembered it was something she’d heard and not read because the sound of the words always inspired a strong image of human bones burning merrily in the fireplace; totally indistinguishable at a short distance from any wood that was also supporting the flames. She’d always taken it as a warning not to trust any and every smiling host, but now she reconsidered. Here she needed to be careful not because Kaija was untrustworthy, but because what burned in her hearth was something tender, something dear, and something Kaija herself probably couldn’t yet define or describe. This home needed compromise, Tai’gee decided. ‘And really, compromise is all these woods have ever been about.’

“How about, until you say otherwise, just you go hunt over there for us – you can take a hunting party or not, your choice – you can take them exactly where you want them to go, and otherwise no one can go across the river without you.”

The dark haired Queen let her wife mull the proposition in silence. She gave her mental space, let her suggestion just float out between them without adding an insistent or expectant energy behind it. She'd learned over their many years of friendship that sometimes with Kaija suggestions had to be just that – unconditional proposals; a lot like the extended hand to a shy and uncertain animal. And not unlike that animal, if Kaija felt a want in the hand reaching out to her she might scurry off to safer grounds, or she just as equally might lash out at that pressure, retaliate against what she sensed was a lure.

“Maybe.”

‘This is really hard.’ The older of the couple sighed internally. She wanted to be supportive, and her sympathy for Kaija’s suffering was quite real, but Kaija was making movement on the issue as restrictive as a viper’s venom in a mouse. “Don’t run from me yet Kaij’ – I just want to talk, ok?” There was still an energized barricade between them, and Tai’gee felt the energy pulse at her request, but not build. “Can you tell me why you don’t want to go over there?” she asked with quiet, honest care. With the softness of her tone, the “can you” meant “do you know why?”

Again there was a scraping of teeth to fill the silence between them. Tai’gee watched busy black ants make their darting paths to here and there around their feet, looking, inspecting, moving on, all – it seemed to her – to no real end or purpose. She listened to the quiet wood around them; the breezeless, late summer day had left many leaves to dangle limply from their twigs and branches, trying to absorb sound to replace the moisture they sought. She could be absurdly restless on a day like that – when all else was still, motivation-less, uninspired – when best to feel the unrelenting need to crawl out of one’s skin with aggravation at a lackadaisical world? She could feel that way on a day like that, but not this time; this time there was heartache to deal with.

The grinding stopped, and Kaija’s mouth parted to draw in full lips and chew on them. Her breathing deepened, or rather got heavier, regular breaths in length but heavy with something like nervousness. “When I think of going back, I feel strange in my body. My heart beats too fast.” She paused, and Tai’gee continued to wait, letting her younger friend decide if she’d said too much or if it was ok to keep going. She kept going. “He will not be there if I go back. I will look in and will know that he is not there.”

“And you’ve never been in your den alone, huh?” Tai’gee hadn’t realized that until then. Something else she had just put together was that Kaija didn’t really like the dark; or at least, not the dark of the interior – she didn’t mind the dark at all being outside; but rooms, tunnels, caves, tents were not her favorite places, and especially at night. She preferred to be out among the trees and stars and moonlight, braving the flashing brightness of a thunderstorm outdoors rather than the steady flame of a candle indoors. Cerebrius was probably a huge security blanket for

Kaija, better than a torch for feeling safe in a large, pitch black cave. She wasn't just nervous – the very idea was probably throwing her into a panic of anxiety.

“The world is not as real on the inside,” the half-sphinx said softly. “It is a different dark than outside.”

Tai'gee was just as soft. “Your Pawpaw made it real.”

“He... he made it alright. He made it ok to go inside.”

‘There's a thought.’ Sometimes Tai'gee hated that she couldn't really talk philosophy with Kaija – her wife was so brilliant, but really not that considerate of depth and debate, not particularly scholarly. It was a curious thing to Tai'gee though, that Cerebrius, being the more biologically feline, wasn't remotely vexed to go into a dark abyss, but his half-human daughter would spend her entire life in perfect contentment with ne'er a roof in sight.

“I'm not your Pawpaw, but I'd go with you, if you'd want Kaij'...if it would help. I'll try to make it safe.”

“It will not be the same.”

“No; it never will be I'm afraid. But what's different doesn't have to be so terrible.”

Tai'gee felt the barricade pulse again, then the standoffishness faded from the energy. The Queen stood up, and held a hand out to her wife. They crossed the river with not just a few eyes watching them, and were soon lost to sight of the large camp of Amazons wondering over any number of curiosities about the Consort.

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Kaija was visibly shaking by the time she and Tai'gee made it to the small clearing that used to be their meeting place near her den. Tai'gee didn't tighten her grip on Kaija's hand, though she wanted to – she didn't want her to feel restrained or pressured or trapped. To keep herself from looking at her wife constantly, Tai'gee forced herself to note what had changed within the forest. The rotted oak that had been her marker for the clearing had been renovated by a very large swarm of bees. It was now one massive hive, well over ten men tall and six men around. She and Kaija steered very wide of that – even with the river so close, trying to save one's self from millions of bees would be quite difficult.

Cerebrius' forest was a very clean forest – it maintained itself. The bright summer sun reached through the canopy, green-tinted through the leaves or brilliant white unfiltered; it wasn't dark or crowded or overgrown. There were pools of light on the softly decomposing floor that warmed the rot to smell of fresh earth. They passed a shrub grown through with sweet smelling honeysuckle vines, probably often visited by the new bee tenants not far away. The clearing they were moving across was a quiet, sound swept space; nothing new had grown in, and, it seemed, nothing old had mutated. Tai'gee thought that should be a little strange if nothing was using the

clearing with any regularity. But then, something may well be using it with regularity. Kaija seemed to think so – she released Tai’gee’s hand to drop to her all fours and prowl the area with caution.

After a few minutes of Kaija’s inspection, sniffing here and there, the muscular body uncoiled and stood again. “You were hurt here. I talked to Aries.”

Tai’gee offered a smile. “Way I heard it you saved my life. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“I did not know that being dead could look like being asleep.”

“Pretty scary. When you were sick that’s all we could think about. I’d watch you breathe for hours just to make sure you’d take another breath.”

Kaija nodded. Then she held out her hand to Tai’gee so they could continue.

The overhang of rock acting like an awning was the first thing that could be seen through the heavy branches of the trees. Underneath it was a rocky surface, and when they pushed through the last few bushes, the wide, plain space that sprawled from the entrance of the cave greeted them. It was flat, packed, grassless ground, after years of trampling. The sun shown hot and heavy on them in the bareness. The air was thick. Kaija’s nose twitched.

“It looks the same,” said Tai’gee. She pointed to the last place she’d been when she was there, hiding on the ridge. “Your Pawpaw caught us up there. It seemed really high all of a sudden, with him standing behind us like that.”

But Kaija wasn’t receptive to reminiscing. She’d dropped to all fours again, and stared, hard, at the dark, yawning hole. Tai’gee’s heart felt heavy for her; she seemed paralyzed by the entrance to her former home; frozen with indecision. “Come on Kaij’, it’s ok. We’ll go together.” Tai’gee missed the narrowing eyes that continued to cautiously study the cave, but Kaija edged closer to the entrance with Tai’gee moving slowly by her side. They were within a few feet of the entrance when Kaija came to a rigid stop. “What is it?”

The dark slits that split her golden eyes widened and narrowed, then widened again, rounded out in a way that usually implied alarm. Kaija’s eyes began darting around them, and she backed up, pressed herself back against Tai’gee’s legs in defense.

“Something is here.”

“What something?” But Tai’gee didn’t hesitate to pull her wide, curving knife from its sheath. There wasn’t anything suspect to Tai’gee’s senses, but she’d give over to Kaija’s any time. It was only a few minutes more though, before she didn’t have to rely on Kaija’s senses – behind them, coming from the forest, the something made itself perfectly obvious.

One who lived and grew up in a fairly tame world, where animals aren’t necessarily larger than dogs and cats, and larger things are usually in places where one would have to go looking for

them, can never truly be prepared for just how big wild animals can be. The bear that lumbered into the clearing was just such an example. Tai'gee swallowed convulsively, glanced down at the huge, pigeon-toed paws, shining black claws poking from furred toes in negligent threat. It was making chuffing noises as it sniffed at the ground, perhaps following something, and then noticed it wasn't alone.

Blurry, brown bear eyes couldn't quite make out what was standing in front of it, but the big She-bear could smell a foreigner, and she could smell fear, and she could smell threat. And she was an old She-bear with lots of experience in dealing with threats. She roared and pushed her heavy body up to stand. She bared her large yellowing teeth and swung a couple warnings with her solid paws, roared again. The catlike hiss that answered her warnings however made her nervous. It wasn't a sound she recalled having heard before from something that seemed so large.

Kaija remained on all fours, Tai'gee stooping behind her, blade held out wide from her body. The half-sphinx pushed them away from the opening of the cave, getting the dark unknown away from their backs. The hard ground was sharp against Kaija's square fingertips, but her palm gloves helped keep the softer parts of her hands from being cut as she spread her fingers wide for a solid base. She growled deep in her throat, then let a hiss snake from her in warning. Her big canines were bared; she didn't want to go directly at an animal so large, but Tai'gee was there and much slower than she – she would do whatever she had to do to keep her safe.

The big bear bounced in place, stamping its huge paws against the ground, the power of the motion shaking muscle, fur and blubber menacingly. The hissing thing wasn't leaving though. She bounced a couple more times before charging forward with an offended roar; she meant business now. Kaija backed them up again as the huge bear rushed them, hissing wildly, and rearing back on her legs. Tai'gee had no choice but to shuffle step backward, and finally hit the face of rock next to Kaija's den; no more room. She-bear charged forward again, also rearing back though not to full height, threw more warning swipes, to which her intruder hissed again and coiled up on its own hind legs and looked even bigger.

Kaija knew they were back up against something, but her major goal was to get Tai'gee out of the way. With one hand she kept pushing Tai'gee back, while keeping the rest of her body facing front and trying to look as dangerous and large as she could. "Nowhere to go Kaij'!" Tai'gee's desperation drove Kaija forward – she was going to have to make the bear back off. With a commanding thrust, Kaija told Tai'gee to stay right where she was, squashing her against the rock. She took a few bounding steps of her own, hissing and growling in an offensive move that forced the bear back out of sheer surprise. Kaija reached behind her and drew her knife, needing it to make her own swipes more dangerous.

She-bear was confused. She wasn't used to so much forward aggression. The glinting claw, she knew, meant nothing good. She retaliated as best she could for the moment, standing to roar in a massive refusal of defeat. 'My den, my den,' her body stamped against the ground when she dropped back down again. But then something shifted for her.

"Kaija! Kaija! Its eyes!"

Fortunately for everyone, Kaija had not yet let herself slip into the dangerous self of her that was all destruction and little consciousness. She could hear Tai'gee behind her, as well as feel the hot puffing breath of the bear in front of her – hot breath, stinking of a long gone meal. Because she was still aware enough, she could follow Tai'gee's yell; golden eyes met silver in a sparkling greeting of metals.

Tai'gee moved up behind her from her smashed place practically within the wall, ready to greet her Goddess. But Kaija wasn't entirely convinced. If the Goddess had wanted to make an appearance, she would have done so, incarnating herself in her own body to stand before them as her own being. When Tai'gee was close enough and started a respectful bow, Kaija stopped her with a raised hand, wary eyes still on the now calm bear. "Do not kneel."

"But Kaij' – it's the Goddess."

"It is not...entirely."

Kaija slowly brought herself to stand up from her defensive crouch, lowered her knife, all the time watching her previous opponent for a similar stand down. It came; She-bear shook herself, her angry energy sprinkling off like dandruff. Her body lost some of its rigidity and she swayed on her stubby legs, side to side.

She-bear made a very low sound from deep within her body, so low Tai'gee almost couldn't hear it. To her great surprise, Kaija made a similar sound – one Tai'gee had never heard her make – forcing a gusting moan up from somewhere so far down inside her body Tai'gee was sure if Kaija had reached any farther she would've come out the other end. Every bit of muscle was used to make the sound, and, once it was done, Tai'gee remembered having heard it before. Cerebrius used to make it to call Kaija home. Kaija and the bear were talking to each other, as animals.

Kaija didn't want Tai'gee to bow because she knew the Goddess hadn't completely taken over the She-bear. Artemis was there to make introductions, to make it so She-bear could understand Kaija, that Kaija was not there for the She-bear's destruction. "Home," the Goddess translated for the She-bear from Kaija's moaning gust. But She-bear was not entirely satisfied – her cubs were hidden off to the side; this was her home now and she was not going to give it up. Kaija made another much shorter moan: "Not to stay." And a high pitched sound like the tail end of a yawn: "To see." And Artemis added for the She-bear a sampling of Kaija's fear to go in alone, much like the fear her own cubs had from time to time over various things. She-bear was convinced.

The big bear called her cubs from hiding, not wanting them to stay out of her sight if the clearing was safe. They scurried as best they could on their stumpy little bear legs, shuffling in quickly to hide behind their mother from the strange smelling visitors. Squinting silver eyes shifted to Tai'gee now, and though no words or sounds were made, Tai'gee nodded in agreement. She-bear ambled towards Kaija, towards the den entrance, and Kaija went with her. As they approached it, before they went in, Kaija placed her hand on the bear, which disappeared passed

her wrist in fur. They melted into the darkness of the cave together, and Tai'gee sat down on the dusty hardpack and let the cubs explore her.

VII

“She is not ready to let you over there Eponin; I'm not going over this again.”

“What is she doing over there? Tai'gee – we need meat. We need food. We need to spread out. We are getting stifled. Can she not see that?”

“I told her it was her choice. Frankly, you're lucky she went after the ropes when she saw what you were doing. You need to let her have her space and everything will work out. If you push you're going to regret it.”

Eponin's frown was deep and the displeasure radiant. Tai'gee suspected her number one guard was really more upset that her project had gotten squashed before she really had it started; she figured Eponin wanted to have a good sturdy bridge built before anyone else had thought of it, and a beaming example of her foresight and ingenuity with congratulations all around. ‘But you can't argue with an irate half cat with the strength, literally, to rip you in half.’ Tai'gee had been on Eponin's end of the argument before, and once Kaija had a mind for something it was and would not be any other way. “Period.”

The tribe had only been in Cresca for three months before they reached their one hundred seventy-eighth member; women were abandoning their attempts to assimilate into non-Amazonian cultures in droves, escaping from their enslavements, and Eponin's story became the first in several ‘back to life's’ they'd heard. Tai'gee was becoming the Queen of more than a handful of refugees, and more than a desperate attempt to stave off oblivion. They'd gotten many of their craft workers and artisans back, and many others went into Cresca to study under tradesmen there; learning woodworking, carpentry, metalworking, trading knowledges of painting and song. They were becoming a healthy diversity again, with options of growth and glimmers of future.

But of course growth had its requirements, and Kaija's flat refusal to allow mobilization beyond the river was spreading their growing camp-city into a jagged, deforesting line along the river and into the woods towards Cresca. Lines are hard to protect; the longer they are the more points for breakage and penetration. Tai'gee wasn't worried yet about the forest they did have access to supporting them all as far as supplies and sustenance, but she felt an uncomfortable crawl move up her spine every time she thought about some Roman sabotage totally decimating their thin trim of tents and fire pits. She did not like having the river at her back – it felt like being pressed against a never ending wall while facing some unseen pacing, stalking creature, no boundary to separate and offer protection.

Five more joined the uprooted Amazon tribe the evening of Tai'gee and Eponin's last discussion on the river crossing; an entire family giving up on their attempt to assimilate into a non-Amazonian society. “Where is the Queen?” the mother demanded, her four daughters in tow. Tai'gee was getting used to being summoned by Returnees – as they were becoming known –

kneeling before her to re-pledge their lives to their Queen and to Artemis, often begging forgiveness for leaving the tribe. Tai'gee never gave it though. "It was your decision to make and you had a right to your choice; no one here holds it against you. You remain virgin, as the Goddess made you, and we rejoice in your return."

This woman, like many of the others, cried, and cried all the harder when Tai'gee reached out to help her stand. "We couldn't do it. My Jenna, their birth mother, died not long after we moved into that dirty house – the whole town was so filthy, those people were so unsanitary. The girls had nothing to do, we didn't know what to *do*. It wasn't long before the men came asking about them, when was I going to start marrying them off? One of them said he'd even be willing to marry one of my older ones despite her age. They saw woman flesh and nothing else – sows they wanted! *My* daughters, all decorated fighters through all their classes, scholars! We got tired of hiding in our house, same as prisoners."

Tai'gee let the woman wind down then repeated her welcome before handing her off to Turtle who'd come to help. The same story had been told too many times to bring Tai'gee to tears anymore, but sadness and worry still reached her heart with every telling. She was sad because the societal devaluation of women was spreading across the world, and she knew it wasn't just because of the Romans – Greece's current laws catered solely to free, landowning men; it would be on Amazon controlled land only that Tai'gee and her tribe would find the freedom and elevation they sought. What worried her was that adapting was no problem as warriors but adapting as new citizens was something else. Being the most adaptable warriors in the world was entirely within their control, those were skills and trainings they could take wherever they went. But if they couldn't adapt to a different society it wouldn't matter where they went, the insurmountable challenge would go right along with them.

Eventually a party started – that was one of the things Tai'gee especially liked about her tribe; they'd look for any reason to have a party. It had been a week since their last celebration, the Queen had forgotten what that one was for, as well as the several preceding festivities, but Tai'gee felt that as long as the women remained in spirit enough to celebrate something that was probably good enough. Personally, she didn't quite feel up to a party that evening, and given that her tent would be close to the middle of things, she grabbed a plate full of whatever they were roasting for dinner, a blanket, her sword and a saddle bag and moved down river. It wasn't hard to find solitude in that direction; the big ferns that grew there were somewhat intimidating – at night, something big could have hidden there and never been noticed till it was too late. She suspected something big had hidden there on many occasions, and the spirit of it lingered keeping most of the Amazons closer to the sandy, open riverside.

Drums thumped into action; the forest could easily muffle the excited shrieking the dark haired Queen knew would be accompanying the exuberant dance steps being stamped out, but she thought the trees, river, leaves, earth didn't really want the drums quieted. That was fine, she liked having the heartbeat of her people be able to reach her.

Once she was settled, Tai'geepulled her sword out along with a whetstone from her saddle bag. "I think I'll give this to Cho-chin." Cho-chin was one of the warriors who'd had to part with her precious sword, and the only one that Eponin wasn't able to retrieve. The flexible guard easily

made due with her bow and bowstaff, but it wasn't the same as having a blade at her access. Tai'gee figured she didn't use hers much since it wasn't her weapon of choice. But for the moment it gave her something to do; even if there were only a few nicks on it, there was still enough to smooth away and allow her to entrance herself in the rhythm of sharpening.

Resting the blade against her knee, tip down, Tai'gee took her whetstone and slid it from the hilt down. A satisfying 'shing' responded and she let the sounds of a dancing camp fade away into *shing-shing-shing*. As her right hand went up and down she noticed several large veins pushing up to the surface. Their presence wasn't new, but their size was. Tai'gee had to re-adjust how well she knew the back of her own hands. She liked them; they were supple and strong and tapered nicely at the ends. All of her hard work kept her fingernails worn down, which was fine with her. As a child they were much longer, and she was constantly breaking them and bending them back no matter if she was helping her aunt in the kitchen or her uncle in the garden. Tai'gee appreciated her entire body; it was reliable and sturdy, it took care of her and enjoyed the adventures she gave it. She was taller than the majority of her Amazons, probably as tall as Ephiny had been, and from the extra muscle her frame carried she thought she probably came across as imposing, given the reactions of many new faces she met. That was a valuable quality in a leader, especially when she was leading the underdogs.

As she worked her way down the blade, closer to the tip, she thought more of her position and that of the Amazons. They would never be the Nation they once were, she was sure of that. Tai'gee felt something important leaving their world that encouraged their Nation's existence even beyond Artemis' protection, and that was tolerance. As great and powerful as they were, the Amazons were never self sustaining. Providing for themselves was one thing but producing themselves was another. There was a time when the villages and towns near their villages thought it a great honor for them to choose one of their men as a sire, and were as ecstatic to receive their boys as the Amazons were to have daughters.

She would like to blame the change on the Roman influence, but their recession really started before them. Tai'gee suspected as the 'fantastic' began to fade from the world, humanity found comfort in conformity. The sphinxes were gone, the centaurs practically eradicated, all of the great monsters, no more giants or hinds, even the great disasters that would challenge human appreciation of diversity in all things seemed to have mellowed to predictable patterns and cycles. Without those escalated challenges, the inspiration to embrace those creatures and peoples of varying talents and skills and cultivate those beings of some god's imagination, it was her opinion humans were reverting to a more natural laziness, demanding assimilation to the easiest ideas and lifestyles.

To be Amazon is to possess a natural tendency towards extra-ordinary. There is no such thing as a lazy Amazon because we cannot be lazy – we cannot rest with 'good', we do not comprehend complacent, our biological goals do not include social regularity. Amazons are seen as edgy and aggressive, and that is because our spirit has been imbued with the need to live at the edge and thrive there.

Even still, that spirit, however strong, persistent or tenacious, cannot endure without those surrounding it who would allow its cultivation. Even before Pompei and his over-flowing civil

war, Amazon citizenship had never known such low numbers – barring its inception centuries ago. They began to recede internally, like an unused muscle, and their alliances began to suffer. Pompei’s invasion demonstrated one thing above all else – no one came to their aid.

Tai’gee sighed. She wasn’t just leading the last of the Amazons. She was attempting to lead fish to live out of the water – this was a whole new environment, an entirely new element they were being forced to live in. She thought they were making a valiant attempt, but in the end some major evolution must happen so they could breathe in this new world instead of panting and flopping miserably on its shores.

“You need to flip your sword Tai’gee,” said a voice through her musings.

Forcing her attention to her blade Tai’gee found she had smoothed the metal to a shining razor but only on half of the blade. A sheepish smile greeted her spouse whose eyes glinted back at her in the silver moonlight.

“Well, anyone on the other end of this will either get clubbed or split in two,” she said then flipped it over and began working on the other side.

“Why are you sitting alone?”

“Didn’t feel like a party tonight.”

Kaija looked around them. “This is one of my hunting blinds.”

“I think this was one of your father’s hunting blinds, too.”

Kaija smiled. “We started most of my lessons here. He showed me how long I would have to wait even when something finally would walk by. It was...”

“...boring?”

Tai’gee knew immediately that Kaija recognized something in the tone of the word that she was unhappy. She didn’t know exactly how Kaija could pick up on those minutely obscure things so easily, but most of the time she was glad she had someone so in tune to her – it made lots of things much easier and more intimate.

“What were you thinking about so hard? You did not hear me come behind you.”

“I was thinking about us again,” she answered with a wave back to the sounds of the ongoing celebration.

“We are getting bigger.”

“But how much of a flash in the pan are we? What are the rest of our lives going to look like? What are we really facing out here? They’re dancing right now – maybe tomorrow the Romans come storming through this area and we’re destroyed.”

“Have the scouts reported advances coming near us?” Kaija moved fully into the little fern shelter, sitting so one knee was up and the other lying flat against the ground. It was probably her most human position; Tai’gee thought any other way Kaija would commonly sit had some sort of feline posturing embedded in it, but this way had some of the human laze she had just been contemplating. Kaija wouldn’t sit that way for long, and just as she thought it, Kaija adjusted herself, bringing the foot of her grounded knee underneath her butt, and pulling out the foot of her raised knee so that she looked like she were ready to sprint in a moment’s notice.

Tai’gee shook her head no to answer Kaija’s question, and fell fully into the morose attitude that had been lurking around her for hours; ever since she’d argued with Eponin. She blew a depressed sigh out through her nose, massaged her face against the back of the hand that still held her sword. “I’m just wondering if all of our effort is just going to amount to a pointless exercise in retreat.”

“We are getting bigger.”

“So? That’s just more of us for me to lead into failure.”

Kaija leaned her head to the side. She wasn’t sure what it was that was rolling off of her wife in great dark waves, but she didn’t like it. She looked down as she tried to think of all the words of emotion she had learned in the past several years. ‘Sad?’ She didn’t think that was it, or at least all of it. Then she asked herself what did it matter if she didn’t know the word? There was something bothering Tai’gee, something that upset her, and she didn’t like when Tai’gee was upset. So she moved closer to her, sweeping a hand to remove the sword from her wife’s loose grip. She replaced the idle metal with her own warm hand, entwined their fingers together and pulled Tai’gee into her, asked what it was Tai’gee was feeling.

“Insecure. I don’t feel big enough for this. I don’t feel worthy to have women coming to kneel at my feet and apologize. They beg my forgiveness, they look to me to make things right in their lives and I don’t have a single idea what in Tartarus I’m doing.” A hot tear escaped her; she was trying not to cry, and she was glad it was cascading down the cheek that was turned away from Kaija. “I don’t know how to be Queen and there’s no one who can help me.”

Kaija pulled her wife closer, spreading her race-start pose to tuck Tai’gee’s larger frame into her. “You did not know how to be a mother, and you did very well with Pi.”

“This is nothing like that, Kaija! And Pi is dead!” She threw her whetstone hard against the mossy ground, and it bounced off to clink heavily against the sword lying off to the side.

Kaija flinched, and Tai’gee was immediately sorry for her outburst. She apologized and tucked her head down so she could give her an apologetic hug as well. “I’m just saying being a mother isn’t the same as being a queen – not in scale. Pi was just one girl; I’ve got almost two hundred

women and children to look after now.” She sniffed. “I’m learning all this as I go – but when you’re learning, you make mistakes. I don’t know that I can afford to make mistakes – what would one of my mistakes do to us?”

Kaija’s voice was a deep rumble in her chest, and the vibrations tickled the fine hairs in Tai’gee’s ear, making her press even closer. “You will not know until you make a mistake. Then we will deal with it.”

Tai’gee traced a slow line up the rippling muscle of Kaija’s arm. She liked muscle on a woman, and she loved that Kaija had such solid muscle, not just tone. The valleys and crevices, the firm smoothness, the unquestionable strength those arms promised helped quell some of her insecurity. Kaija could destroy armies, she was the child of a creature of the gods; Kaija loved her. Kaija was her one assurance that any mistakes she made would be surmountable. And Tai’gee loved her back for it.

When they kissed it was like a gate opening to release a building flood. Initially, Tai’gee’s tongue and Kaija’s battled together as they pulled each other’s heads as close together as was physically possible before the primary surge subsided and they backed off to more gentle exploration. Tai’gee ran the tip of her tongue carefully over the sharp teeth of her wife, cautious not to close her own mouth too far and risk cutting herself against the canines. ‘Kissing Kaija is a risk in itself, or an adventure, or both,’ she had thought after their first session of that particular expression of their feelings. If Tai’gee forgot herself, she could very easily be nursing a bloody mouth; and Kaija was often leaving bite marks as her passions built. Kaija was not a person one could sleep with idly; she required someone who not only could handle her but also who could withstand her – just like a wild mare required a strong hand as well as a devoted perseverance. When Kaija’s guard was down she was wild, there was no question about what her father was. Tai’gee thought the closest she could compare making love with her was like a fire handler she’d once seen. He had skill and knowledge and ability enough to keep himself from being seared by the flames, but his every attention was required to keep it that way and still enjoy the heat and excitement of holding onto something so elemental. When Kaija brought Tai’gee to climax all the wood grew still, and the dancers weren’t sure if the great sphinx was actually dead.

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They laid calmly together in the finally quiet night. The drums had stopped, the dancing stopped, the frenzy and celebration had all stopped, and the forest was returning to itself. Tai’gee stretched herself to lie on her back in a long, lean line, content. Kaija lied next to her, curled up, purring, her head tucked into the soft space between Tai’gee’s shoulder and her breast.

“Were you coming to tell me something earlier? Why were you looking for me?” Her voice was thick with contentment, gentle with sated relaxation, and a happy hum carried it easily into the small space separating lips from ears.

“I was. They can go across now.” Kaija was tired. Her voice was heavy, and Tai’gee suspected her wife had just about gone to sleep when she’d asked her question. That was alright – she liked to hear Kaija’s sleepy voice; it was very deep, very throaty, a bass earth.

“Why now? Wha’d you do?”

“Moved the bears. Took me weeks; she started hibernating. Gave her my dell.”

‘So that was what was taking so long...’ Tai’gee smiled slightly, more inside than out – she now had another story to tell of Kaija’s humanity, which Kaija would never realize for herself she was sure. No animal would care if the bears got hunted down, but here Kaija was holding off an entire tribe hungry for hunting grounds, just so she could move a hibernating bear and her cubs to the secluded dell to keep them safe. Happily Tai’gee stroked her wife’s scraggly mane and kissed the crown of her head, and they pulled into each other to snuggle just as they had when they were children.

VIII

“I think you know that we don’t want you to leave,” the councilman, Arteminius intimated to Tai’gee. She and the older man walked alone along the outskirts of Cresca – the far side, behind the temple where her uncle had previously served the gods...and himself. The drought persisted, but there had been a very cool fog that broke the unending days of heat and swelter that morning so at least there was an illusion of moisture in the world. Tai’gee was wearing ceremonial leathers: a short skirt and halter top with broad straps – the material was heavy, but there wasn’t a lot of it and she was opting for less coverage rather than lighter fabric and more coverage in an effort to avoid heat stroke. The man she walked with wore a short tunic, the bottom stopping at his mid-thigh, belted in the middle with a thick leather strap, and nothing else. She could see the sweat darkened spots easily and thought for a minute maybe he’d prefer to wear women’s clothing himself.

She liked Arteminius. From the moment she’d made his acquaintance she’d felt an easy familiarity with him. She didn’t remember knowing him at all before she’d left Cresca, but she thought she must have met him or seen him once or twice in her childhood to feel the casual intimacy she did. He was a fairly nondescript man, average height, average looks, but Tai’gee thought he came across much older than he actually was. She wasn’t sure if it was an age in his deep blue eyes or an age in the spirit that surrounded him. ‘It could be both,’ she allowed. He seemed like a calm man, not easily riled – as he’d demonstrated at their first meeting where Patrach had tried to take Kaija to trial – and an inner calm could show as wisdom and age in all kinds of ways on a person.

“I’ve known that since we first arrived. What I can’t figure out is why. That’s not popular opinion across Greece as far as we’ve seen.”

“You don’t know?”

Tai’gee gave him a patronizing look. She wasn’t big on repeating herself, and whether or not he intended to, he was making her look less than insightful. But Arteminius was a perceptive man if nothing else, and he apologized. “It’s just, I would think it would be obvious, given our history.”

Mild agitation moved to confusion. She asked what he was talking about, and frowned back at his frown. “Clearly you have some knowledge I don’t have – perhaps you should share it for both of our benefits.”

“Your mother was an Amazon.”

Their meandering stroll stopped immediately. The dark-haired Queen wasn’t sure what her favorite councilman was talking about but bringing her family into the conversation wasn’t necessarily appreciated – especially considering it was using information of which she was completely oblivious. “What are you talking about? My mother was Crescan.”

“She wasn’t actually. I recognized her the moment I saw her.”

“How can that possibly be – I don’t even remember her. She died giving birth to me.”

“Which is the real shame, because had she lived I’m sure you would’ve had much more knowledge of your family than you now have.” The plain man only barely hid a seething disgust for Tai’gee’s upbringing – family was of high importance to him and he was of the opinion any person should know as much about their own history as possible if they had someone who could tell it. At the least it gave a person an identity and could put them at a starting place in their life – if that person didn’t particularly like his history, he would know how to move away from it if that’s what he chose. Or build on it. Or just know it. History gave a person options, conscious options and personal insight. He felt Tai’gee was cheated of these things, even given the life she’d made for herself.

“I don’t think I appreciate what you’re saying – you’re telling me you knew my mother’s life and times when my own father and uncle’s never had anything to say about her?”

“I didn’t know your mother. I recognized her.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

Eyes the color of a deep, clear pond regarded the tall woman. “I am an Amazon son. I was sent to live here with one of my own uncles when I was six. When your father returned from his wars with an Amazon wife I knew her the moment I saw her. And she knew me. She knew a lot of us – I’m not the only Amazon son here. In fact...” His blue eyes narrowed to study her, and dark eyes stared inflexibly back at him. “In fact, there are only three families in all of Cresca now that don’t have Amazon blood in them. Yours was one until you were born.”

The air around them suddenly felt thick to Tai’gee. She looked to her right, into the alleyways that would eventually wind into the main plaza of the town. Homes, businesses, storage buildings, all so familiar to her from her listless wandering in their shadows as a child, now seemed abruptly unfamiliar. She let her dark gaze bore into her walking companion while she considered what he said, and he watched as she went from staring at him to reprocessing her own

childhood. He watched her realize the truth of his story, and was in turns pleased and sad to see it.

There were many more boys in Cresca than girls, and yes, Tai'gee could recall a new little boy suddenly in town that she hadn't remembered seeing before – frequently. She hadn't paid any special attention to it though; they were all little blondes and brunettes that could easily look the same. Was that all?, just the boys? No – Artemis was in Cresca as well – She was the first deity statue a parishioner would pass on the way into the temple, it was Her effigy sewn into the tapestries nearest the center altar. It was a falcon with an arrow clutched in its claw that topped the sign post at the edge of the main road into and out of Cresca – and Tai'gee had never noticed.

“You are our family; all of you. That's why we want you to stay,” Arteminius said softly.

“But...but why would they never tell me? Why wouldn't my aunt and uncles ever tell me?”

The thin man shrugged and resumed their walk. “I can only guess their reasons. Your aunt may never have known – she and Patrach weren't married at the time. Your mother wasn't alive very long once she got here either, I'm sad to say. She was about ready to give birth when she and your father arrived. I would guess your uncle Patrach didn't really get to know her before she died – Thalkus, I remember, wasn't even back yet from his wars. If your father really loved her it wouldn't surprise me if he was too hurt to speak of her again. But those are all guesses. The only way to know for sure is for you to ask them yourself.”

They both took a deep, thoughtful breath at the same time. Tai'gee ran an unsteady hand through her thick hair – she'd left it unbraided because of the morning coolness, but now she was rethinking putting it up. She looked down as they walked, watched her feet move over the ground in thin sandals. “Do you know all the Amazons in this town?”

“Yes, mostly. I know of them all, I should say rather.”

“You watch them? Us?”

Arteminius had a tick in his upper left cheek, Tai'gee noticed, whenever he talked specifically about his childhood. It reappeared as he began to talk. “When I arrived here I thought I was alone in the world. I felt rejected and unwanted. I was afraid and bitter. And then my uncle sat down with me one evening and told me I wasn't alone, he had been in my place once, as had my father, our neighbors, as many other little boys that would come here after me.” A large hand swatted the air before his square face, tired of the gnats that had gathered before his eyes. “He had a whole history in his head of our family... I was inspired. And it was the very next day when another boy came to town, sad, crying, scared – my uncle looked down at me and I just went up to him and told him not to be afraid, that I was his brother and he wasn't alone. We were best friends for years, and made a sort of welcoming committee for our new arrivals.”

Tai'gee couldn't believe all of this had been going on right in her face, before her very eyes. Perhaps it was easier to ignore the social structure when there weren't many other little girls to pull her into town to play. And even though there were some, Tai'gee's focus was in the woods

– once she'd met Kaija she hadn't paid the town much attention, the forest was where she spent most of her time, and where all of her interest was directed.

"I always thought it was a mistake they didn't send you to the Capitol as a child," the councilman's voice interrupted her thoughts. "You were a little Amazon from the very beginning."

"What do you mean, send me to the Capitol? Why would they do that?"

"A lot of us do that with our daughters. I sent mine. My daughter wouldn't have had any of the privileges or opportunities she deserves had I not sent her to the Capitol. You've seen for yourself how limiting life can be outside Amazon borders. I wanted my daughter to be limited if that's what she chose for herself, not because she had to be."

"When did you send your daughter?"

"After she was weaned of her mother. Of course I asked my wife – and it's so hard for a woman to give up her child, but she agreed with me. So we gave her to her cousin who still lived there. We have two older boys here with us; it helps having them, but it's still hard knowing I have a daughter out there that I'd love to raise myself."

"Did you see her in the parade? You should come to our camp and see if you recognize her – she may want to know her parents."

Tai'gee realized they had come to a modest mud brick home, clean, well made, similar to her own Crescan home. It sat close to the road, but a great space of land stretched back into the sprawling fields that turned into the rest of Greece. There was nothing tangled and impassible about this side of the village, which made it a perfect place for farmers and herders. When the councilman held up a finger to indicate a pause in their conversation and gave two quick, shrill whistles to the vastness behind his house, Tai'gee guessed he was either calling in his dogs, his herd, or his sons. Considering the comfortable house, he may have been calling in all three. "I wouldn't want to disrupt her life so drastically. We haven't heard about her in years; I assume it's because she's melted into her life there and that's fine by me."

"But what about her history? You were just saying how important you thought that all was for a person. Not your daughter?"

"She knows *of* us," he said after calling an hello into the house and waved for her to follow him around to the back, "it's not necessary for her to know us. We made a point that her guardian would let her know of her family here. If she'd wanted to come find us I'm sure she would have by now."

Tai'gee frowned as she followed the man through a thin-stick fence running from either side of the house. Outside, a weather beaten table sat feet from a back door, several grayed, well used chairs surrounded it, and a bowl of fresh, bright vegetables sat in one of the chairs, looking as though it had only just been abandoned. It was a working back yard, trampled into homespace

from years of use as a pre-kitchen, outer dining area, general family gathering space. A scraggly olive tree stretched off to the far side of the house, and an apple and a fig tree grew lushly on the closer side, providing welcome shade from the already overbearing, mid-morning Grecian sun. It was a content family home, but Tai'gee couldn't feel the contentment knowing this family was missing a member that could be only miles away if she was one of the many children they now had among them. She asked the man for his daughter's name. "Maybe if I know her I can at least tell you about her..."

The councilman's square face relaxed with a small, polite smile. "We aren't sad about giving her to the Amazons. We aren't pining for her – it was the right thing to do and we've all gone on about our lives." He held the smile, on his lips and with kind sincerity at the edges of his eyes. "But, to answer your question, we named her Elpida."

A stout woman tromped through the darkened doorway then, pointing an equally stout spoon at the man standing just outside the door. "You know I hate it when you call the boys in like that. No one else around here whistles their family in like dogs –" the woman's annoyed – but amusedly so – blue eyes flicked to the other person standing nearby, watching her with neatly arched eyebrows and a handsome bearing – "Oh! My Queen, I didn't realize you would be here –" amusedly annoyed blue eyes cut shyly back to her husband, "You could have said," she hissed, then bowed respectfully to her guest.

Arteminius only laughed. "If I thought the Queen was a particular stickler for decorum I'd have given you time to prepare, my wife, but we were only having a casual meeting and it just meandered to our back table." Here he bowed lowly to Tai'gee while he introduced his wife, who knelt her head. As a man paying respect to a woman in Amazon custom, Arteminius remained as low as possible to allow his wife the grace of elevation and presence. A loving grin accompanied his introduction, and Alegra raised her head with a matching smile.

Tai'gee motioned Arteminius to stand and accepted a cup of apple juice from Alegra. The stout woman took up her bowl of vegetables after pouring beverage for herself, her husband and two more for the young boys she knew would be joining them shortly. Arteminius offered the royal a seat, and took one himself after she'd sat. Casually he leaned back in his chair till he was resting on two legs against the fig tree – to which he reached up and plucked a fruit. "They aren't great to eat now, but they're in a perfect condition for making wine," he smiled. "I do like a nice fermented fig juice."

Alegra sighed. "He is a good winemaker," she admitted to Tai'gee as if it were being drug out of her. "The problem is, he enjoys his own talents too much – we could sell more of it if he cared less for the fruits of his labors!" she teased.

Her husband just shrugged lightly, a non-verbal 'What can I say?'

"But his honey mead, now there's a real treat. Actually, I'm glad you've come by, My Queen – I can give you a bottle of it myself and know you'll actually get to try it!"

Tai'gee smiled – and moreso at her host's affronted expression. “Please, you’re making me sound like a hopeless drunkard.”

“Oh – well I didn’t realize you were maintaining a hope in the matter. My apologies,” the woman closed her eyes and raised her eyebrows at the same time as she tisked contritely. “Oh look, here come the puppies to your call.”

“You know, it’s exactly the fact that everyone else stands out to bellow to their sons that makes my whistles the distinct signal our boys can recognize.”

“If you say so; but I have a feeling they’d recognize their names just as easily – what was it you insisted on naming them after again...the gods’ pet peeves was it?”

“There is nothing wrong with their names – and you were just as much involved with choosing them as you well know. And it was their pets – not their peeves.”

Tai'gee was chuckling with the banter. Alegra had an entertaining way of making everything sound like a heavy tragedy, and the Amazon Queen immediately thought Eponin would find the humor particularly amusing. Arteminius didn’t seem to mind at all being the butt of her jokes and good naturedly left her openings to work with at his expense.

A few minutes later two sapling youths joined their group, after pinning a small herd of goats. Tai'gee was eager to meet them; if they were anything like their parents, the boys should be a great deal of fun to get to know. They were both blue-eyed, sandy haired boys, like their parents. The obvious older boy had a curly tousle, a young boy’s muscle easily seen through his loose tunic. He leaned his shepherding staff against the pen and walked over with a proud confidence to show off for whoever his father had brought to visit. He didn’t bother to look behind him to see if his brother followed; he walked with the confidence of an older brother that knew his junior would trail him closely.

“Is this Her, Papa?” he asked shyly once he was close enough to suspect the guest might be someone important.

“Yes son; show your manners.”

Both boys dropped to one knee, bowed from their chests to lower their heads over their raised knee and greeted Her Ladyship with shy cordiality. Tai'gee beckoned them to stand; she watched with amusement as the oldest rose with a cocky shake of his head to toss his curls from his eyes. The younger followed up more slowly and kept his head low and a covered expression. She asked them their names, and the oldest answered for both of them, “I’m Centari and this is Pegasos.”

“You’re great big boys to be helping your father all on your own with the herding,” Tai'gee complimented.

“I’m twelve now,” answered Centari with a purely teenage bravado, “so I can handle it. But I’m studying, too.”

“Oh? For what?”

“Centari wants to go to Athens and be a senator,” Arteminius supplied with a small, fatherly smile. His eldest puffed again with pride.

“He won’t be able to do it,” said a much younger voice; while Centari’s voice was cracking with his change to manhood, Pegasos was still firmly in the grip of preadolescence. Still, the younger boy spoke with knowing insight, and that type of expression in such a youthful tone made one pause to wonder at the human-ness of the speaker. Tai’gee beckoned him forward.

“Why would you think that about your brother?”

“The Romans have taken over; they won’t let a Greek into their government.”

Centari didn’t appreciate the expression of doubt, especially coming from his little brother whom he had just helped get unstuck from a tight rock crevice that could easily have cost him his foot. He also didn’t appreciate that Pegasos had the Queen’s undivided attention and he was being ignored while they talked about him.

“We still have our own government,” Tai’gee supplied to the boy. He looked up at her then and the world stopped. Pegasos’ hair, unlike his brother’s, was like sand and it shifted in long straight lines over itself as he raised his head and teased about his clear azure eyes with golden delicacy. His body was thin, willowy, not the hearty musculature of his brother, but more an under-developed thinness that would make him look younger than his years for a long time to come. But it wasn’t just these features that made Tai’gee catch her breath – his discerning inspection of her from the very young, very blue eyes forced an image of another young perceptive she had raised and loved and lost. She let him search her, much the way Pi had, never really knowing what it was they were looking for in their observation.

“We don’t govern ourselves, Rome does. They let us keep the officials because they think it will keep us happy. The Romans control everything.” Seriousness in a child was intimidating she thought, and somehow unnatural, but she also considered the great oracles and soothsayers and knew that sometimes special gifts came to a person at whatever price tag they required. Childhood was so fleeting perhaps the gods thought it wasn’t all that much a price for this youth to pay, or that no greater price could be paid which made it a highly valuable exchange.

Tai’gee looked at Centari who maintained an undignified scowl at the attack on his ambitions, then to Arteminius who gazed at his youngest son with a quiet introspection of his own. The youth sounded so eerily sure of what he’d intimated that Tai’gee was apprehensive about continuing the conversation. She let her eyes tell him first that she was going to change the subject, and some subtle flexing in his clear blue gaze let her know that was alright. “So, what have you thought about what you want to do?”

Again the boy's face and composure demonstrated a prophetic knowing; Tai'gee had to wonder if his childhood had quite passed him by and, with sadness, if he ever laughed. "I'll either be a priest or go to the army. The farm will go to Centari because he's the oldest."

"I don't want it," Centari jumped in, "I'm going to be a Senator so you can have it." Naturally he hadn't made his gift of abdication to spite his father but he didn't have the awareness to see how it would come out. Of course the Queen knew that Centari would have to own his father's farm if he wanted to be a Senator – the Greek government only catered to landowning men and that would be his first requirement to attain his precious dream. Considering how ambitious he was, Tai'gee suspected Centari may well be owner of quite a few farms before all was said and done.

Tai'gee patted the youngest boy's thin shoulder and shuddered again at the similarity to Pi's before offering a fairly weak smile to both of them. "You're both still very young and have plenty of time to work out your plans."

Alegra took the chance to point out the cups of juice to her children, and offer a midday meal to her guest. Tai'gee of course accepted, and enjoyed a long, lazy repast with the jovial family. As the sun turned toward afternoon, she allowed the giddy boys to show her around their pastures and show her the many tricks they'd taught their dogs. Once she'd returned, Alegra had set a light table for the early evening, and yet again Tai'gee enjoyed their company over food and drink. Finally she turned to the quietly watching parents after a lull in conversation. "It's getting late; I need to get back. Thank you Arteminius for talking with me today. I'm sure we'll talk again soon; we need to."

The elder man didn't dare extend his hand to her as she didn't put hers forth first, but he was sincere in his appreciation of meeting with her and glad to have introduced his family to her. Alegra bowed again respectfully and Tai'gee gave the stouter woman's shoulders a friendly squeeze and all four waved her off from their home, with a bottle of honey mead just as Alegra had promised. She hadn't gone far before knowing she was being followed and stopped in the middle of the hard caked road for her pursuer to acknowledge himself. More accurately, herself, as was the case.

"The Lioness sent me," Beckries supplied with a degree of shyness.

"I do hope you were letting me know you were there on purpose," Tai'gee teased. "I'd hate to think all of these days of lethargy in these nice woods of Cresca are encroaching on our stealth."

Beckries' glance shifted off to the side in mild embarrassment. She hadn't been trying to be secretive which is why she was noticed, but what embarrassed her was that she hadn't thought to be secretive. "I apologize, my Lady. The Lioness should have sent a more responsible guard."

"Relax Beck. I'm just teasing you." Tai'gee dismissed everything with a deep intake of dusky air. Dust, heat and twilight made a pleasant mix, though of course not the same sort of pleasant as the dawn freshness. Around them the wide street grew dim then dark and the half-moon

overhead was eerily as bright as a full one; visibility was not a problem. “When do you suppose tomorrow comes?” the young Queen mused.

“My Queen?”

Loose, dark hair hung in obeisance to gravity as Tai’gee lifted her face to the sky and idly studied the stars and the dark spaces between them. “Right now it’s today. And the moon is hardly ever at its highest point at midnight – it can be out during midday – so when do we know that today has turned into tomorrow?”

The duty-stiff guard looked covertly at her queen...and wondered about the significance of the question. ‘Does it matter when one day turns into the next?’ She also wondered if she wasn’t the only one getting lost in the laziness of the village.

Tai’gee continued with her musing even though her companion hadn’t offered anything. “I’ve heard there is a great machine in Athens that can tell us the days and times and seasons – that it can predict where the stars will be in the future. I wonder if it would know when tomorrow comes...”

“That seems like a lot to keep up with,” said Beckries doubtfully. “Is it magic? Is it something the gods enchanted?”

“No, not at all – I heard they’ve done it with math. Some kind of math based on the stars. We have a great many scholars you know.”

Beckries only nodded. She was a practical person and didn’t see how useful some great machine would be; what did it matter if it said on which day a season would fall – there were still the needs of the season to deal with. Mentally she shrugged, done with the whole ponderance, but outwardly she didn’t let so much as a tick of her skeptical boredom show.

Around them the night bloomed in the murky darkness only truly unending days of heat can create. Cresca slowed down considerably around them, the town’s activities going into sludge-like motion, buildings and people merged into one blurry landscape, life became shadowed and unsure. The swelter that had built all day behind Apollo’s chariot continued to bake the earth – the heat radiated off of the plastered homes and buildings from feet away; Tai’gee and Beckries both could feel the emissions like they were putting their hands too close to a smoldering fire. The various trees dotting all over the village were burned so badly by the relentless Sun God that their leaves had taken the color of spent fall and sagged too limp to be identified as one kind of leaf from its neighboring trees’ leaves. Heat made the dirt smell, the earth smelled of an unwashed musk just the same as human skin browning in bright, baking sunlight. Tai’gee took a deep breath of that musk and let her mind wander as she and Beckries continued to stroll across the back end of town.

And it wandered right back to Pegasos. He could’ve been Pi’s twin, but they weren’t the same age. It was uncanny how much they were alike in body and behavior. The behavior is really what kept grabbing at the young Queen – how many unrelated children perceived the world with

more insight than an adult? How special was that?, or was it just destabilizing, surprising, unexpected and really quite common for a child to say something that would stop an adult cold to consider? Full lips pulled tight, and Tai'gee thought that wasn't fair to Pi or Pegasos— the things they said, the things they thought, the things they expressed to others weren't just simple turns-of-phrase or a child's uncomplicated or unpolluted point of view. They spoke to the *truth* of things, they saw the *truth* of things and laid it bear for questioning and explanation before others – they rolled it all out in one smooth motion like unrolling a carpet, spread it there in all its flat obviousness and while they stood at the long end farthest away they pointed out some detail in the middle and made it the undeniable center of attention. 'And once they did that, not answering, not acknowledging what they said isn't a comfortable or suitable option,' Tai'gee thought.

But then there were other things they said and did that weren't really clear or obvious. Tai'gee was never sure how Pi had felt about her; as an adoptive parent she'd loved Pi greatly and was sent into a world of depression after finding out she'd been killed. But Pi was so studious, so distant in her intuitive pondering that Tai'gee could never say with one-hundred percent certainty that she'd earned the young girl's love and trust in its entirety. They had a different relationship than Pi and Kaija did – she could look at the two of them together and see their unconditional love for each other; how they acted towards each other left no doubt about how they felt. Which made Tai'gee wonder all the more how exactly Pi had felt about her. *'Would it matter if I ever found out she didn't love me like a mom as much as I loved her as a daughter?'* 'No. It wasn't her job to love me like I loved her; it was my job to love her as much as I still do.' *'So what am I looking for in the approval of this girl? I'll love her no matter what; why does it matter if I know she loved me back?'* Tai'gee glanced at the million stars hovering silently above her – and added idly to herself that people wonder the same about them – do they care about us up there in their darkness? *'They go away in the morning and we are still here to wonder about them when there's nothing to see but starless sky.'*

On a deep intake of air Tai'gee realized they were going to pass her aunt and uncle's house. Mian, she knew, would be glad to see her, would be happy to meet Beckries, would make them welcome. Patrach, if he were home, she was sure wouldn't want her there. Was it worth the strain she knew it would cause if they stopped for an unannounced visit? She hadn't decided as they walked past the first corner of the house, nor after they'd passed the front door, nor after leaving the last corner behind them in the darker end of dusk. Instead, Tai'gee went back to thinking about Pi, and Pegasos and mothers and daughters. "I'm an Amazon," she said with a sudden jolt of realization.

Beckries' eyes cut to her in a bothered and concerned way; she knew there was a whole lot of thought behind her Queen's testament, but not knowing what it was made it sound like an invalid's enlightenment at best. "Yes...you were inducted years ago."

"No – no, my mother was an Amazon. I just found out. She was an Amazon Beck – this, my entire village – this entire village is Amazon. It's mostly Amazon sons."

That raised the guard's eyebrows high. "That explains why they ask so many questions about us," she said at length. "I'm glad to hear that actually, because if they were really just that interested in getting to know us I think that's way too creepy."

Tai'gee gave a small laugh and agreed. "They want us to stay, make one big happy family."

"Stay? With men?"

"Do you dislike men so much?"

The guard knit her brow together tightly. "Are you really considering it? I mean...live with men?"

"We'd get to stay in Greece..."

"But...we wouldn't be Amazons anymore. We'd have to give up our lives, our identity...we couldn't be Amazons with men in our lives that closely. That's the whole point."

Tai'gee smiled. "Yes, I know – I just wanted to see what you'd say. And no, I'm not really considering it. I have no intention of merging with the Crescan men, especially if they're our Brothers – that's just incestuous." They both looked at each other and shuddered. "Besides, we have to put more distance between ourselves and the Romans, and Cresca doesn't give us that space."

"So...your mother was an Amazon? But you didn't grow up with us... Why'd she leave us?"

"I don't know." Tai'gee shook her head sadly, and restrained herself from turning back to go ask her aunt and uncle that, and many other questions. "I don't know anything about her other than she was an Amazon, and she came here with my father and died in childbirth. None of my family ever mentioned her. Maybe I would have come to Amazon land long ago if she'd lived." 'And then I may never have met Kaija...' She wasn't sure that was a good trade.

"What about the Lioness' mom – was she an Amazon, too?"

'Good question.' "I don't know that either. I think Arteminius might know."

Beckries smirked. "We should've known he was an Amazon son right off with that name. Only an Amazon would name her son after a goddess." They both laughed and pushed through the final few dozen yards into the fire lit Amazon camp.

PART 2

I

"Mama look! It's not flat out here!"

Seema and Meica had gone off the road to play in the grasses while the rest of the caravan continued their sojourn. Every now and then they could see the tops of their chestnut heads bounding over the brush and grass. Watching them for a few moments made it very clear the land through which they walked was definitely not flat. It was more rolling, but the monotony of the growth and colors made it look even and boring. ‘It would be the perfect place for an ambush,’ Tai’gee’s warrior instincts whispered to her.

She didn’t doubt that most of the warriors were thinking the same thing. Kaija had been extra vigilant, scouting ahead hundreds of yards looking for anything that might hint at trouble. She had gone miles ahead of them at one point until she’d come to a crossroads before doubling back. The roads were empty she said, and there were no homes or businesses to be seen, no reason they should meet any other travelers for the next many candelmarks.

“Meica, Seema – come out of there. Stay on the road where I can see you.”

Two brown heads popped up from a nearby bush. “But Mama,” one of them whined – it was impossible to tell them apart from a distance – “there isn’t enough room on the road for us to play.”

“Play at the rear, behind the last wagon.”

“That’s no fun. We spend all the time avoiding horse piles.”

Tai’gee could hear Dotra laugh and she smiled herself.

“Alright,” she relented, “but no more than two lances from the roadside and keep up with us.”

“Yes Mama!” they agreed in unison.

They’d left Cresca after the winter rains had stopped. The majority of the town was sad to see them go, but it wasn’t a departure that could be put off any longer. The Sphinx’ vast forests were starting to tire with the growing Amazons’ needs and everyday Tai’gee’s paranoia of being followed and trapped expanded. ‘I don’t feel safe stopping until we’re well away from Romans and their conquered allies; this just isn’t far enough.’ For the most part everyone else seemed to understand that; Arteminius was the most difficult to convince.

“We can protect you – we will protect you. You’re our family and we’ll stick beside you.”

“And risk having your entire lives destroyed.”

Arteminius frowned at Tai’gee’s direct conclusion. “There’s no guarantee of that. Many times the small and unexpected has triumphed over the massive and obvious.”

Tai’gee had placed a friendly hand on Arteminius’ broad shoulder. “Brother,” she said sincerely, “Cresca would be destroyed, no matter the outcome. Win or lose, the dead would be irretrievable, and the living would never be the same. Think of your sons-”

“My sons would be fine without me-”

“But would you be fine without them?” the Queen asked sharply. “I lost my daughter to Rome. That’s a whole different proposition by which to live your life.” Dark eyes softened as troubled blue eyes looked elsewhere in consideration and, probably, for another line of argument.

“Arteminius, when war comes to your home – not a battlefield, not some piece of land far away from your daily life – but your front door, you have to consider different things. What’s important to you? I know you well enough to say your family. Rome is coming – you have to decide what’s going to be best for your family when they get here.”

Tai’gee knew Arteminius knew she was right, but he sulked anyway. She appreciated it – his sadness to see them go meant he cared for them greatly, and that was incredibly comforting to Tai’gee. Even moreso since Patrach had emerged from his silent, seething funk once learning the Amazons were moving on, and made it out to the main square as the last of the Queen’s entourage was turning to leave.

“Great – so now that you’ve been here and cleaned out our woods, used us for everything you needed, what’s left for us?” he called out. “When the Roman soldiers come here after you and find we’ve harbored Amazons what protection will we have from you?”

He raved alone in the square, the rest of the Crescans kept their distance from him, but Tai’gee didn’t miss some of the wary, uncertain expressions of many of the townspeople as they considered what he was yelling. And neither did Patrach. “You ungrateful harlots! You and your godless, heathen beast – you’ve cursed us just like your demon sire did! We’ll all be crucified because you were here and no difference to you!”

The entourage pulled further out of town, stiff backs set to barricade themselves from Patrach’s increasingly hysterical shouts.

“You know it’s true,” he screamed – his voice was screeching in and out with passion. “We’ll all be killed because of you – you’ve sacrificed us! After all we’ve done for you – took your orphaned sons! sent you our daughters! let you hide in our woods! – and you abandon us to death! You’ve destroyed us all!”

“My Queen?” Beckries looked at her queen with concern. Tai’gee’s face had pulled into grim lines and the younger guard could hear the grinding of teeth.

“Keep going as you are; if we change anything we give him the satisfaction of knowing we acknowledge him.” By example, Tai’gee remained as she was, not so much as shifting in her saddle though her big, curving knife was rubbing uncomfortably against her leg. She didn’t even turn her head to smile and wave at the young villagers who’d come out to see them off, though out of the corner of her eye she could see their worried faces staring.

“Do you hear me? We’re ruined! You’ve killed us!”

“Uncle of Tai’gee.”

The clean growl behind the man startled him into silence and he wheeled to face hard golden eyes. “You have said enough. Be quiet.”

Patrach recoiled with disgust. “Get away from me,” he hissed. “You gods-damned animal – get away from me!”

Kaija did not get away, she moved closer, narrowing the distance between them into dangerous nonexistence. “You are the threat to this town. If you betray them to the Romans, I will come for you. If you betray us to the Romans, I will come for you.”

“You won’t have to, Lioness,” said Mian firmly as she headed a group of determined followers. “If he does any such thing, we will come for him.” Alegra and Arteminius backed her up with arms crossed and twin threatening glares for the red-faced man.

Patrach was cornered and he, for once, had the sense to recognize it. He swallowed all of his insults and protests in one large gulp and pitifully slunk away. Kaija watched him with a measuring gaze then moved to rejoin her people. As he disappeared into the alleys and shadows, Mian wheeled to watch the last of the Amazon parade move out of the main square and loosed an impressively loud screaming cheer in salute, which was immediately redoubled by every woman in the village. In response, every man and boy bowed lowly. The sentiment brought quick tears to Tai’gee’s eyes, but she returned her own warrior scream through them, as did each of her Amazons. She liked to think the united energy of their cheers blanketed Cresca and did indeed lay a curse to protect it against any aggressor.

That had been days ago, and the damp, puddle potted road they traveled had spread an equal dampening on their enthusiasm. They were back in the uncertain Outer World, refugees, travelers into the unknown. Even though their band had swelled to over two hundred women and children, and even though they were each and all as brave as could be expected of any warrior, constant, unending uncertainty had a way of chipping at bravery. And so did deceitful scrub flats. When Kaija brought back news of what they were getting ready to head into, Tai’gee cringed.

Kaija had nodded towards the road ahead. “The woods end a little more up this way. It becomes rolling brushland.”

It wasn’t news Tai’gee had hoped for; she wasn’t ready yet to have the physical landscape affirm to her they were summarily heading out of Greece, if not already out of it. “I don’t think we need to sleep out of our element too soon. Do you?”

“I think taking some time to hunt and collect water would be good before we go into the plains.”

“This isn’t the best place for a camp though,” Tai’gee offered while looking around. “I’m sure travelers in either direction stop here frequently to sleep among the trees... which means game may be scarce, as well as privacy.”

Kaija nodded at her conclusion. “Or we move on – those are our choices.”

They’d moved on and had been moving through the windswept, scraggle branched plains for several days, grateful that the heavy, roiling clouds overhead held onto their rains for some other location. The dim, low clouds reflected an orange glow well ahead of them that could only mean a city lay in their path. Tai’gee wasn’t altogether excited about that either – cities meant people, lots of them, and all of the temptations they brought with them: exposure, spending money, questions and explanations, not to mention keeping track of all of her company. Tai’gee had everyone bed down where they were, too far to venture to the city and back during the spring-short night, far enough hopefully for anyone else to meet them. She’d see if any of them were interested in stopping in the city later, but didn’t want to deal with it sooner than necessary.

They found that the brush actually had several advantages: it gave them great cover, they were practically invisible amidst the tight branches; it was a great wind break, providing thick shelter from the naggingly cold wind, but also keeping in the warmth from their low fires. The hungry Amazons also found that they weren’t the only ones sheltering among the thickets: rabbits, game birds, and foxes abounded. They had no want of fresh meat. They did have need of water however, not only to drink but also to bathe. Cleanliness was an important part of daily Amazonian life and they were used to taking at least one bath a day and more if there was opportunity or desire. They had created elaborate plumbing systems to bring water to their homes – systems they had shared with the Romans among others. They weren’t in their cozy, technologically advanced homes anymore though and had to rely on what nature gave them and how they could use it. Without a body of water to make use of, they had to resort to regarding water as a commodity to be bought and traded for. Using the skins from their kills as tradefare they went to buy water and bathe at inns or towns or wherever else they could.

After the second day of sequestering themselves in the rest-providing shrubbery, Tai’gee allowed the Yearies to go to the city in search of water and any other provisions that had been listed as they re-inventoried their supplies. “Fabric – I have got to make some new clothes. Or fix the ones we have,” Sentenia had called out. She gave the young warriors some dinars and said she didn’t care what colors they brought back, just to use their good judgment. With that and a couple other special orders the small group had happily set off. The rest occupied themselves with whatever satisfied them – for Tai’gee and Kaija, it was taking a nap.

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When the royal couple awoke, the sun had passed its zenith and the blue morning sky had acquired a slim veil of dust, turning it to a duny azure. The children were off with Cheelopi, who’d volunteered to use the close interior of the brush as a teaching ground for stalking and setting snares. It was quiet in the encampment without the rummagings of the kids, but none of the remaining women – especially the mothers – were going to begrudge the serenity. ‘Getting the privilege to sleep in hardly ever happened at home, even on festival days.’ A village life might have been more settled, but there was always a regimen of work to be done for all its habitants... at least it was so in the Amazon villages. ‘I do remember several perpetually unoccupied people in Cresca though.’

A little ways off Tai'gee heard the clack-clack of staffs hitting each other. She sought out the sound, and found Beckries with Shingari who'd gone to the road for a sparring session, working with staffs to avoid looking too threatening should anyone go by. As she emerged from the brush they wound up a final maneuver and turned to her panting.

"Queen Tai'gee," nodded Beckries, "care to join us?"

"Not at the moment, no thank you." She looked up and down the road which seemed empty. In the brighter sunlight, as opposed to the low clouds and night before, she could see all the way to the city walls, though they were heat-streaked. "Has there been much activity?"

"Some," answered Shingari. "In both ways. Probably a good thing – otherwise it'd be a pretty sorry city."

Satisfied, Tai'gee went back to her space, a narrow ring they'd cleared of brush and smoothed by crushing the high grass; the sandy soil was soft enough, but the grass provided extra cushion and after sleeping constantly on lumpy earth full of rocks and roots 'the softer the better!' The road was low among the brush spreading out from it, and the further depressions and basins radiating out that Seema and Meica had so innocently illuminated made it so the Amazons could actually stand at full height in some places and not be seen from the road at all. The bushes protecting them were tough, scraggly things, dropping very few limbs and leaves, so with the trained stealth of the women they could even move through the foliage without making a sound. It was a great hiding place that allowed them all kinds of freedom and space to rest and recoup. Tai'gee was happy for the break for her people; they would've forged on the instant she asked it of them, but this was a needed respite and she wasn't going to waste the opportunity of a little relaxation. She smiled as Kaija brought over a couple of quail for their dinner; they cooked them at Beckries' fire with Emelia, Eponin, Shingari and Latrez.

"The Yearies haven't returned yet," Emelia said as she waved her spoon to cool her stew.

"Probably taking their time. This is the first city they've ever been to. Maybe we should have gone with them so they wouldn't get overwhelmed," Eponin chuckled.

"They're big girls, they can take care of themselves," Tai'gee replied.

"Besides, there's nothing like a fight when you're fighting for someone," added Shingari.

"What do you mean?" asked Kaija.

"Rickel and Rosa, aren't they together now? If anything were to happen, they'll be all the more focused on taking care of each other," she clarified.

"Mm, young love," hummed Eponin. "You know what we need – a song. Latrez, sing for us!"

“You know warriors can’t sing,” she laughed, as did the rest of them. “With all of our war cries we tear the parts of our throats that would sing.”

“I know why she doesn’t sing,” Ep teased. “She’s never been in love before. She’d sing if she was in loooooove!” She warbled the word for effect, getting the desired rise out of the warrior.

“Why don’t you sing since you know so much about love,” she pouted as her playful swats were easily batted away.

“I’m injured.” Eponin sat back, crossing her hands behind her head, with a particularly lecherous grin. “Besides, I never claimed to ever have been in love – I’m a woman of lust and passion.”

Everyone had her own reactions to that, which, Tai’gee noticed, ranged from slight blushes to congratulatory slaps on the back.

“Xena could sing, and who could possibly do her war cry? Just trying makes my throat hurt,” Emelia gagged for emphasis.

“Nobody could do half of what she could do,” said Beckries and they all nodded solemnly.

“What about that fish thing?” Shingari asked.

“Fish thing?”

“Yeah, throwing the fish into the sky with the polar star. Do you think she really did that?”

On cue they all looked up, immediately finding the star in question.

“It does kind of look like a fish,” Emelia offered tentatively.

“Could be a shark,” suggested Latrez.

“How do you know, you’ve never seen a shark.”

“And you’ve never seen a bear, but you still know what one looks like Beckries.”

“I don’t see a fish at all,” Shingari cut in. “I see a torch.”

“With all those stars you could see anything you wanted. Fish, shark, torch –”

“What do you mean there is a fish up there?”

Tai’gee looked at Kaija who was earnestly studying the sky. “Fish do not live in the sky,” Kaija added looking at her wife with innocent confusion.

Tai'gee wondered. "What do you see up there? At night, what do you see?"

Kaija looked up again. They all waited now, watched her, looked at the sky, curious as to what her powerful eyes perceived. Kaija's eyes were two massive pupils in the darkness; there was a slice of golden ring surrounding them but it wasn't visible in the fire light.

"Mist. A frozen mist," she said at length. "But only when there is no fire. Fire makes it harder to see. I see the moon when it is there. Not tonight."

"You don't see any spots? Little dots – little white dots?" asked Eponin.

Kaija looked again. There was a particular twitch, very subtle at the tails of Kaija's eyebrows Tai'gee noticed many years ago that meant Kaija wanted to see what someone else saw, but didn't. Tai'gee knew it saddened Kaija when she couldn't experience what others were experiencing and she reached over to rub her back, tactilely telling her it was ok to say no.

"That is what you see? Dots?" Everyone nodded. "And the dots make pictures?" Everyone nodded again. Kaija nodded, though she didn't understand.

"Can you picture a field of dandelions?" Tai'gee asked her quickly. "When they're all white and puffy." She nodded. "That's kind of like what we see up there."

"Yeah, and sometimes, when one of those little wispy parts break off, and go blowing across the field, we see that like a shooting star!" Shingari added.

Kaija looked up again, then a wide smile streaked her face, spreading to all the rest of them. "Do the dots make you sneeze like the dandelions?"

That got another round of laughter. As they quieted down, several voices picked up in song at a nearby fire where the mothers and children were. They only waited a moment before communally deciding to join them and doused their fire as they left. It was easy to join into these songs. They started off as children's ditties of heroes and Artemis, legends, then moved into more patriotic psalms of old Queens and their own great warriors. Then Falcon released her voice on a moving song Xena had once sung on one of her rare visits to the mainstay. They were all surprised when Falcon's soprano rose to meet every note like a shining sword in a slow demonstration, easily cutting through the air, bringing tears to some of their eyes. They didn't know she could sing – she was like Noki, a loner who enjoyed her own company more often than others. After only a little while, Kaija curled up next to her wife, laying her shaggy head in her lap. Tai'gee could feel purring on her leg, and smiled at how soothed Kaija was by Falcon's song. As she listened she stroked Kaija's thick hair.

It had gone back to the coarse scraggle typical of her childhood when she wasn't there everyday to comb it for her. Tai'gee was sure if she'd tried now she'd find several mats and snarls. Not that she would have cared – she was happiest about the fact that Kaija didn't bathe like her father, licking herself clean. She wouldn't have been able to stand that, and since that wasn't the case, she'd never ask anything else of Kaija regarding hygiene.

As Falcon prepared to move into the second half of the love song, Kaija started in Tai'gee's arms – it wasn't long before they all heard why. Someone was crashing through the scrub bush, heading straight towards them. Kaija jumped into a defensive crawl, pushing Tai'gee behind her, backing her up while Cheelopi advanced with arrow fitted and ready. Just before she let it fly, two hurried cricket chirps sounded and Eutries burst into view. Everyone let loose her tensed breath.

“Gods be damned Eutries, you have got to learn to signal sooner or you'll be scouting for Artemis sooner than you expect,” Tai'gee scolded as she stood up from her crouch behind Kaija.

“I'm sorry my Lady, but I just heard from some people passing by – they say there are Amazons imprisoned in the city. They expect their sentence to be carried out tomorrow.”

“Where are the Yearies – they went to the city today,” demanded Dotra.

“They haven't returned,” Eutries answered.

“None of them? Did those people say why they would be in jail?” she asked.

Eutries shook her head no. “I only overheard their conversation. They were wondering what sentence would be imposed tomorrow on thieving Amazons. Another said he hoped they were in the safest part of the prison so they couldn't escape.”

“You're sure of what you heard – absolutely sure?” Tai'gee had to press her, it was too serious an issue for there to be any doubt.

She nodded. “Yes my Queen. I was only a couple feet from where they passed and they were loud.”

Tai'gee could feel everyone's eyes on her waiting for a decision. She tried not to frown as she made up her mind, but she had a feeling the joviality and peace they had just enjoyed would be a long time coming again.

“Break camp. I want everyone ready to go in a half candlemark. Eutries, find Blue-wren. Go to the city and find out who I need to talk to about this. Do not announce us. I want all guards and huntresses dressed and armed for a royal entrance into the city by the time we arrive at the walls.”

Everyone moved away to carry out her orders. As Beckries passed by, Tai'gee pulled her aside. “I want you to ride as my second in command.” The young guard bowed and moved away quickly to get ready. Eponin hobbled over, too, with Kaija by her side.

“Eponin, when we get to the city I want you to stay with the wagons. When the time comes we may need to make a hasty exit and I want you to orchestrate it. Keep whatever guards with you that you'll need to get us moving and quickly.”

“Yes my Queen,” she bowed her head with all seriousness.

That left her with Kaija who was frowning severely. “We need to get dressed. Come on,” Tai’gee said gently, and let some of her sadness seep into her voice.

II

They arrived at the city – which they knew was called Maridian by then – as dawn broke. Tai’gee knew all the warriors felt bedraggled, but they looked great. Her warriors were armed and dressed in their finest and everyone, including the children, was alert, attentive and cooperative. They met Blue-wren and Eutries at the front gate. The high stone and wood walls betrayed nothing, but the awkwardly massive gate suggested the people of the city had never had to defend it. ‘That thing looks like it’d take an hour to close,’ the dark haired Queen thought, unimpressed. At a second glance she added, ‘nevermind – it may well take them days; the hinges are rusted.’

Blue-wren and Eutries approached her as she moved her big mare up closer to the gate. They both bowed deeply and Eutries began to explain there was a man in charge of prisoners and the court who she needed to talk to. “They call him the Officiate. He lives at the prison, on the east side of the city. That’s where all of the Yearies are.”

“Were you able to find out why?”

Blue-wren shook her head no. “No one would talk to us about anything; only the guard at the gate who told us about the Officiate.”

Glancing at the gate Tai’gee could see a couple of heavily armored men peeking around the walls at them. Even in that brief moment she knew their children could have felled those men. ‘I mean really – how do you maintain respect for a man who peeks around his city skirts like a shy babe?’

Fifteen women accompanied Tai’gee to the gates, Eutries and Blue-wren riding in front, Kaija on her left, Beckries on her right, Cho-chin – their only surviving master swordswoman at her back with Noki, Falcon and Latrez. The others followed, robed, armed, riding tall and looking every bit as serious as Charon coming to collect his dues. As they approached the gate, one of the guards – a mere boy from the look of him – hailed them to stop.

“Who approaches Maridian?”

“The Queen of the Nation of Artemis, Patron Goddess of the Amazons, wishes a meeting with the Honorable Officiate of Maridian,” Blue-wren announced loud and clear. Many people near the gate both inside and out stopped in their paths to look at them – Tai’gee took great pride in the scene they were creating.

The young guard wasn't expecting the official announcement he received, so he tried to raise himself to their formality by puffing out his chest and staring ahead to nothing in particular. It may have been a sneeze, but there was something suspiciously snort-like from the royal contingent, when the guard practically yelled his reply.

"The Honorable Officiate has been expecting you! I will take you to him!"

The guard didn't take a horse; he walked, forcing them to an ambling stroll through the city behind him. The young Queen didn't appreciate the pace since she just wanted to get her girls and leave as soon as possible. At length, after startling most of the city's early risers with their fierce entourage, they arrived at the prison – an obvious stone mass, sunken beneath ground level, with few windows and less character than one of the quarry stones for the pyramids.

The guard led the way around the prison to the south side where an extension had been built, clearly as an afterthought. It looked like half a house had been hurriedly stuck onto the prison wall and as their entourage regrouped, the front door opened. A man emerged; the first thing Tai'gee noticed was the absurdly large, gold medallion swinging from his neck. As he came fully into the morning sunlight he raised his arms in greeting and smiled. Kaija immediately hissed, making her and Cho-chin's horse skitter.

"What is it?" Tai'gee asked her under her breath.

"Something," she growled back lowly.

Well, Kaija took a quick dislike to this man, so the Queen studied him closely as his guard came up to make introductions. The new man was handsome, wearing fine red and blue robes. He wore his hair long and loose like the centaurs, and when he spoke finally, his voice was a rolling baritone.

"My Queen – let me be the first to welcome you to Maridian. It is an honor to have you and your people visiting our city." He was unfailingly inviting, arms still thrown wide as he gestured to them all. The Amazons remained sober, committed nothing to expression, and remained vigilant. Tai'gee was so proud. "What do I owe for the grace of your presence?" he asked finally.

Tai'gee urged her mount forward, Kaija and Beckries following close behind. She preferred to stay mounted – extending the length of time for him look up at her was a trick Solari, Ephiny's second in command, had taught her: "the longer you stay mounted, the more time a man will have to absorb that you are not his equal nor beneath him. Once you feel he understands that point, then dismount."

"I do apologize for awakening you at this early hour, though it seems you were expecting us – your guard said you knew we were coming and that you oversee any prisoners arrested here."

"That is true," said the man sprightly, "and my common name is Mathus."

Tai'gee gave a nod before deciding to dismount, her two closest joined her. Turtle came up to hold their horses, leaving the Queen free to shake Mathus' forearm. "This is Beckries and my Consort, Kaija." She didn't feel yet he deserved her name.

"I am glad to meet you all," he said with a toothy smile. "Perhaps your women would like breakfast? The Shumants have an inn not far from here – in fact you passed it along the way. They serve the best food in town; I'm sure they would be happy to accommodate them."

"That won't be necessary," Tai'gee answered with a smile of her own. "We are passing through and hope to be on our way soon."

"Very well; what can I do for you?"

"Some of my Amazons planned to come visit the city yesterday and did not return to us last night. My scouts heard they may have gotten into some trouble here."

"Ah, yes I see. But," he said with a cheerful bark, "this is nothing to discuss in the open. Would you care to join me?" He waved towards the cottage he had come from earlier and the three of them followed him inside, Cho-chin and Shingari taking up guard positions by the door.

The cottage was functional and boring, but that wasn't unexpected. It seemed the good Officiate was more interested in spending his money on clothes and appearance than the comfort of his home. It was a one room rectangle, sleeping pallet at one end, shabby fireplace not far from it, and a desk at the other end, either unused or obsessively kept. A door directly in the middle of the wall seemed to lead into the prison – Tai'gee wondered a moment at the wisdom of the convenience. 'You wager heavily on their not being a prison break or a guard riot in the night...'

"Please have a seat," Mathus offered as he pulled out his own chair and sat behind his desk. Kaija and Tai'gee took the two chairs directly in front of him, while Beckries stood behind her. "Down to business then." He pulled a quill from a nearby well and seemed to prepare to dictate everything they were going to say.

"Is it true my Amazons are being held here?" Tai'gee asked plainly.

He answered matter-of-factly. "Yes it is. Four young women are currently detained in my prison. I would tell you more of them but they refused to give me their names."

"What are they charged with?"

"Theft, disturbing the peace, assaulting officers of the law."

"And will there be a trial?"

“We don’t have trials for these types of offenses. I judge matters such as these myself. Having gathered all of the necessary evidence, I have found them guilty and the remainder of their sentences shall be carried out today.”

“What is their sentence?”

He looked up a moment from his scribbling and, to her, his expression had a ghost of a smile. “For the offenses to the peace and my officers a day and night in jail. For the theft, the removal of one hand from each.”

Beckries jumped forward, her hand dropping to her sword. “That’s outrageous,” she bellowed.

Cho-chin and Shingari immediately stormed the room, prepared for whatever had caused the outburst. Mathus’ own guard followed latently behind though it was obvious he was at a loss as to what to do with two armed Amazons in front of him and a dozen more behind.

“Stand down,” Tai’gee commanded. “Go back outside.”

They bowed obediently and pushed the gaping guard ahead of them, shutting the door.

“Beckries, hold your tongue.”

“Yes my Queen,” she answered softly and the younger warrior stepped back.

“Mathus, I’m sure we can arrange some other punishment if you’re certain of their guilt.”

“I’m sorry, that is not possible,” he said succinctly. Tai’gee was beginning to get very irritated with his smug clipiness, but was determined to remain a pleasant diplomat.

“Sir, with all respect, if their offenses are not severe enough to warrant a trial then they would seem to be charged of misdemeanors – lesser crimes that come with varying and malleable retributions-”

“I know what misdemeanors are,” his baritone sounded frankly, “and for each common crime I have set standard punishments so that all those committing those crimes will know the price of their actions. Minor theft warrants the removal of a hand – ask anyone in town; they will be able to tell you this.”

Tai’gee frowned deeply but remained persistent. “What are they accused of stealing?”

“Some knives apparently. The vendor couldn’t see which one did it in particular that’s why the sentence was extended to all four.”

“Were the knives recovered?”

“No. I suspect when they were called on their act they threw the weapons away and some other person has picked them up and run off with them. In the fray your girls caused when my men were trying to arrest them, those were easy things to make off with, I’m sure.”

Tai’gee didn’t miss his condescension and were he to have so daring a tongue in earlier times, ‘I’m sure there were Queens who would have had it removed.’ She toyed with the idea for a moment, lingering in the thrill it gave her, but soon discarded it. She didn’t have the same powerful Nation of the former Queens – her battles needed to be picked with care.

“If the knives were not recovered, the merchant didn’t see anything clearly and you have no confessions, what has convinced you of their guilt? If you’re wrong, their price would be uncorrectable.”

“There were many witnesses, all with the same story,” he said with a confident smile. Smoothly returning his quill to its well, the handsome man folded his large hands over his writings, surely smearing the ink, and tried to offer a sympathetic countenance. “I know it must be difficult for you to experience necessary discipline on your own subjects, but it is as it must be in order to keep the consequences of the law firmly in place. As a leader I expect you would understand that... seeing how well trained your little entourage is.”

Her temper flared and Tai’gee knew that flare made it to her eyes because his smile fixed for a moment. A sudden glint sparked his eye and she felt he was trying to egg her on; she turned the idea over and decided it was more truth than suspicion. She realized he wasn’t going to budge and enjoyed dangling her hope of negotiation in front of her. Since he was cold hearted on the idea of diplomacy, perhaps he would favor cold money instead, Tai’gee reasoned. Reaching behind her – and causing him to jump up defensively in alarm, which pleased her to no end – she tossed a bag full of dinars onto his desk. It was all the money Kaija and she had.

“That should easily pay for the knives and then some. It could be a fine rather than removing their hands,” she stated flatly.

Mathus looked at her, then at the bag, then her again. With the back of his hand he wiped his upper lip which had erupted with cold sweat at an expected assault. Slowly he looked back to the bag. “It could be...” he said.

“Good, then we have an agreement?”

He looked up at her, surprised and confused she thought, like he couldn’t believe their conversation had come to this. “Yes,” he said at last, “this will do.”

“Good. May I see them now?”

“Of course, right his way.” He seemed to regain his composure, running his hands smoothly over his bright clothes and then patting his medallion. “But just you.” He waved a finger at Beckries and Kaija, who had remained quiet and observant. “My guards had quite a bit of

trouble with you people in the market – I don't care to take my chances with several of you indoors."

"I assure you we are all quite tame when we are not being abused," Tai'gee quipped. "But as you wish. Wait for me outside with the others; I'll be out shortly."

Beckries bowed out with a decided glare at the Officiate, while Kaija rose slowly, looking at him with feline studiousness. She rubbed her hand along Tai'gee's back tenderly, discretely slipping her boot knife into the waistline of her pants. "Careful," she said slowly under her breath, and as she continued to move away, she trailed her fingers down her wife's arm and across her hand – all the while still looking at Mathus.

Tai'gee watched her leave the house, with a smile she couldn't control, and when she looked back to her host she found him staring out the door after her, mouth slightly ajar. Feeling her eyes on him, he returned his gaze to her, and, still seemingly enchanted, breathed, "she's not human is she?"

"Not entirely, no," Tai'gee confirmed.

He licked his lips, glanced back at the door like a skittish colt, then recomposed himself. "Follow me."

Many torches lined the hallway behind the door, and though the walls and roof left much space to spare, once the door was closed behind them and the flickering firelight was left to cast its shadows, it felt just as close and oppressive as the Temple of Artemis back at the Amazon capital. There was no perfuming though, and that fact was nice. Tai'gee could always tell when a priestess was approaching because the scent of sage and flower pedals over-saturated their skin and preceded them by many feet.

Mathus led her through a maze of tunnels at a brisk pace. The Queen got the feeling he was trying to confuse her, but he didn't know that Kaija and she played games like this as children. Kaija would get them good and lost, and it was Tai'gee's task to point the direction home – and she had to be right because if they went the wrong way she would be home late for dinner which meant an uncomfortable confrontation with her uncle. At their every turn through the prison she knew the direction of their entrance and there appeared to be enough hallways and connectors that any of them would siphon down to the original path, which freed her mind from needing to recall their exact route.

Finally they reached a set of gates and locked doors, five minutes later than they probably should have had they come more directly. The large man unlocked the first gate but some guards opened the others, saluting him as he passed and watching her curiously. They entered a main corridor with several smaller halls branching off in multiple directions. Tai'gee expected each branch had a bank of cells at the end. Taking the far right branch they approached a bank of six cells, four of them occupied by one young Amazon sitting glumly on a bench.

Tai'gee watched their heads raise and then eyes light up as they recognized who was coming into the jail, and they all ran to their cell doors and knelt. She could see they all suffered various wounds: bruises and knots fortunately seemed to be the worst of those. Mépol was in the first cell she and Mathus approached.

“My Queen, thank you for coming.”

“Of course I would come. This is a mess Mépol.”

“Yes My Queen, but if I could explain what happened – ”

“That won't be necessary,” Mathus interrupted. He motioned to a guard to unlock the cells. “You are free to go, thanks to your Queen.”

Mépol rose as her door swung open, looking both embarrassed and relieved. ‘We didn't do it,’ her eyes screamed at Tai'gee. Tai'gee, in turn, put her hand on the youth's shoulder and the others joined them as they too were released. “It's ok,” Tai'gee said. “We're getting out of here.”

“Thank you my Queen,” they all said.

“Your things will be returned to you as you leave. Dracanus will show you the way.” Mathus gestured carelessly to the pale man who had unlocked the cells. To Tai'gee he beckoned to follow him. “I need you to sign their release papers as a witness. Procedure.”

“Of course.” Tai'gee smiled at her Amazons and urged them forward to follow the swiftly retreating attendant. She and Mathus started back for his quarters.

They were taking a different route – their entry into the prison descended and ascended by a series of ramps, their exit took them up and down sets of stairs. They were headed in the direction Tai'gee knew the entrance was in, but she grew uncomfortable as there seemed a lack of the abundant torches and wide halls of earlier. She reached behind her, closing her hand around Kaija's knife. Mathus was directly in front of her, at least two paces between them – if he tried anything she had plenty of time to maneuver.

As she finished that thought, they passed a particularly dark hallway to Tai'gee's right. Just as she had cleared it she saw something move out of the corner of her eye, but it was so quick she had no time to react. Something hard and heavy cracked against the back of her head and she knew nothing more.

~

Someone smacked her hard as she came to. A panting, sweaty Mathus hovered above her straddling her hips. As she became more aware, she felt her pants had been removed, there were chains on her ankles and her wrists were chained and stretched above her head, all sets held by men farther away where they could maintain the tension. She was lying on the floor. There was

a soreness between her legs and she felt something hard and fleshy twitch at her opening. She groaned as she realized what had happened.

“Don’t worry Queen,” Mathus said roughly. “You didn’t feel a thing the first time.” She could hear the men’s chuckles echoing in the hall and she squeezed her eyes shut trying to block them out as well as the added pain they were causing in her head. “That’s why I wanted to wake you up.” Mathus grabbed her face roughly, turned her to him. “You have no idea how I get off at punishing criminals – how their screams from retribution thrills me,” he hissed in her face. His hair was wild as were his eyes; she could see their dark lustfulness even in the dancing torchlight. “No, I want my pound of flesh, and if I can’t get it from your pretty little Amazon bitches, then I’ll get it from you.”

He thrust himself into her and Tai’gee gasped in pain – he was much too large and she, never having been touched by a man, had never felt anything like that inside of her. She gasped and then bit down on the bile rising in her throat.

“If you scream for me Queen it’ll go a lot faster,” he grunted as he rocked himself back and forth in her. “It’s the screams I want, it’s the screams I love.” He thrust again, hard and uncaring and again she gasped. “Scream for me,” he grunted, his voice growing hoarse with his efforts. “Scream! Scream for me! Gods, scream!” He pumped harder and faster as he yelled, pulling himself back and forth, supporting himself on her chest, convulsively squeezing her breast with a massive claw. He gave one particularly forceful thrust and she felt skin tear and could hold back no more. She heard herself scream and her own shrill echoed in the hall. It was the encouragement he needed and he gasped his satisfaction, stiffening and then collapsing on her as he spent himself in his orgasm. Tai’gee cried and whimpered, the pain in her was a throbbing, seething fire and she could feel wetness seeping from herself she was sure was mostly blood.

Finally Mathus recovered enough to remove himself from her, doing so slowly, scraping against her inner walls like thousands of barbs were ripping the rest of her out.

“This – will – not go – unpunished.” Tai’gee tried to imbue as much fierceness as possible into her gasps but she was sure she was much too ragged to sound like a serious threat.

“Try it,” Mathus croaked back. His own pants were passing. He laid on his back next to her, sucking in deep breaths of air. “Try it, and I’ll have bounties on your heads. I know why you’re here, trying to leave Greece, hiding out in the scrub fields – how far do you think your dwindling band will get with every bounty hunter in the country after you? Not to mention militia, war parties. I know several warlords personally who’d love to take you all on. There’s nothing you could do about it.”

Here he pushed himself up and wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. Tai’gee glared at him with disgust as her lower walls spasmed in contractions reacting to their forced stretching. He smiled at her with the same smile he had welcomed them with in the yard. “Tame when you’re not being abused huh?” he huffed. “You seem pretty tame to me.” He licked his lips with a fat, dry tongue. “Maybe you liked it. Maybe you want the rest of my men to have a go?”

The chains rattled and pulled with their wanton laughter. The chain on her left leg slackened completely and she imagined one of them was coming over to avail himself of the opportunity.

“No,” Mathus hummed, still smiling at Tai’gee. “You need to get back to your Amazons. Your...consort... may want to hear of your adventures.”

Tears sprang to Tai’gee’s eyes anew. Kaija – what would she do? How could she tell her? “She’ll kill you,” Tai’gee whispered.

“I don’t think so. You seem to have her on a pretty short leash.” He got to his feet and tugged up his breeches. He smoothed his clothes and finger combed his hair before grunting to his guards to release her. “I’m not so unkind,” he said as he picked something up from beside him and set it before her. The manacles were released and Tai’gee looked down at the clothes and bucket of water sloshing slightly at her feet.

“There’s a room right behind you where you can go freshen up. We were careful not to leave any visible marks on you. The manacles were padded. If I was a real monster I’d make you go back out there disheveled and helpless. As it is, all you have to be is helpless.” He grinned as he opened his hand indicating the door behind her. “Come out when you wish, but keep in mind it’s been a quarter candlemark since I freed your Amazons.”

Tai’gee washed her face first, trying to wipe away her tears and disgust. She felt so dirty. She wanted to peel her skin off and rip out all of her insides and leave both in the bucket so she could grow anew like a snake. She gently wiped her inner thighs and gingerly washed herself. The blood was not as bad as she thought it would be, but she could barely touch herself for the rawness and pain. She folded a second cloth into a pad so nothing would seep through to her leggings. Checking the rest of herself she could see Mathus was right – where Tai’gee’s clothes would not cover her there were no marks to indicate her ordeal. Underneath her tunic however were angry scratches and her left breast was a massive red-purple bruise where Mathus had strangled it. Tai’gee reached to her head where she had been struck and found a tender knot, but no cut. Her circlet rested just above it and her hair was so dark that between the two she was sure no one would have noticed a slight bump. Once she was dressed, Tai’gee emerged with as much dignity as she could muster.

Mathus had sent the guards away and stood alone in the hallway. Without a word, he turned and began leading the way out of the prison. It was so painful to move but Tai’gee clenched her teeth and forced herself to walk as normally as possible, knowing she would have to do so in the broad daylight. When they arrived in his quarters, Mathus moved to his desk, gathered several papers together and held out his quill to her. “The releases. We want everything to be legal.” He quirked a confident smile. Once she had signed each document Tai’gee threw the quill down.

“Is that all?”

“Here, your knife – for all the good it did you. Yes, that will do.” He patted his thick sides. “And thank you.” He hefted the pouch of money Tai’gee had tossed at him earlier. “I’ve never been paid to do something so pleasurable before.”

He laughed at Tai'gee's sneer, and again Tai'gee forced down her rising sickness. She made her way out of the building, yanking on the door and bathing herself in blinding sunlight.

Everyone waited for her in the yard. The Yearies were surrounded by most of the others, probably giving their side of events. They all straightened once they saw their Queen come out and offered salutes. "Mount up," she ordered. "Head out."

They moved without question. Beckries held the reigns to Tai'gee's horse and as she made her way over to her she could feel herself start to panic. 'How am I going to do this?' The thought of asking Beckries to help her up crossed her mind, but Tai'gee knew she was smart enough to know something was up if she did. She could feel Kaija approaching her, directing her own horse to pull alongside. No, Tai'gee was going to have to do this herself. She did it quickly, hoisting herself and throwing her leg over in one motion. The position immediately brought tears to her eyes, which she tried in vain to blink away. Even if that had worked, the saddle was excruciating against her. She closed her mind to it all. She knew both Kaija and Beckries asked her what was wrong, and she thought she said she was glad they had their sisters back.

The next thing Tai'gee was truly aware of was sitting in the back of an empty wagon surrounded by blankets, held firmly by Kaija. The pain and dirtiness were still there, rushing up and down every nerve of her body. Some of her was so glad to be safe in Kaija's arms, who loved her and supported her and would kill for her – but some of her didn't want to be touched; every touch felt like a threat, every contact a vile attack. The rest of Tai'gee was given over to pain and suffering and sadness, defeatedly having to accept that she had been raped – violated and laughed at. No matter what anyone could offer her, there was nothing they could do to help her with that.

III

Tai'gee slept for two days. In her incapacitation she gathered the tribe looked to Eponin for leadership since Beckries didn't feel strong enough to step in. They were moving when Tai'gee awoke, and she was as she had been the last time she had awoken – surrounded by blankets in the wagon, only Kaija wasn't with her. Even though she hadn't opened her eyes, Tai'gee could tell by the absence of Kaija's powerful energy that she was alone. The blankets were soft and warm and no one seemed to notice her stirrings; she was content to continue lying there peacefully.

"Eponin says we'll pull over here. Blue-wren's found a good spot." It was Beckries and from the answering grunt, Tai'gee gathered Turtle was the one driving her wagon. "You and I will put up the Queen's tent."

"Lioness back yet?"

"Yeah. Eutries saw her riding up behind us."

"Good."

In a few minutes Tai'gee felt the wagon give a hard lurch as they left the road. They bumped along for several more minutes then came to a slow stop.

"This it?" Turtle grunted, and the buckboard creaked as she dismounted.

A horse rode toward the back of the wagon and finally Tai'gee opened her eyes to find Eponin looking at her.

"Hi," Tai'gee croaked.

"Hi yourself." She looked around quickly. "I'll be right back."

In the distance Tai'gee heard Eponin barking orders before returning quickly and hoisting herself into the wagon. She slid herself up to sit with Tai'gee, her mangled leg dragging along with her. Eponin studied the Queen quietly for a moment before asking how she felt.

Tai'gee hadn't yet done a self-assessment and she winced as she recalled everything that had happened. She lifted her hand to her head and found a bandage. 'Oh no.' Throwing back the covers, she found her clothes had been changed. She could tell the rawness and wounds between her legs had been treated and she looked up to Eponin in panic.

"Kaija found out. When you wouldn't wake up that night she checked you out."

Tai'gee shook her head in disbelief. Eponin raised placating hands. "No, listen Tai'gee. She was frantic when you wouldn't wake up. When she found you bleeding she thought you had fallen into the sleeping sickness like she had. Only she and I know about it at the moment."

"No," Tai'gee moaned. "I was going to tell her."

"I told her Tai'gee. I explained to her."

"Oh gods." Tai'gee put her head in her hands.

Eponin put a gentle arm around her shoulders. "I had to tell her Taig'," she said softly. "She wanted answers, she was scared to death. She only came to me, we didn't tell anyone else."

"What did she say," Tai'gee sobbed.

"Oh Taig', she's your wife, she loves you. What do you think she said?" Tai'gee hiccupped. "She wouldn't let anyone touch you. In fact this is the first time anyone has laid a hand on you in almost three days. She's carried you, dressed you, fed you, washed you – Cleopatra wouldn't have gotten better treatment." Eponin gave her friend a small squeeze as she chuckled kindly.

"Was she angry?" Her voice was small; Tai'gee was afraid of the answer. *It was stupid of me to go with Mathus alone, without even a cursory insistence on having one of my guards go with me.*

Kaija gave me her knife, and I did nothing to protect or defend myself. Of course she'd be angry – I'm surprised she would even touch me.

“Yes Taig’,” said Eponin on a sigh, “she was very angry. And I honestly can’t say I know what else she did, but you have your money back – and then some.”

“What?”

“I’m saying I wouldn’t be surprised if Mathus is dead.”

“Well, I’d told him that, didn’t I?” “No, no I mean is she mad at me for being so – so stupid.”

“What? – Taig’ no! No, ok – are you hearing me? She was not and is not angry with you, and this was not your fault. From your nightmares it sounds like there was nothing you could have done.”

Tai’gee cried harder, tucked herself into Eponin’s tunic. “I could have – I shouldn’t have gone alone. I should have gone back a different way –”

“Yeah and Kaija could have insisted on going with you. And Beckries. We could have left the Yearies there, or let them cut their hands off. You can list alternatives all day long – it still doesn’t make it your fault.”

Tai’gee couldn’t accept Eponin’s consolations. She wanted to, but she couldn’t – she felt too dirty, too weak, she felt disgusting; she disgusted herself. “No Ep... I can’t. I can’t do this.”

“Do what? No one is asking anything of you.”

“No I can’t – can’t be Queen. Now, like this –”

Eponin shushed her gently. “Right now you are not Queen. You are a hurting woman who needs her wife – and she happens to be standing only feet away needing you, too.”

Though her vision was quite bleary as she lifted her head, she could see a water smeared little Kaija waiting at the end of the wagon. Tai’gee beckoned to her and felt the wagon shift as she vaulted in. Eponin lifted Tai’gee slightly so they could trade places. *Oh the difference between them is by leagues.* Eponin was soft and gentle and strong, she cared for Tai’gee as a good friend does. Kaija’s hold, however, reached Tai’gee’s heart. She knew all the places to touch and how. There was love there, everlasting. Tai’gee noticed Kaija’s hands shook as she stroked her wife’s face; when she brushed Tai’gee’s tears away the trembling made her trace a shaky rivulet across her cheek. Tai’gee reached for her hand and held it between them, looking across their entwined knuckles and asked her why.

“I do not want to hurt you,” Kaija whispered honestly. “At night you scream when I touch you – I want to hold you, but I am scared I scare you.”

“Not you. I’m not afraid of you.”

They held each other’s faces in their hands, foreheads knelt together. Tai’gee had cried so much at that point her temples pulsed with aching. She thought she must have cried herself to sleep in Kaija’s arms. Sometime in the night, Kaija lifted her easily and carried her to their tent. Tai’gee was content to hold onto her neck, nestle against her as Kaija walked – with her strength, Kaija could easily have been carrying a child rather than a grown woman. They passed someone who spoke softly. Tai’gee could feel Kaija’s voice rumbling in her chest and that comforted her. “Tomorrow,” she answered to whatever question was asked, and they continued on their way.

Inside their tent, Kaija laid Tai’gee down in a pile of sleeping rugs and began to tuck her in. A thought occurred to Tai’gee then. “Do I want to know what you did to Mathus?”

“No,” she said flatly and drew a blanket over her. “You want to sleep and get well.”

“Stay with me.”

“Of course.” Kaija sat down next to her wife, folding her arms across her knees and Tai’gee snuggled into the blankets, rested her forehead against Kaija’s thigh. She felt Kaija’s heavy, paw-like hand raising and dropping to the top of her head as she lightly combed her fingers through Tai’gee’s dark tresses.

“I’m not sleepy,” admitted Tai’gee.

“You have slept a lot.”

“I didn’t mean to. I don’t remember going to sleep.”

“We think it was the knock on your head. The knot has gone down a lot.”

Tai’gee hummed, and rolled to her back, then to her side again, pillowing her head on her folded arm. “I’m sorry you had to find out like you did.”

“Do not worry with that now.”

“No – I wanted to tell you. I wanted to explain – I mean I didn’t want this to happen – but at least if I could have explained to you...”

“You owe me nothing,” Kaija said firmly. She slid herself down to lie next to her. Kaija looked at Tai’gee earnestly, but Tai’gee couldn’t hold her gaze. Kaija touched her chin but did not urge Tai’gee to look up. “I should have followed you. Even still, there is nothing for you to explain. I am sorry you are hurt.”

“It all happened so fast.” Tai’gee meant to just talk, but a sob escaped her. Kaija immediately placed her hand on Tai’gee’s side to comfort her, but Tai’gee flinched and Kaija jerked her hand back. “I’m sorry,” Tai’gee cried. She took Kaija’s hand into her own. “There were so many of

them, they knocked me out and chained me – there was nothing I could do. They laughed; the more I was –” she swallowed against her own distress – “hurt and humiliated the funnier they thought it was. Gugh – I don’t think I’ll ever feel clean again. I feel like I don’t want to be touched, but I want you to hug me, but then I feel like that closeness is too much; like I’ll be trapped again. I feel like everyone is laughing at me or shaking their heads. How can they follow me when I make such bad choices. So stupid –”

“Stop now.” The kindness in the command did nothing to diminish the firmness in Kaija’s voice. “You are not stupid. I love you. Your Amazons love you. We do not know what *maybe* could have changed. You were ambushed – you would have done differently if things had been different. You did what you could.”

It was one of those rare moments when Kaija said quite a lot, especially for her.

“So I’m not stupid, huh?”

“No Tai’gee.” She gave Tai’gee’s hand a squeeze. “You are not.”

Tai’gee relented a little, but still felt the need to talk. “Well, maybe I don’t feel stupid – but I don’t feel smart for it.”

“I do not think we were.” Kaija’s voice was suddenly very small and tenuous. “I think we got a lesson and – and I am so sorry you had to take all the punishment. I am so sorry I failed you.”

“Oh no Kaija – you didn’t fail me. You warned me –”

“I should have been there,” she said calmly. “I knew something was not right with him and that should have been reason enough for me to go.” She took a breath, released Tai’gee’s hand, and stood up, rubbing her arms as though she were cold.

“Kaija –”

“I could have lost you, like I lost Pi. My fault. My charge –”

“No Kaija – I told you to leave.”

“Tai’gee, I will not argue with you what I know. I failed in my responsibility.” She turned and looked at Tai’gee with very sober eyes. Anything Tai’gee was about to say died on her lips.

“You are my wife and my charge to protect and when I relinquished that you got hurt.”

Tai’gee reached out her hand to her, but Kaija did not take it. “You can’t do everything Kaija,” she said.

“But I can do better.” Tai’gee warily watched the never-black obsidian arrowhead pulse with red light as it hung limply around her wife’s neck.

“By not sleeping? By not eating? I can see in your face you’ve done neither in these last many days. You aren’t a god.”

Kaija closed her mouth and stood there, hugging herself. After many moments of watching her large jaw muscles bunch and relax, Tai’gee held out her hand again. This time Kaija joined her on the skins and gave her that hug she loved most. “I am sorry I failed you; I am sorry you were hurt. I will do better,” she pledged into Tai’gee’s hair, then kissed her lightly above her ear.

“I’m sorry for it too, and we will be better.”

IV

Tai’gee thought they’d gone too far southeast. They were out of the scrubby flats and seemed to be moving through terrain that was getting progressively more mountainous. The game was much better and Cheelopi had the honor of downing her first stag of their travels. It was very hard to consider telling a group of excited young huntresses that they were going the wrong way.

Eponin, Kaija and Tai’gee were well ahead of the caravan, discussing their course.

“Even if this isn’t the right way, we don’t have to worry about food,” said Eponin. “Let’s just take the game trails and see where they go.”

“That’s why,” Tai’gee said pointing to two white tipped peaks far in the distance.

“Well of course we won’t go up those Tai’gee, be sensible.”

“I am,” Tai’gee insisted as she gave her horse a good kick to keep up with Eponin and Kaija. “We need to go north at some point, and we’ve missed being able to go straight north and avoid the wall of water Xena told me about.” Her companions copped their question at her with their eyes and she explained that Xena had told her a wall of water divides the arid north from the mountainous south and there are only two ways to deal with it – cross the Black Sea or follow the coastline and take their chances crossing the isthmus between that and the Caspian.

“What’s wrong with staying on land and just taking the isthmus?”

“It’s controlled by the Kwarims.” Tai’gee soberly regarded Eponin’s return scowl. The Kwarims were a fierce and deadly people, aggressive and powerful – Rome would have a difficult time trying to bring them under Roman command if that was one of its goals, and Tai’gee could envision the Kwarims coming to be a substantial world power of its own. “We’re already near their borders I think.”

Eponin spit out the blackroot she’d been lazily chewing and looked around her deliberately. “This place looks as good as any, nobody’s here – let’s stake a claim. I know we’re out of Greece; we don’t have mountains like that.”

Tai'gee shook her head with a definitive no. "If we are where I think we are we should be right above the Phoenicians."

"But there's nothing wrong with that, the Phoenicians were allies of ours – we fought together at Troy."

"I've heard they have a new, more powerful ally in Rome."

"Well you're just a barrel of good news this morning." Eponin rolled her eyes and tugged off another chunk of blackroot. "So what do you suggest?"

Tai'gee pulled up on her reins, bringing her and the others to a stop. Kaija sat atop Mylo quietly, Eponin fought with Beckries' horse, Cinga, before she could stand by them and listen. "Confound this beast; what possessed Beckries to buy such an animal?"

"She wanted spunk," grinned Tai'gee.

"Well she got it didn't she? Hera's tits, be still beast!"

Tai'gee ignored Eponin and Cinga's antics and continued her original line of thought. "Well, if we want to keep going east we'll need to double back for about a day and a half to get back to that road you saw Kaij'. We'd go back west, then north so we can go due east after we pass the Black Sea."

"But..." Eponin drawled while Cinga did a particularly interesting little sidestep.

"But it's a day and a half back just to that road and we go back to the scrub flats which nobody was sad to leave."

"That's the only real choice though – if we go south we head for Phoenicia and if we go back west we run into the Aegean and the Romans. They control all the ports; we'd be sitting ducks. We can't go straight north because we'll run into the Black Sea."

Kaija dismounted and nonchalantly walked up to Eponin's dancing equine and calmly took hold of the reins. To Eponin's and Tai'gee's amusement, the horse froze, unsure whether to bolt from the questionable predator or beg an apple from the questionable human. Without missing a beat, Kaija turned back to her companions and said a boat ride would be too expensive. "We cannot afford sea passage for two hundred Amazons."

"Xena had a captain friend named Melinda. She said sometimes when she didn't have enough money to move her soldiers Melinda would let her cross on her ship as long as they crewed it."

"Ahw Taig' that was a long time ago. If this woman's even still alive there's no telling where she is now. She could be in Chin or Egypt or Zeus knows where right now," Eponin protested around her blackroot, which Tai'gee was finding more disgusting at every word.

“Besides,” Kaija added, “we know nothing about boats.”

Eponin agreed with Kaija with a shake of her head. “How did Xena get to the Northern Amazons all those times? She can’t’ve had all this trouble.”

“The world was a different place when Xena and Gabrielle traveled through it,” Tai’gee answered grumpily. “Greece was still in command over all this,” she hotly threw her hand out to include the land around them. “Passage wasn’t an issue through our own country. We’ve got other governments to get around now. I’d like to deal with as few of them as possible. We can do that by heading north.”

Eponin protested immediately. “But going north... the Black Sea is too dangerous! Even skilled captains who’ve done it before will tell you that – we can’t just go and say ‘take us across.’”

“Sounds like we should go back and northwest,” said Kaija but looked at Tai’gee with trepidation.

“Is there some reason you don’t want to go west,” Eponin asked after picking up on Kaija’s caution.

She didn’t have a good one honestly, other than a gut desire to get on a ship. The thought of continuing east into the land of the war-practiced Kwarims, and even farther into arid deserts where she knew greedy, ruthless warlords with no particular governmental ties lurked made her more than wary. Tai’gee’s heart beat hard at the small doubtful voice in her mind that asked if she was afraid to fight – ‘of course not!’ – but if her group of two hundred, skilled at killing three to four times as many came across a war party of seven or ten times...then what? ‘And how could we hope to make it across the desert? We can’t gather enough water for ourselves in lush lands.’ Her gut said go north, but she had no reasonable support for that choice – not over staying on land and trusting her warriors to fight when needed. North was madness; there was no way any responsible captain would consider crossing that perilous sea with a crew of uneducated, untried sailors. Tai’gee picked at her saddle in indecision.

“Taig’, something you want to tell us?” Eponin asked at length.

“No,” she said at last, but it came out a frustrated gust. Tai’gee relented. If she couldn’t explain it, she wasn’t going to push it. She needed to be able to explain herself to those who were choosing to follow her lead – who were catching up to them quickly – and if she couldn’t give them more than ‘because I feel like it’ Tai’gee didn’t feel it was a choice that was worth their trust. Forcibly making up her mind to turn them back around and redirect them eastward, Tai’gee spotted Cinga again. The horse was still frozen in his odd position. “Kaija let him go before he has a heart attack,” she laughed.

“Next time I’m borrowing someone else’s horse,” Ep mumbled.

They turned their horses around in just enough time to hear another set of hooves pounding toward them.

“This can’t be good,” Ep mumbled again.

Seti came thundering up, horse and rider panting. “My Queen! Bandits!” She pointed frantically behind her. “Beckries!”

“What is it girl?” demanded Eponin.

Tai’gee scowled briefly at the lame warrior then dismissed her sharp tongue to address Seti. “Calm down. What is it?”

“Bandits! Beckries went after them,” was all she could manage.

“Kaija—” Tai’gee started but Kaija was already moving.

The great muscles in her strong cheeks flexed to grind out her orders. “Seti, stay here. Ep —”

“Two owls and a cricket.”

Kaija nodded and kicked her horse hard, shooting back down the trail towards whatever the problem was. Tai’gee hated staying behind but it was no longer her place or privilege to jump into every fray like she used to. Two owls and a cricket, Eponin was explaining to Seti, meant whoever approached later had better hoot twice like an owl and then chirp like a cricket or they would be killed on sight – that was how the Queen was protected. Eponin drew her sword, Tai’gee her big curved blade, and Seti fitted her great bow and the three of them ducked off the road to wait.

‘I hate waiting. I’ve always hated waiting – patience was never my forte.’ They crouched in tense silence behind the roadside brush and listened. Once Seti got her breath back Eponin asked her again what had happened. The big girl explained that a troop of highway bandits had attacked another group of travelers following behind the Amazons and Beckries and Shingari had gone to help.

“Stupid girls,” Eponin grouched. “We don’t have the luxury or time for heroics like that. They have no right to make a decision like that on their own.”

“Where are the wagons?” Tai’gee asked Seti.

“Beckries told them to keep coming.”

“And just the two of them went?”

Seti shifted uncomfortably. “Emelia and her long brown-haired friend too...”

“Latrez. All of the upper warriors,” Eponin ground out.

“Not Cho-chin or Noki!” Seti testified.

That didn’t satisfy Eponin however, and the older warrior gave her queen a very dour look.

“I’ll take care of it Ep.” Tai’gee wasn’t pleased either and sending Seti ahead alone to alert them also wasn’t high on her list of good ideas. But there was nothing that could be done at the moment except to keep waiting.

In the distance they could hear the clink of swords, but only faintly. Tai’gee clenched her teeth in disapproval and irritation at not being able to at least see what was going on. She was also very aware that their caravan had not yet caught up. When underbrush rattled to their left – the direction Kaija had rode off in – and no call was made the small group froze. Eponin drew a throwing dagger she had hidden in her tunic and gave a serious nod to Seti to raise her bow. The girl was nervous but did as she was instructed, drawing back her arrow and aiming at the direction of the sound.

The rustling came again and then a slow parting and shifting of branches. All else was quiet and Seti caught her breath. Tai’gee saw a body move and suddenly Seti’s bow string twang as the arrow was released. There was a scream of pain and a thump as a body hit the road.

“I didn’t mean to!” Seti apologized instantly. Her eyes were wide. “I didn’t mean to! It slipped!”

Eponin jumped from the woods, sword and dagger battle ready. As soon as she cleared the bush, the warrior moaned, “Blessed Artemis,” and Tai’gee abandoned their hiding spot followed by Seti.

Eutries lay flat in the road, Seti’s arrow sticking prominently from her chest. Tai’gee’s heart skipped in panic. Eponin skidded to a halt by her side with Tai’gee right on her heels. Eutries was still alive, panting heavily. ‘There isn’t enough blood,’ Tai’gee thought first. When she did a secondary inspection, the Queen felt her heart skip again. She grabbed one of Eutries’ hands which was quite cold. Eponin looked down at the young scout sorrowfully. Seti came up slowly behind them and her voice shook as she apologized repeatedly.

“Be silent,” Eponin hissed at her. Eutries was trying to speak.

“Ka-Kaija said you were here – owls – crick –” She looked at Tai’gee sadly. “Not – fast – enough. Di-Didn’t sig-nal – ssoon –”

“Shhh,” soothed Tai’gee, stroked her fine black hair from her forehead. As the blood filled her lung, the guard’s face went from ashen to gray and cold sweat dotted her forehead. She tilted her head to the side, swallowing convulsively. “Art-Art...Artemis –” she forced out.

‘Artemis will have a very fine scout much too soon,’ the Queen thought in response. Eutries began to cough as she tried to speak again, her punctured lung having less and less room to work with. “Hur-hurts.”

Tai'gee looked at Eponin and the older guard shook her head gravely. There was nothing they could do for a wound like that, but the inevitability would be slow coming if they didn't do something. The fact that she wasn't yet coughing up the blood seeping into her lung signified just how slow the guard's death was going to be. The elder guard saw her Queen's decision in her eyes and looked past her at Seti.

"Go back to the caravan. Tell them to stop and wait for us to come back to them," Tai'gee said flatly to the girl over her shoulder. Seti turned to retrieve her horse but before she took a step, Tai'gee added with heavy finality, "*No* one breaks my order."

As horse and rider trotted then galloped down the road, the two remaining Amazons listened to the hooves over Eutries' pants. When the pounding hooves stopped abruptly, Tai'gee judged the head of the caravan was about fifty yards away, behind a sloping bend in the road. The Queen and warrior looked back at their fallen sister. Her lips were turning blue and she kept blinking to clear her vision of tears.

"Eutries," Tai'gee said softly and saw the muscles in Eponin's jaw clench out of the corner of her eyes, "There is nothing we can do for this wound my friend."

The scout's eyes sprang open and she rolled her head to face Tai'gee, "No" pleading in her eyes.

"Your lung is punctured," Ep said to her in like softness.

"T-Take it – out," the girl panted.

Grimacing at the girl's pain and discomfort, Eponin and Tai'gee struggled to get the girl sitting up. Eponin broke off the fletched end of the arrow and tried to push the head the rest of the way through, but Eutries screamed. "I can't – the tip's in a bone." Eponin's apologetic gaze was wrenching. The two warriors sat supporting their panting sister as she leaned weakly back against them. She coughed again, but this time, it wasn't a dry heave; the movement of the arrow had done more damage, worsening the injury. Tai'gee lifted sad eyes to the young guard. Eutries' eyes were brown with flecks of darker brown streaking from her pupils, which were growing larger. As Tai'gee looked into them the color reminded her of well-worn wood, aged and handled so much that the oil from constant hands had penetrated enough that it would be preserved forever. Her pupils contracted suddenly from terror – Eutries had accepted what Tai'gee said to be true.

"We can only make it quicker," she whispered. The fallen guard continued to look into Tai'gee's eyes and the young Queen watched as fear shifted to disappointment to open sadness and finally resolve. She nodded.

"We love you Eutries," continued Tai'geen a now shaking whisper. "Is there anything you would like to say?"

She squeezed her eyes closed and more tears slid out. “S-ssorry,” she managed. “Buh – Blue-wren....”

Tai’gee nodded. “We’ll tell her. Think of her ok?”

At her nod, Tai’gee signaled to Eponin. Eponin hit Eutries hard on the back of her head with the hilt of her sword, and when the girl went limp Tai’gee pinched her nose and held her mouth closed. Shortly the scout’s body began to seize and spasm with the need for air and Eponin threw on her weight to hold her down until the seizures passed. Once they did, Tai’gee counted to one hundred before releasing her suffocating hold. She said a prayer.

Between the two of them, they got Eutries body onto Tai’gee’s horse, though it was incredibly difficult with Eponin’s disabled leg. Tai’gee removed her tunic and covered Eutries’ head with it. Finally, her stomach revolted and once she was through being sick, Tai’gee grabbed a spare tunic from her saddlebag and took Cinga’s reins from Eponin.

“I’ll be back,” she said and turned the jumpy beast towards the caravan.

~

They all waited for her somberly. Cho-chin was astride her mount at the head of the wagons looking worriedly up the road. As soon as she saw the Queen she called something to the others and everyone – children and adults – dismounted, leaving wagons and horses to come meet her. Tai’gee hadn’t decided yet what she was going to say. Her hands were clammy around the reins and she became acutely aware that Eutries’ blood was on them.

No one spoke as she rode up, for which she was thankful. She was sure Seti had told them what had happened and with whatever expression was on Tai’gee’s face there was enough for them to assemble the results.

“Have the others returned?” Tai’gee’s voice seemed foreign to her, deep and possessive of a formality she wasn’t sure the rest of her possessed.

Cho-chin shook her head no.

“Alright, come with me. We have a sister to honor. Bring everything. Cho-chin, call Blue-wren, tell her to join us.”

Tai’gee turned Beckries’ horse back around. “My Queen,” Minyosh called, “what about the others?”

“Hopefully they find us.” Sharp heels kicked the horse to trot without anything further.

V

They couldn't burn Eutries' body and that bothered everyone. They went well off the road to find a suitable place to bury her. Falcon sang Artemis' death rite, those who knew the mourning dances stamped out the sacred moves, and the rest sat quiet and forlorn. Though Blue-wren and Eutries weren't dependently close to each other, they had made a bond of familiarity since they were the only scouts. Blue-wren was extremely sad to lose her friend and she didn't say much as Tai'gee told her Eutries' last thoughts were of her. Blue-wren took charge of Eutries' belongings, parsed out what could be shared, buried what could not. It was dusk by the time they finished everything and Tai'gee had everyone settle for the night in whatever way made them comfortable.

Tai'gee found a log in a semi-secluded area of their camp, and sat on it. The only thing she'd bothered to unpack from her gear was her woven blanket – a gift from Kaija on their wedding day. She wrapped herself in it, tried to let its warmth seep into her and stared at the darkening ground. Eponin had come to her earlier offering some bread and dried fruit for a dinner, but she sent her away. She needed some time and space to think. She needed to process what this death meant to her and her tribe.

She was angry. Tai'gee was angry at Eutries for not signaling, angry at Beckries for running off, angry at every little thing anyone had done from Eponin borrowing Beckries' horse to her own indecision at where they should go. This death was pointless, unjustifiable and everywhere she looked for a reason only supported the irrationality.

The young Queen had already talked to Seti. She was a wide-eyed tearful mess. Before the funeral Tai'gee asked Seti from her grandmother's embrace and they went for a short walk together. Turtle had been re-iterating how much she disapproved of Seti's use of a bow when Tai'gee had walked up, so that was the first thing she addressed on their walk.

“Do you want to be a huntress, Seti?”

“No, My Queen.”

“Not anymore or not in the first place?”

“I never wanted to be a huntress, My Queen, just an archer like my mom – really good at shooting anything.”

“I see. But you are also pretty good with throwing knives too, aren't you?”

“Grandma thinks so,” she answered sadly.

“What do you think?”

“I like them both.” The girl stubbed at a rock with her toe then kicked it along as they walked.

“Well, if you like both you should do both,” Tai'gee said. When Seti didn't answer, the elder snuck a peak at the youth and asked if she didn't think so too.

“Just because I like something doesn’t mean I’ll ever be any good at it. I’ve already messed up once –”

“– No you didn’t.” Tai’gee put her hand on the girl’s shoulder but she angrily shook it off.

“Don’t tell me it wasn’t my fault! I killed Eutries!”

“I killed Eutries, Seti. And Eutries killed herself. She had a bad habit of waiting too late to signal her presence, we warned her, and it cost her.” Seti folded her arms in refusal. Tai’gee knelt down to her level and the girl turned her face away. “Seti, what you did was an accident. Maybe one day you’ll see that. You shouldn’t have been there. What you did was an *accident*.”

“I didn’t mean to,” the big girl mumbled weakly. Her bottom lip trembled, but she refused to let it do more than that. She brushed roughly at reddening eyes. “What do you mean I shouldn’t have been there?”

“Don’t worry about what I mean. Listen to what I’m telling you and understand that.”

“It’s not my fault?”

Tai’gee smiled. “That’s right. And I want you to keep practicing with your bow and your knives. Next time I want you to shoot when you mean to shoot.”

The girl swallowed once and nodded, “ok”. She didn’t go back to her grandmother right away; Seti said she wanted to take a longer walk. That worked out well because Tai’gee took the time to talk to Turtle instead. She didn’t expect Turtle would purposefully contradict what she had said about Seti’s part in Eutries’ death, but Tai’gee wanted the elder to be aware of what she’d told Seti. She also wanted the woman to stop telling girl not to use her bow. That wouldn’t help anyone, especially a strong-willed child who was going to use it anyway.

Tai’gee didn’t know what exactly Seti took away from their conversation. More than likely she was more interested in finding out what the Queen had done to kill Eutries, but that’s what she would expect of a child. Even though she was such a big girl for her age, Seti was still nine and that wasn’t old enough to understand a lot of things. Even at nineteen there would be many things a person wouldn’t understand, which was why Tai’gee had spent the rest of the evening trying to figure out how to say what to Beckries and her group.

They were brought to Tai’gee as soon as they caught up to the rest of the tribe, without a word of explanation. Thankfully for the latecomers they picked up on the formality and one by one as they entered Tai’gee’s clearing they knelt before her, heads bowed. The queen motioned with her head for Kaija to come over.

“What happened,” she asked at large. Her voice and tone were tired and she could feel the weight it added to their meeting.

None of the four answered which angered her anew. Kaija started to explain but Tai'gee silenced her with a wave of her hand. She was one hundred percent positive Kaija had figured out what had happened on the road after she left, if not in all its detail, then enough to know they lost someone by their own carelessness. Kaija was quite the tracker – she had, after all, found them, where ever it was they had taken themselves to bury Eutries – and every sign she'd probably used was a piece of the ordeal. Tai'gee was also fairly sure that none of the others kneeling before her had any idea what had happened, and only suspected she was angry with their unilateral action. And she was angry about that, but she was getting angrier because they were willing to let Kaija explain for them, maybe even looking for her to defend them. Tai'gee was angry because as Amazon warriors they were supposed to have responsibility for their choices infused into their bones by then, yet were cowering like children caught breaking standard house rules.

After waiting in lengthening silence, Tai'gee asked again what happened. "I won't repeat myself a third time."

Beckries finally shored up and started the explanation, keeping her head down. "Blue-wren signaled in there were armed men in the bush. She thought they were thugs waiting for a good ambush. They didn't bother with us, but there was a smaller group behind us and they went for them. We went back to help on instinct." When she'd finished, Tai'gee detected a hint of expectation of congratulations; perhaps Beckries thought Tai'gee would be proud of their altruism.

"Did they need your help – whoever it was behind us?"

"It was a group of performers. They had some weapons and some guards but I think they were better with our aid."

"Casualties? Injuries?"

"No one was hurt badly," Shingari injected. "Mostly the thieves tried to cut and run with whatever they could get their hands on, so we helped recollect much of their losses."

"They rewarded you?"

"They were pretty poor, and we didn't expect anything," Shingari replied with increasing wariness.

"I see." A night breeze chattered over them and even though it was moving farther into spring, the evening draft was still chilly with winter's hard breath. Tai'gee tugged her blanket closer around her. "Did it occur to you, as you dashed off to help strangers, that since the highwaymen let us by in the first place because of our numbers we would now be endangered by the absence of four of our warriors?" She appreciated they had the grace to dip their heads slightly. "Did it occur to you that your first responsibility is to this tribe's protection and that no matter what goes on elsewhere it is your job to see us to safety? Did it occur to you that you sent one of our youngest children ahead, alone, on horseback to tell me you had left our caravan open to the road

with four Yearies and one Elite Guard to defend it? Did it occur to you that you fight under *my* command?" Tai'gee's voice had climbed to a scathing yell by that point. She threw her blanket aside in her rising heat of passion. She continued to scream at them, her self-composure having completely dissolved to cater to the repressed emotions building in her all day.

"Eutries is dead because of your actions! Seti shot her while we hid in the woods. We now have one trained scout to help us through this unknown world because you four up and decided to play hero! Four of my best warriors chasing after common thieves like you'd gone to catch butterflies!"

Her chest was heaving in her rage. She could see wisps of her dark hair flaring wildly about her face and wouldn't be surprised if someone told her that her eyes were bulging and various veins protruding. Some people may get prettier when they're angry – Tai'gee happened to think those people weren't really angry in the first place.

Taking a breath to calm herself, Tai'gee tried to speak again. "What you did was irresponsible and inappropriate. If I had the means and luxury I'd punish you for it – but I have neither. Hopefully our loss will be punishment enough and you'll think twice before pulling such antics again."

They all mumbled apologies which Tai'gee dismissed. Right now those were expected, they were supposed to be sorry – when they really felt it they would apologize again.

"We're leaving first thing in the morning," Tai'gee finished. "Cho-chin can show you where Eutries' grave is if you'd like to pay your respects."

Tai'gee made a sign to dismiss them, to which they saluted in return as they rose and backed out of the clearing. She watched them slink out. She wasn't nearly spent of the energy she'd been bottling all day, but what could she do for it? She was starting to think the real chore of being Queen wasn't in how to lead but in how to control herself.

She felt Kaija move closer. The light was poor in their little space – she'd had one torch lit mostly just to show the others where she was. She would have preferred to stay in darkness. As her wife came closer, the glinting torchlight caught at an angry scratch across her right cheek. Tai'gee lifted a finger and traced around it. "Mylo ran me into a little tree," Kaija smiled genuinely and the rise in her cheek made the cut pinch together a little. Tai'gee continued to dally her finger about Kaija's face, mentally drifting in heres and theres. Kaija slid her arms around her and brought their lower halves together.

"Tell me something that won't make me angrier," Tai'gee requested absently.

Kaija knelt her forehead in, rested it against her chin. Tai'gee re-realized that she was many inches shorter than herself, a fact easily forgotten when witnessing everything else she did. "I love you."

For some reason, Tai'gee wasn't expecting that – as she thought about it, she didn't know what she was expecting to hear, but that unexpected statement greatly pleased her. *Somehow she always seems to know.* “I knew there was a reason why I married you.”

VI

They went north. After the Eutries debacle, no one bothered Tai'gee for a reason or explanation why. Shingari and Beckries seemed to be nursing their moral wounds together, Emelia was bending over backwards to make herself helpful to everyone, and Latrez adopted a meek countenance, generally trying to be anonymous. Kaija took Noki and Cheelopi with her to train in scouting. She reassigned Cho-Chin to Royal Guard duty and the newly appointed guard and Eponin rode with Tai'gee where ever she went. It was stifling, but Kaija insisted Tai'gee have two escorts if she was not going to be by her side – especially as they moved into more populated areas.

“People mean trouble,” she'd said one morning as she strapped her boot dagger into place.

Tai'gee had smiled at that. She wondered if Kaija remembered that that was something her father, the Great Protector Sphinx, said quite frequently when Kaija started bringing Tai'gee around. That was about the time he had also given Kaija the arrowhead she still wore, now bordered by two feathers from his magnificent wings – all the half-sphinx had left of her father. Cerebrius had given the arrow point to his young daughter to remind her of hunters and their weapons, but Tai'gee was suspicious of the stone. Any time she'd ever seen it, the obsidian rock had never been black – it looked like it should've been just as dark and impenetrable as Tai'gee's own eyes, but there was always at least a solemn, inexplicable glow about it. At its most mild, the glow was amber, like a firefly was caught inside the dark rock; at its brightest, Tai'gee had seen it glare like a star brought to earth, beaming, blinding, a shattering light that could sear through closed eyelids. But it always looked black to Kaija, no matter its color it remained cool to the touch, and if nothing else, seemed to indicate Kaija's level of arousal. *Though when she was comatose for a month those couple years ago, the rock still glowed a foreboding red, and Kaija was certainly in no position to be aroused.*

“Did you hear me Tai'gee?” Eponin was speaking loudly, since Tai'gee had apparently been ignoring her for some time.

“No, I'm sorry. What were you saying?”

“That so far the people we've been passing look very different from us. For one thing, they're a lot darker; kind of like what Gabrielle said the people from India looked like.”

Tai'gee took a closer look at the surrounds they were passing through and the people they were passing by. She wasn't sure where it all actually changed, but they were definitely away from Greece and the Roman states. Herders and tradesmen peppered the road like fig seeds. Almost everyone was barefoot, and those who weren't may as well have been considering the thin wooden sandals they wore. These people were dark of skin, much darker than any of the Greeks and had black hair. Perhaps their skin and hair seemed so much darker because of the brightness

of their clothes: saffrons, oranges, deep and vibrant reds woven in mesmerizing designs, blues helped to bring out the richness of every color it touched, and Tai'gee saw – 'no, it couldn't have been' – she grabbed Eponin's arm.

"That woman, she's wearing purple! Her scarf, do you see it?" She could barely contain her excitement. "As a head scarf, can you believe it? That can only be the second time I've ever seen that color, and the other time it had been on a priest-king's robes!"

"What's so special about purple?" Cho-chin asked.

Tai'gee explained before Eponin had a chance to denounce the younger guard's ignorance. "It's rare, very rare to see that color on cloth. It's very hard to make, which makes it very expensive."

The young guard pff'd at that. "I made it all the time on my fingers – all you have to do is grab an overripe blackberry!"

"Yeah, but that fades out pretty quickly to blue – on your fingers and on cloth. Try getting it to stay purple and see where that gets you," Tai'gee countered. They continued on, passing the elder woman with respectful nods.

This new country was teeming with people and they hadn't come yet to any major city, or even a town that they could tell. The locals shouted to each other in their strange language, everyone seemed to be talking at once – how they understood any bit of conversation was beyond Tai'gee. There was singing that was not unlike their own, but instruments none of them had ever seen the like of before.

As the streets became more crowded, Kaija and the others returned to walk with the caravan. "No need to scout," she said with a grin, "we know where the people are now."

Tai'gee glanced behind her to see how the others were taking in this new scenery. The reactions were as varied as the menagerie surrounding them. Seema and Meica had joined their mother who was driving the supply cart. *Joined* actually might've been too distant a word; *melled* might have been more appropriate. They stared around themselves with wide eyes and were bewildered into silence. Tai'gee hoped Dotra took notice of the quiet around her – she very rarely got more than a moment's peace. The Yearies were all exuberance to inspect the market they were entering – they were hardly keeping their saddles as they tried to peer into every nook of each stall passed. Turtle maintained her usual look of disinterest but Tai'gee could tell she was having quite a many thoughts, positive and negative, about what she saw. Her eyes darted from place to place so quickly she looked more demon than human.

"What do you think Kaij'?" Tai'gee looked at her little lion. She too had a distinct expression as she was inspecting the market, and it resembled her dissatisfied look quite closely.

"It stinks," she said at last. Tai'gee was surprised, and disappointed truthfully. But when Kaija added "like the temple – makes my head hurt," it made more sense.

Kaija had a very sensitive nose; she could pick up week-old scents on a leaf and a coming storm a day away. She'd be the first one to know when something was burning and the last one to be free of it as the smoke dissipated. Strong smells irritated her and particularly overpowering smells nauseated her. The temple was singularly pungent, and while it sickened Tai'gee to be inside the stuffy halls, Kaija could hardly stand the olfactory assault. Taking in a deep breath it was easy to see why Kaija would make such a comparison. The air was spicy with strange and unfamiliar seasonings, perfumes and strong oils were on display at almost every venue. Between all the sights, sounds and smells, Tai'gee was surprised her wife was still in her skin, let alone riding beside her at their languid pace with nothing more than a look of distaste on her face.

This market was huge and it actually opened into a city. Tai'gee felt relieved to come into the city proper because it was much more open. There was so much excitement with all the yelling of prices and bargains and attention grabbing, Tai'gee was starting to feel claustrophobic. She thought it strange to think of a city as a reprieve.

Mépol trotted up. "My Queen, do you think we could stop? Look around some?"

Kaija and Tai'gee both shook their heads. "This is only the first city in this country; we'll come to more. Make sure everyone keeps up," Tai'gee ordered. A couple hours after leaving the city behind, she pulled them up to regroup.

Seema and Meica still looked shocked – they hadn't budged from their mother's side. It was pretty funny, but Tai'gee refrained from looking directly at them and making them more uncomfortable. Mépol on the other hand stood up in her stirrups.

"This country is awesome! We have to hang out here a while!"

Many others agreed. "Did you see the tattoos?" "We have to try the food!" "There was so much stuff at that market!" Tai'gee was happy about their enthusiasm if nothing else.

"Don't worry," she said while patting her hands down for calm. "We'll come to many more cities before we get where we're going. You'll have plenty of time to look around."

"Where are we going?" Ghiran stood up on the buckboard. Shiekkel, her guardian, gave her a swat for her demanding tone, but the girl ignored her.

"Fair question. There are only two ways to get to the land of the Northern Amazons, both dangerous, but they are our only choices. Either we go around the Black Sea through war torn country, or across it... on a ship..."

"Ship!" most yelled in unison.

"We'll need to sell most of the things we've bought and figure out what to do about passage for all of us, but I think that's the better choice as well. There's a port city about five days from here is my guess. We can take some time to explore there while we get a ship booked."

Everyone seemed pretty agreeable to the plan, which Tai'gee suspected surprised Eponin. She shrugged a little but didn't say anything. Tai'gee was happy to consider sailing; she'd never been on a boat, not even a small one or a raft, and the idea had always intrigued her. She thought that was probably most of the appeal to the others as well. Now all she had to do was make sure not to lose any of them between here and the port.

~

Byzantium was, in a word, magnificent. Bustling didn't begin to describe the activity going on there – feverish was probably the best Tai'gee could come up with. There was so much wealth and commerce that she was left in complete awe. Athens had nothing on the diversity and opulence of this city, and coming from a Greek, that was saying a lot. There was craftwork being traded and sold that Tai'gee would never have imagined could exist, let alone be common work. Jewelry boxes of white stone – she'd come to learn was ivory, the same that had made the intricate handle of Kaija's great knife – were her biggest fascination; what Tai'gee hadn't known was that it wasn't stone at all, but the tusks of a great lumbering animal called an elephant. They found skins with designs they'd never seen before, big cats that were supposed to abound nearby in the jungles and wilds at the edges of the world – India, Chin, Egypt, even farther away. Kaija was most interested in these hides, in tigers and leopards, big cats that bore fascinating patterns. Eponin was immensely interested in a spectacular horse one man wanted desperately to sell her.

“An Arabian?”

“Yes, best horsemen in all world,” he said in grossly stilted Greek.

“Not better than the Cythians,” Ep scoffed.

“The Arabs would be insulted to practice with the Cythians. This animal is best bred in all of this world.”

Tai'gee knew Eponin had the money, and she knew Eponin wanted that magnificent beast badly. Finally though, Ep wrestled her desire down. “I may be back,” she said with pain in her body as she turned away from horse and seller; every fiber in her screamed ‘I want that horse.’ All Tai'gee could offer was a pat on the back as she limped over with her cane.

“I never thought paradise could be so torturous,” grumbled Ep.

“You think you've got it bad?” Tai'gee lifted her head in Kaija's direction. The spell of the strange cat skins had worn off and she had, simply, broken down under the onslaught of sight, sound, and smell. The half-cat was completely rigid, every muscle stood out in tense masses, her breathing was incredibly rapid, and Kaija didn't move as Tai'gee put her hand on her chest and felt her heart beat.

“Oh, your poor heart. Kaija, Honey, relax.”

Eponin bit her lip to keep from laughing, then tried hiding her unmastered smirk behind her hand. A moment later she gave up the effort. “I’ll give you forty dinars for it! It’s a beautiful statue that’ll go great in my entryway!”

“Oh stop.” Tai’gee smiled a little as well, but it didn’t last as she worriedly studied her wife’s petrification. Kaija had frozen like this before, when she’d returned the Crescan children to their village and was about to be attacked by a mob of angry parents.

The cacophony of the city had become too much for Kaija’s hypersensitive nerves. Tai’gee thought some wild bird had gone by – a dodo she learned later – squawking like nothing she’d ever heard before and that put Kaija over the edge. Being that there were no trees there for her to scramble into, and really no place to hide under or behind, Kaija had pretty much petrified in the middle of the street – a statue of fear and disorder. As she thought more about it, Kaija had become more unfocused as they traveled through this new land – the first market had earned a look of distaste, but now that Tai’gee was reconsidering their comings and goings from each populace since then, Tai’gee realized Kaija’s expressions had moved from distaste, to suspicion, to anxious paranoia. The amount of people had become more and more dense, loud, close, pressing. Kaija had nowhere to hide and sort through the throngs, as was her natural urge – stand back and watch, move in as she chose the proper moments.

“We should do something,” Ep said in Tai’gee’s ear as they studied her.

“Help me get her some place quiet.”

“Uh, yeah right – how much help do you think I’ll be with a boulder like that? Stay here, I’ll go find some help.”

Help turned out to be Zupé. “She has a great idea,” Eponin grinned brightly. Tai’gee looked warily at the somber girl and lifted her eyebrow in question.

“I could tranq her?...”

Tai’gee’s initial reaction was ‘absolutely not.’ However, as she looked at Kaija she saw that the only change in her was that she’d become more and more pale, and was probably hyperventilating. Byzantium’s immense population seemed to appear suddenly and just as suddenly recede as they moved through the city, like standing waves. Kaija didn’t have the equipment to weather that amount of excitement. Tai’gee considered if Kaija was going to have to stand there and get hit by wave after wave perhaps tranquilizing her and keeping her sedated until they could get out of the area would be better for her.

In the end, that was what they decided to do. They waited until they had several buff Amazons on hand before they took Kaija out. It took three darts before Kaija lost consciousness – Tai’gee was getting exceedingly nervous about poisoning. Despite Zupé’s assurances to the contrary, Tai’gee said if Kaija didn’t go down on the third dart there wouldn’t be a fourth. Shingari, Falcon and Alcai helped to carry Kaija as they went in search of some accommodations. They

were fortunate that a soft spoken store owner was happy to have Kaija and Tai'gee stay with him and his family. Their home was nearby.

“Come, very quiet. Come.” His smile was warm and congenial though he was missing most of his teeth. He was very thin and had a pudgy belly. His wife, on the other hand, was quite hefty. Her eyes, like her husband's, were friendly and gentle, and she led the way into their dark, small home at only one word from her husband. There were many children inside – Tai'gee saw six right away before they scurried to even darker corners to peek at their guests shyly from the shadows. Tai'gee wondered if they all belonged to this family or if there might be a collection of relatives living there. When they met with no other adults, Tai'gee assumed they were all the store owner's children.

“Come,” motioned the man with a large hand. “Here, very quiet here in this room.”

Alcai ended up taking Kaija by herself once they were inside the house because it was much too awkward with all three of them shuffling around. Gently, she set Kaija down on a tiny wooden bed. Tai'gee thought it very strange to see her fierce fighter being carried like a child. Respectfully the helpers bowed out once Kaija was settled and left with instructions to let everyone know where the royal couple was staying.

“This room for you,” the man said, still smiling.

The jovial little man felt familiar to Tai'gee somehow. When she took his hands to shake them in thanks – a very different custom than her own forearm shake, much more intimate Tai'gee thought – she felt an old comfort in their dry softness. He saw her question in her eyes and gave a happy, vigorous nod. His wife came in carrying a large bowl of food and he beckoned to her.

“Yes, yes,” he said to Tai'gee and Eponin, who remained behind. “Long ago my wife's family was blessed by Great Lion Man. Now my wife has visions and knew his daughter and a great queen would come.”

“You know us? Kaija and me?”

“Yes! Yes!” His face expressed an infectious enthusiasm. “We are honored to have you with us. For your journey we can help.” He gestured to the room. “Stay! Stay! Get well. My name is Ari.” He motioned again for his wife. “And this is Rylah.”

Stepping forward, Rylah handed Tai'gee the large wooden bowl. She studied her for several moments, and Tai'gee grew much less comfortable suddenly. Rylah gave a brief smile, and she and her husband both turned and left.

“Well, seems you're a woman of the world.” Eponin elbowed Tai'gee in jest. “Never been out of Greece and even the peasants in far corners of the world know who you are. You gonna eat that?”

Tai'gee shook her head trying to dismiss the curiousness of their new situation.

~

It may have taken three darts to drop Kaija, but it was enough to keep her out for a day and a half. She was going to be furious once she had enough of her senses back to figure out what had been done to her. But while she slept, Eponin and Tai'gee spent their time getting to know their new benefactors.

The six children Tai'gee had seen did indeed belong to Ari and Rylah, and they had four more that didn't live in the house any longer. Ari and Rylah had been married as children practically, but had lived together in happiness building a life they were very proud of and content with. Ari was much more talkative and engaging than his wife, who preferred to sit back and listen while she milled rice, acorns or wheat in a large bowl. The children also hung back, their large brown eyes peering at Eponin and Tai'gee with owlish curiosity.

“How is it you know us? What do you mean you were blessed by Great Lion Man?”

“Yes. He came to us before we had our first child. My wife used to get terrible headaches. I would take her to a field nearby to rest where it's quiet. Great Lion Man came through this field and found us. The headaches he said were because she was not allowing her visions. He stayed to teach her how to see the visions – much danger to himself to do so. Many here are afraid of the great creatures, the creatures of gods.”

“Are you a profit then?” Eponin asked Rylah, but the woman did not look up from her ever present bowl.

Her husband gladly answered for her. “No, not prophet. Prophet sees things that can happen if something is not changed. My wife sees things that will happen, that are already set to happen. She can see into the past, see what sets up the future.” The man smiled proudly. “She is a very special woman, my wife.”

“And she saw that we would be coming?” Tai'gee asked.

“No, actually the Lion Man said before he left. We asked what we could do to repay him. He said his daughter would come here at the head of a great queen's army. He said to help her and that would be our payment.”

“Cerebrius – you mean Cerebrius! Great Lion Man – the Sphinx!” Ep exclaimed. Tai'gee nodded confirmation, and frowned.

‘No doubt Cerebrius might have been expecting Aries would have had more influence in that prophecy than is now the case.’ It was an unpleasant thought, and didn't do justice to the real love Cerebrius had for his daughter. But he wanted Kaija to find security and safety within a sense of superiority that Kaija just didn't have. He didn't realize the pull her human heritage would have to find comfort with other humans. Which Tai'gee always thought was a strange

expectation for Cerebrius since he was part human too... well at least enough to give him a human head... sort of.

~

Tai'gee and Eponin took advantage of Kaija's incapacitation to visit the docks the next day. Ari didn't know of Melinda but he had a strong relationship with a man named Habel who owned a ship and brought many valuable wares to Ari's store.

Habel was, in a word, ancient. He was a little man with a shriveled face and hunched back. He reminded Tai'gee of a tortoise, bald head and all. Despite – or perhaps because of – his small size, he was a loud man.

“What do you mean you want to book passage for two hundred across the Black Sea?” He hadn't said a word to them before then as they explained their position and the booming demand startled Tai'gee. “I'm a cargo shipper – not people.”

“What if we crewed your ship?”

“What you know about sailing?” Tai'gee could feel his sharp eyes scrutinizing them through sun-squinted eyes.

“We can learn. Besides, you wouldn't have to pay us – you'd save all kinds of money.”

He spat in dismissal. “No time for this.” He turned to walk away then turned right back around. “What I do once I've dropped you off? Heh? Bah!” This time he threw both his hands at them and really began walking away.

“Well do you know anyone that would help us then?” Tai'gee shouted after him. She tried to put some guilt evoking emotion into her question. It didn't take.

“You think I know stupid people? Think I spend my time with fools?” Habel shouted back over his shoulder.

“Look,” Tai'gee said dropping the nice, needy Queen act, “we didn't come here for insults. If you won't help us and don't know anyone who might just say so and save us the trouble!”

“Bah!” he shouted again with a final wave of dismissal and waddled farther away.

“How can Ari recommend someone like him?” Eponin muttered loudly. Tai'gee shrugged and turned away from the dock to think. This was going to be very difficult, and it seemed even after all they'd done to get there, they'd still have to walk around the sea and face war.

“Ari huh?”

Habel's rough grunt was right behind Tai'gee and startled her into drawing her knife in reflex. Seeing him a split second before she took off his ear, Tai'gee quickly stepped back to force a miss.

"Don't do that!" Angrily she shoved the big, curved blade back into its sheath and put her hands on her hips, with no small degree of impatience in her posture. "Yes, Ari. He suggested you might be able to help us."

The little man groaned, if a person can grunt a groan. "Shoulda known not to owe a man that quiet and smiley." He chewed his lip and sized the two women up again. "Gah!" He spat in exasperation then started to walk off again down the dock. Tai'gee looked at Ep, and she looked back just as confused. After a few stomping steps the little man yelled back at them "Come on then if you're comin'!"

VII

After they'd finished with Habel, Tai'gee told Eponin to round everyone up and explain what was going on. They would be leaving on Habel's ship in two days. They had to sell everything – wagons and horses in particular. Ep wasn't pleased about the horses. "Come on," she said to Habel, "I know you can take horses on this ship – how'd those Arabians get here?"

"You want to buy all they need for a month at sea, be my guest. Even still they probably won't make it – not much room to walk, no sun in the hold. Gonna be dangerous enough already. Crazy woman." He muttered that last part under his breath.

As they walked back up the dock, Eponin explained she thought there were at least three horses they should take with them. "Beckries' – he's a great stud and she's got him broken in well now. I doubt we find another horse than can handle Kaija – at least that's not half dead."

Tai'gee accepted those for thought. "And the third?"

Eponin grinned as an answer. Tai'gee rolled her eyes. "Ep, I don't want to sacrifice that much on an untried horse of an unknown breed. He looked wilder than a hydra!"

Eponin was set on buying the Arabian horse from the market man and said she'd even buy the food and water for the other two to make up for her impulsivity. Tai'gee had no idea where she'd gotten all this money, and she doubted Eponin would tell if asked, so she gave it up. She had other battles to fight, like getting Kaija awake and keeping her from being angry.

It was dark when Tai'gee finally made it back to Ari's house. She'd actually passed it twice looking for it because, unlike the night before, it was not brightly lit. It appeared to be deserted in fact, and Tai'gee's heart leapt a moment fearing for Kaija's safety. She hurried inside and stumbled into many things: chairs, mats, tables, stools; before making it to the first door which led into a largish common room where the family slept. The room she and Kaija were sharing was just off of this room, and Tai'gee hurried to it seeing a soft light emanating from within.

A single candle sat on a stool opposite the bed where Kaija slept. Next to the candle sat a silent Rylah, still working in her bowl. Tai'gee smiled when she looked up at her, but Rylah did not return it. Uneasy, Tai'gee moved to the bedside to check on Kaija. She slept peacefully and deeply. Tai'gee still felt a pang of guilt for drugging her, but there was nothing she could do about it now except wake her up and explain. Before she could reach her though Rylah spoke from her corner.

“Leave her to sleep.”

Tai'gee jerked around in surprise. It was the first time she'd heard her voice. It was beautifully musical. “You should leave her to sleep where she can hide from the demons a little longer.”

“Demons? What demons?”

Rylah glanced up briefly from whatever she was working on before continuing. “We all have demons we battle. She needs a rest before fighting hers again. You also need rest,” she finished looking at Tai'gee enigmatically. Tai'gee for her part was too confused to even ask what she meant.

“You were taken by a man not long ago,” Rylah stated succinctly. The shock must have registered on Tai'gee's face and she subconsciously looked at Kaija.

“She did not speak of it, the drugs are strong. I see it in your Mendhi, as I see the battle in hers.”

“What Mendhi? What are you talking about?”

Swiftly the woman set her bowl aside and stood. Her motion was so quick it made Tai'gee jump and did nothing for her feeling of foreboding. She wanted an explanation now that she was sufficiently befuddled, but she sensed the more this mysterious woman talked the less she would like what she had to say. Oddly, Rylah obliged Tai'gee, but not saying anything more – not that her alternative was any more enlightening.

Rylah began picking at the air around her, like Tai'gee would pick olives from a tree. She circled the room, picking, then came back to her chair. Before Tai'gee could ask her what she was doing, Rylah began waving her hands in easy, sensuous motions, then clapped her palms together. As she pulled her hands apart again an explosion of color burst from her; strange and brilliant shapes sped across the room, twining tails weaved behind them making and unmaking rainbows. Tai'gee was surrounded by color, bright and dancing, and before she could touch any line that swept by her it would dance just out of her reach. Every time a head shape would pass by, Tai'gee could feel a heat or energy like a faint breath that gave her goose bumps.

“This is the Mendhi. Yours, hers.”

Tai'gee looked to Kaija, ecstatic. Kaija would love to see this. But Kaija was not surrounded as Tai'gee was with brilliant sparkling lights. Tai'gee gasped in horror and Rylah immediately clapped her hands together again and it was all gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

“What – what was that?” Tai’gee managed a feeble point at Kaija. “What was around her?”

“Guilt and doubt do strange things to the Mendhi. You must not let them do strange things to you for the sake of your children.”

“What children? What are you talking about? How do we fix that – that – whatever that was around her?” Tai’gee was demanding and impatient and did not care to be otherwise. The dull and sluggish lines circling Kaija looked evil to her. There were very few strings of color weaving gaily around Kaija – there were more dark webs, blacks, grays, the color of fear and deterioration – death is what she saw winding around her wife.

“No – she will not die of this. At least as far as I can see, though that is not far.” Rylah spoke calmly. ‘How could she be calm?’ “Not all of that you saw is the taint she fights – some is the drug. The Mendhi reflect our lives. Did you notice anything in particular about yours?”

Forcibly, Tai’gee pulled her gaze from Kaija and looked dumbly at her hostess who had reseated herself and taken up her bowl again. Tai’gee was growing irritated with her nonchalance, and even though there was kindness in her voice, Tai’gee could not deny it seemed patronizing.

“Kaija –” she began to demand again.

Rylah looked up sharply and silenced Tai’gee with a piercing glare. “– is asleep. What did you see?”

Tai’gee closed her eyes. Like a scolded child, she tried to recall what she had experienced, quickly studying it for some answer that would appease her dissatisfied instructor. The most obvious thing she noticed about the Mendhi was a bold, glittering luminescent that darted back and forth between Kaija and herself. “Yes, that is your connection with your soul mate,” Rylah said in dismissal. “What else?”

Thinking more, recalling, re-sensing the feelings, Tai’gee realized a double yellow line weaving around her waist, somewhat slower than the others, almost timidly tenuously. “Yessss,” said Rylah and Tai’gee opened her eyes.

“You will have children. Right now they are afraid because they were conceived so violently. They are unsure they are wanted. You must decide that and quickly so they do not enter this life suffering.”

Slowly Tai’gee’s hand dropped to her belly. Disbelief. A refusal to believe. “I’m pregnant?” “No, I can’t be pregnant. Not now, not with all our struggles.” Tai’gee shook her head, refusing.

“If that is your choice stop your children now. I have medicines for it.”

Rylah reached into her flowing clothes and produced two vials. She held them out to Tai’gee in a steady hand, but Tai’gee recoiled. Rylah pulled her hand back casually but did not put the vials

away. “This is a time of choice – maybe not this instant, but a time of it. A prophet would be able to tell you the consequences of your choices. All I know is that nothing good will come of a mother keeping children she does not want.”

She lifted her hefty form from her chair and shuffled towards the shocked young Queen. With one hand, Rylah pressed the vials into Tai’gee’s and smiled that confounding smile again. “You should wake her. Eat all of this, both of you.” The big woman gave her guest the bowl. “Keep those for when you do make up your mind.”

Tai’gee stood there for long moments, unsure and unsettled. She debated stomping after Rylah and shaking her, reminding her that Cerebrius had said to help his daughter and this certainly seemed anything but help. She swallowed that impulse, gulped it down like a big piece of dry bread. She was tired. Tai’gee looked down at her stomach. She loved her body, she really did, but at the moment she didn’t feel like it was hers anymore. She didn’t want to deal with any of it. Looking over at Kaija, Tai’gee bit back tears. She didn’t want to wake her up either because then she’d have to tell her everything Rylah had said. It was too soon for that. Tai’gee set the bowl of food on Rylah’s stool and put the vials in her saddle bags before climbing into the little bed.

It was just like their little hut and bed back home, before Xena and Gabrielle gave their larger house to Kaija and Tai’gee. They would crowd together in an impossibly tangled mass to fit into their tiny bed and somehow the discomfort that should have made it an abysmal arrangement never touched their blissful dreams. Right now though Tai’gee was uncomfortable and felt unquestionably dismal. As she looked at the sleep slackened face of the woman she loved most in the world, Tai’gee felt tears sting her eyes. She felt so lost; she was twenty three – she thought – cycles old, leading a group of women through strange countries to ... where? She was an unbridled village girl only three cycles earlier, and now she was the Queen of the Amazons. For Zeus’ sake, she was trying to crew a ship across the Black Sea and she’d never even been on a skiff in her life. Now a foreign visionary, a stranger, said she was pregnant, showed her ominous magic, was giving her ominous vials – all with an infuriatingly simple smile.

Tai’gee reached up to stroke Kaija’s face and then pulled in close to hold her in her arms. She grew sadder lying there because had the drugs not been in her system, Kaija would have reached around and held Tai’gee as well. Tai’gee apologized in her incognizant ear – “I’ll never do this to you again.”

~

Sleep was a long time coming and when it did come, it welcomed Tai’gee begrudgingly. She didn’t sleep well, and she didn’t sleep long. When she opened her eyes the candle across the room had burned down to an inch high nub, and she was alone in bed.

Rising to her elbows and sitting up, Tai’gee rubbed her face and looked around. By the door to the room a pair of glittering eyes greeted her. It took a moment, but Tai’gee recognized it was one of Ari’s children sitting in the doorway, looking at her. Tai’gee waved, but he didn’t wave back. ‘A little Rylah,’ she thought. She got up, bringing the bed sheet with her as a body wrap.

Tai'gee was about to ask what he was doing and if he knew where Kaija was, but he placed a finger to his lips solemnly and looked into the common room.

Leaning into the doorway, Tai'gee could see the room was full of sleeping bodies. Apparently the family had returned while she'd slumbered. On the far side of the room, however, were two people not sleeping. There was light encircling them, much like the light encircling her earlier in the night. Tai'gee watched as Rylah made slow sweeping motions with her hands and arms while Kaija sat on her knees in front of her. She seemed to be both absorbing and emitting the light around her, and instead of streaking and swirling they seemed to just kind of hang in the air and pulse. Absently Tai'gee started to walk into the room but the little boy put out an arm and shook his little head at her. So she stayed and watched what felt like a long time of shifting, pulsing lights. Tai'gee leaned her head and body against the door frame and watched idly.

Just as she was starting to yawn after being relaxed by the quiet peace of what she was witnessing, the light broke up somehow. Some of it seemed to flutter off like fireflies and moths, some seemed to immerse into Kaija, some just seemed to fade into darkness – a gentle, caressing, resting darkness. Kaija bowed her head and Rylah placed her hands on her crown, neither spoke from what Tai'gee could hear. But after a few moments Tai'gee heard a soft mewing, a sound that always cut straight to her heart, a sound that distressed her so much she wanted to do anything to stop it. It was the closest Kaija could get to crying and instinctively Tai'gee started to go to her. Again she was stopped by the boy who shook his head gravely and placed a finger to his lips again.

They sat together like that for a long time, Kaija's soft mewing still filtering across the room. Tai'gee really wanted to speak out to Rylah and tell her to hold Kaija – 'Just hold her and hum, that makes her feel better.' But Tai'gee remained quiet, as the boy had bade her. They were obviously deep into some spell and who knew what they were working on. Obviously it had something to do with Kaija's Mendhi, the threatening sluggish lines vining around her earlier weren't gone but there had been fewer in this second emission.

Suddenly there was a sharp thump to Tai'gee's leg. She looked down at the little boy who'd just hit her, but he offered nothing except a head nod towards Kaija and Rylah. Looking over, Tai'gee could see Rylah's head turned to her, she could feel her looking at her through the darkness and Tai'gee shivered. The boy thumped her again then pushed her leg, urging her to go in. Carefully Tai'gee picked her way through the crowded room to the corner.

"We've done much healing." Rylah's voice barely disturbed the quiet of the room and Tai'gee was surprised she heard her; Kaija's mewing was almost louder. Tai'gee looked at her wife whose head was still bowed. Now that she was closer, the crying she'd thought she'd heard was actually a kind of humming. If Kaija knew Tai'gee was beside her, nothing in her body betrayed that.

"She is entranced. It is good. What she says to you now will be most important to her soul," continued Rylah in her low tones. "Sit as me."

Uncertain, Tai'gee lowered herself by Rylah and she shifted over so Tai'gee would be directly in front of Kaija. "Your hands," she directed Tai'gee gently with her eyes, encouraging her to place both her hands on top of Kaija's bowed head. Just as she was about to touch her, Rylah spoke again.

"Do not be afraid. What you will feel is the power of her Mendhi. It will be very different from yours. She has much of her father inside."

It was singularly amazing. When Tai'gee's hands touched Kaija's head the humming became clear; it was an energetic vibration – the closest she could describe would be like being surrounded by hummingbirds. When Zeus sends his bolt storms sometimes the hair on her arms would stand up and she was sure every hair on her body was completely on end right then. And like the spark that would jump between her fingers and her sword hilt in the winter, Tai'gee felt a shock that made her throw her hands aside. Surprised she looked back and forth between Kaija, Rylah and her hands. The Elder woman nodded again.

"It is strong her power, but she will not hurt you."

Again Tai'gee placed her hands on Kaija's head, closing her eyes in determined trust, and again she felt the vibration emanating from her, the electricity. It flowed through her fingers and palms entering Tai'gee's veins and coursed through her body, rushing and working with her blood. Her heart rate picked up like she had been running or startled. She was scared, she would admit it; she was fearful of whatever it was Kaija was emitting, especially since she was not awake to control it as far as Tai'gee could tell.

'What was that?' I listened closely. Within the humming and the static I heard voices, talking, a conversation. It was probably a couple of Rylah's children whispering about us and our odd behavior in the corner. When I looked up to see where the voices were coming from, I found it took a great deal of effort. Blinking my eyes, flexing the muscles in my neck – my body felt heavy and mired in something thick and sluggish. Effortfully, I pulled my eyes open in an attempt to see and was greeted by an open space of static energy. It crackled all around me in sparkling black explosions. I felt myself moving through it, towards the conversation – or maybe it was moving towards me. Either way the voices were getting louder.

"You keep trying to live like a human, and bring me out when I'm convenient!"

"You don't belong all the time!"

"I'm more useful than your stupid emotions. All you've learned has made you vulnerable and still you hold me back!"

"All we've done is what Tai'gee has wanted us to do, what would make her happy," said a third voice.

I was surrounded by talking. Some voices were loud and forceful, some quiet and persistent, but they were all the same speaker... they all sounded like Kaija.

“That’s what you always say. ‘It’s what Tai’gee wanted us to do.’ Well I know she wants us to stay alive and that’s what I do. She’s never met me-”

“-She would be afraid of you,” said a timbre I recognized with intimate fondness. “And if she is afraid of us there will be no need for you.”

This timbre was my patient, affectionate Kaija. The timbre she argued with I didn’t recognize – it was angry and fierce in no way I’d ever heard Kaija speak. It was scary sounding and the more I heard that voice the stronger a tingling intimidation shot up my spine.

“She’ll have to meet me some time – you can’t get rid of me. And you all like me, you like that I’m here to keep you all nice and safe.” In the background a smaller voice repeated “No” over and over, like a mantra, but this rougher voice didn’t pay it any attention. “You keep making mistakes. You don’t listen to me. You think Tai’gee wants to be wandering over the world?, getting raped? What about Pi?”

“Pi was not our fault!” many voices yelled at once.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear you,” the gruff voice chided.

A softer voice answered. “We could have done better.”

Then a second voice: “I can’t do this. Everyone thinks I’m so good – but I’m not. I’m not good. I can’t do anything right.”

“You can’t, but I can. I save us. I keep us safe. When you deny me, everyone dies.”

“And who are you?”

‘Finally! I said something.’ I knew now where I was, though not how I came to be in Kaija’s mindscape. This must be the battle and demons she was fighting within. Around me the static seemed to seize for a moment, becoming a constricting charge, then it exploded around me.

“Get out!” several voices bellowed at me, riding a wave of energy meant to throw me into oblivion. I stood my ground, setting myself somehow against this rebellion.

“Who are you?” I demanded again.

Again the static intensified, electricity coursed all around me, I could feel bolts streaking by me, investigating and intimidating. The rough voice rolled out to me from this charged darkness. “I am the commanding force of this energy,” it proclaimed ominously. “I am the base, platform, I am the stable thread of this weave you call Kaija.”

“No, no,” persisted a little voice. The others were silent, waiting.

“I don’t think you are,” I said in as brave a voice as I could muster.

“Tai’gee, we’re trying.”

“I’m just not that good.”

“I’m going to fail.”

“It was my fault – everything is my fault.”

“How can she love me when I let that happen?”

“She doesn’t. She needs me. She’s waiting for me!”

“Get out!”

The jolt took me by surprise. I felt myself spinning wildly. Just as suddenly though, I stopped. I felt surrounded by something firm, something unquestionable.

“You will not touch her again.”

‘I don’t know this voice.’ But it was more familiar than the angry timbre. There was a roiling baritone in it, and something a little higher in pitch that softened whatever might have made the deeper tone imposing.

“Who are you?”

A smile enveloped me. “I am glad you are here, but you must go.”

“No – no I can’t go yet – we have to fight. Kaija has to believe how I feel about her. That voice-”

Jerked. Yanked.

Tai’gee sat up breathless and panting, feeling naked without all the energy that had been encircling her. She was back on their cot in their room. Rylah was nowhere to be seen. Kaija slept next to her, her face was peaceful, free now of the sedatives she’d been given. As Tai’gee watched, Kaija’s face shifted and heavy eyelids slowly pulled open. Her heart skipped – a fleeting radiant yellow glow shown in her eyes, fading into nothing before Tai’gee could be sure of what she’d seen.

“You are awake?” Kaija half whispered, half croaked.

It was still dark – had at least a day passed so she could have absorbed all she had experienced and learned in just a few hours, Tai’gee might have been able to believe she was awake. As it was, she pulled up their tattered, undyed blanket – the rough fabric scratching against her skin did not escape an immediate comparison to the crackling electricity from earlier – and snuggled into Kaija’s arms. *“I’m not awake; go back to sleep.”*

~

The morning dawned crisp. The first thing Tai'gee noticed was her nose was cold. The room was lit in a cloudy morning gray. Rylah's stool was primly in the opposite corner, as always, with the large wooden bowl sitting atop it. More than likely, Rylah had already filled it with their breakfast.

Lying on her back, Tai'gee rolled her head over to meet Kaija eye to eye. "Oh! Ah – hi," she croaked in surprise. "You're up."

"Mhm."

"How'd you sleep?" Tai'gee winced a little as she asked, knowingly testing for what Kaija might remember or suspect.

"Weird dreams." Kaija frowned a little, squinting in concern. "I feel like something is not right."

"What do you mean?"

"I do not know exactly. I did not sleep like I usually do." Kaija took the drugging well, as Tai'gee explained the why and when. "But I do not like to be asleep for so long."

"Well, you won't be again – not by my hands anyway. I wasn't sure what to do at the time, but I don't like that choice."

Kaija sat casually on the side of their bed, inspecting all of her extremities, moving them cautiously, testing their flexibility. She didn't like sleeping – ever since her coma, Kaija slept only when it was absolutely necessary. This current self-exploration was in response to that injury, making sure her body worked like it was supposed to after a long, unexpected unconsciousness. Satisfied, she looked up at Tai'gee, her gold eyes open but not particularly expressive. "I am sorry I froze. I will do better."

Tai'gee had been sitting in Rylah's usual chair rolling the pomegranate seeds and grapes they had been given around in their bowl with her finger. She looked up, startled by Kaija's declaration. It reminded her of the night before and after what she'd heard in Kaija's mind, Tai'gee never wanted to hear Kaija say that again. She immediately glanced to Kaija's chest, which confirmed her suspicions. The arrowhead her father had given her was glowing an obvious red.

"You ask a lot of yourself Kaija. Just relax. There was a lot to absorb all at once."

Kaija frowned but didn't say more about it. Instead she asked what had been done while she slept.

Of course the first thing Tai'gee thought of was the conversation and magic with Rylah but she wasn't ready to talk to Kaija about those things yet. She wanted to talk to Rylah first and process with her these strange experiences.

"We got passage on a ship – we're leaving tomorrow." Tai'gee grew tired of playing with their breakfast and set the bowl on the floor. It must have come across as a troubled move because Kaija asked her what was wrong. 'Shit. Not yet.' Tai'gee shrugged.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do?"

"Kaija, I don't know what I want to do. If I could know where any of our enemy's are that at least would be something. Everything I'm deciding is based on thinking the hounds of Hades are on our tails, and we may have all the time and leisure we need and nothing more to worry about. But I don't know. I'm lost."

Tai'gee was too busy feeling sorry for herself and her directionlessness to notice Kaija had come to sit on the floor beside her. When Kaija placed her hand on Tai'gee's thigh, the young Queen jumped, startled, and Kaija immediately recoiled. "I am sorry," they both said at the same time. Then they just looked at each other, openly, searchingly. Tai'gee saw her thoughts in Kaija's eyes.

"We've been apologizing to each other a lot lately," said Tai'gee. "What does that mean?"

In the stark room Tai'gee felt loud. Her doubtful question, though she knew she asked in a small voice, seemed to reverberate off the walls then hang in the air over them like a suspended anvil.

"Are we hurting each other?"

'Ah, the direction I'd given her years ago to know when to apologize. Kaija always did know how to simplify things.'

"No. But I think we're both hurting within ourselves and that's making us apologize for each other's pain."

"I do not like when you hurt," Kaija stated honestly.

"Likewise." Tai'gee offered her a smile and lifted her hand to stroke her hair. Her fingers instantly got caught in a tangle. "Kaij' – we've gotta do something about this." Tai'gee rolled her eyes at Kaija's sniff of indifference. "Come on, where's your brush?"

"No, I do not want my head yanked," she pouted. What Kaija had yet to learn was that Tai'gee found her pout exceptionally cute; cute is never a deterrent.

"Come on, I'll cut out the tangles so I won't pull, ok? You should have enough hair up there to hide any patches," she said. The humor was lost on Kaija though.

VIII

“No, I do not like it!” shouted Kaija angrily. “I do not want it like this!”

Eponin had arrived while Tai’gee was brushing out Kaija’s hair and Tai’gee had to admit, Eponin was absolutely no help. What made Tai’gee happiest was Kaija’s irritation was directed at Eponin rather than herself, since the older warrior had taken over grooming detail. Tai’gee’s hands were cramped with the effort. When Ep pronounced herself done, Kaija’s matted jungle had morphed into a fuzzy, wild bush. It was standing on untamed ends in total disarray. Tai’gee covered her mouth to keep herself quiet, but Eponin grinned - - a huge mistake.

Golden eyes zeroed in on Eponin and ‘hunter’ took over instantaneously.

“Kaija calm down.” Tai’gee took the brush from the giggling hairdresser. “Ep, it’s not funny,” she told her in a low warning. “She’s really mad.” Eponin managed to get herself under control, but she glanced past Tai’gee’s shoulder again and started laughing all over – Tai’gee couldn’t say she was much help because she could feel a smile twitching at her own lips. But Tai’gee wasn’t facing an irate half-sphinx, and Eponin was. She did recognize a particularly threatening growl which wiped the humor from her face. “Ok, time for you to go Ep,” she said, and pushed her out the door to safety.

“Come on. I was only kidding – I wasn’t going to leave it like that!”

“*If* there’s a next time, remember that so you don’t risk losing a limb.” With a final shove, Tai’gee got Eponin out of the bedroom. Turning back to Kaija, Tai’gee told her to sit back in the chair. “I’ll braid it for you. That way you don’t have to worry about tangles.”

Kaija acquiesced reluctantly. “It is not funny,” she mumbled as she flounced into the chair.

Taking her place behind her, Tai’gee started to work. “When did you get so sensitive about your hair? You used to not care how it looked.”

“Do you like being laughed at?”

Tai’gee conceded. “You’re right.” She braided in silence for about a half candle mark. Kaija’s hair was easy to braid because it was so coarse and stiff. Tai’gee plaited her mane in fourteen rows then wove the tails together to make one tail. When she was halfway through Kaija’s much softened voice broke the quiet.

“No one braids it like Pi,” she said wistfully.

Momentarily Tai’gee’s hands stilled. They hadn’t talked much of their daughter in the last several months. Pi was actually Kaija’s niece, her only remaining blood relative, and they had had a very special bond.

“Have you been thinking of her much?” Tai’gee’s voice wavered and her hands shook slightly as she resumed her meticulous work.

“I miss her,” answered Kaija plainly.

‘Oh curse my confounded tears!’ Tai’gee’s work suddenly blurred as her eyes misted over with tears, and they slid silently down her cheeks. Her reflexive sniff gave her away.

“Do not cry.” Kaija’s voice was deep and comforting. And then Tai’gee realized the opening this conversation gave her. As she mechanically moved into uniting the tails, Tai’gee availed herself of the opportunity, trying to control the quiver now moving throughout her body.

“Would – would you want more children Kaija? Another family?”

Tai’gee felt Kaija’s shoulders stiffen, but just as quickly she forced herself to relax. Tai’gee was glad to be behind her, blind to whatever expression she may have at the moment. Perhaps if the conversation stayed faceless it would be easier.

“We have many children in our tribe.”

“Yes, but not our own.”

Kaija was quiet again; Tai’gee could feel her thinking. She wondered what voices may be contributing to her deliberation and what they might be saying. She worried about the dark voice and imagined it taunting Kaija over the potential for more failures...

“I would be scared.”

It was odd really, thought Tai’gee, when moments of pure pride pop up. Tai’gee didn’t know if Kaija even noticed, but she had just announced an emotion for a hypothetical situation; perhaps no big deal to anyone else, but to the half-sphinx, recognizing what she was really feeling in the present moment was difficult work – to identify one from an abstract possibility was something just short of remarkable. Tai’gee hugged her impulsively, wrapped her arms around her shoulders and pressed her cheek to her wife’s. Kaija gave her arms a squeeze of her own. Finishing with the final braid, Tai’gee moved to squat before Kaija, steadying herself with her hands on Kaija’s thighs.

“The truth is Kaija... there is a chance I could be pregnant... from what happened... with Mathus. It’s a possibility.”

“No!” Kaija exploded. It wasn’t the reaction Tai’gee was expecting, and when Kaija stormed from her chair Tai’gee sat back with a hard thump. “He does not get to hurt you and have this. Children are good – to come from good! Not mistreatment! He does not get goodness from his mistreatment!”

A voice cleared behind Tai'gee at the door leading to the common room. Eponin and Beckries stood there wide-eyed.

“Get out!” Kaija yelled at them.

“But-”

Kaija's eyes shrank to indeterminate slits, leaving vibrant, electric gold, glittering like sparks. Tai'gee heard the two guards bolt from the house without another word.

“Kaija-”

Those same eyes turned to Tai'gee, though the anger melted instantly to a mournful stare. “Why Tai'gee? Why would he get this good thing from his cruelty?”

Tai'gee pulled herself to her feet and looked at her distraught and struggling wife. What could she say? She wasn't sure if she wanted to convince Kaija this could be a good thing. Did she want to make it sound like she wanted these children? She was happy with Pi; she hadn't considered having children of her own, though she did remember vaguely wanting to raise a family before they'd adopted the little blonde. She had wanted Pi; these babies hadn't a place yet in her plans or desires. But still...there they were. Tai'gee didn't choose their father, they had. She hadn't chosen the circumstance, they had. Did she owe it to them to let them live out their choice? And what would it mean to her wife if she did? Would they be a constant reminder to Kaija of a time when she felt she'd failed? Would Kaija be miserable and angry to look on them and see Mathus in their faces? ‘Would I?’ Tai'gee couldn't stand to see her wife suffer like that, holding a child that would make her feel...impotent.

Tai'gee held out her hand to Kaija. Kaija chose to stay where she was; she needed space. Tai'gee was content to give it to her. Kaija had told Tai'gee once that sometimes she felt too much energy in some situations and being touched in those times made her want to destroy something for adding more to it.

“This wouldn't be his goodness,” Tai'gee attempted to explain again. “They would be our children, our reward for getting through that.”

“No, he took you by force. He put those children in you.”

“And if he hadn't, would it be alright then?”

Kaija's mouth clacked shut, hard. She yipped in pain and opened it again. A line of blood ran from her lip where her canine had bitten into it. Tai'gee took a rag from the wash basin and asked to help her with a look. Kaija let her wipe her chin and hold the rag to her lip to stop the bleeding, which wasn't really necessary – Kaija healed so quickly that the bleeding stopped within seconds of her initial bite. But Tai'gee wanted the reason to be close to her, and pretending she had an injury to nurse gave her an excuse to be close. All the while she dabbed at

her lip, Kaija kept her eyes down, and finally her breath hitched and a soft mew escaped her. Tai'gee brought her into a hug, shushing her and humming to comfort her.

“You are pregnant,” she half asked, half said into Tai'gee's shoulder, very sadly.

“Rylah believes I am. That there are two children.”

Her body hitched again and Tai'gee tightened her hold around her. “I don't have to have them Kaij'. We don't have to have them.”

Her body began to tremble, and Kaija was so much muscle holding onto her when she shook was like trying to hold a tree still in an earthquake. “No, no, Honey, it's ok. I promise.”

“No – I – I need –” She started to push away from Tai'gee. Suddenly their room was a flurry of activity. Ari and Rylah bustled in. The former grabbed Kaija by her shoulders with his happy smile; “Come – come with me, this way.” In a blur they were gone, leaving Tai'gee with Rylah confused and feeling stripped.

“What are you doing? You can't-”

“Ari will help the Little Lion.”

“But-”

“Where are you going?”

The standoffish question took Tai'gee completely by surprise, especially since she hadn't moved from her bewildered spot in the middle of the room. She blubbered a bit before just shutting her mouth altogether. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell Rylah she was trying to get to the Northern Amazons, but Tai'gee thought the fewer people that knew where they were headed the better. Rylah seemed to accept the silence as some sort of answer, and from the look of her, it wasn't the answer she wanted. Her dark eyes grew darker with something like impatience – or maybe it was exacerbation. “A babe amongst babies, first to stand, first to stumble out the door, all to move and nothing more,” the woman muttered.

“I don't understand.”

“Of course you don't child,” she said gruffly, though not unkindly. “Come.” Without explanation, she led them from the house, out into the dusty streets. The closeness of the houses and shops crowded in around them and it seemed every alley was a major thoroughfare. Everybody jockeyed for space to sit or walk or be. After several winding paths taking them down dark alleys, light alleys, and ambiguous roads they emerged from the crush of walls and walked almost directly into the sea. They'd come to the port, an end far from where Tai'gee and Eponin had met Habel.

Sunlight glittered brightly on the minute ripples as waves ran into and broke up against boats, sea walls and dock poles. The water was murky, like a pond disturbed. A pier stretched out to their right where several men fished and dropped nets and cages into the depths to catch what they could. Children sat with their bare legs dangling over the side, carefree, content to stare at the water and swing their feet like they were running in place.

Rylah waved her hand in front of them, spreading it over the sky, water and port life before them. “Where are you going?” Each word was a deliberate, punctuated question.

Considering where they were, Tai’gee put together Rylah wanted to know where they would be sailing. “Habel said he would take us across the sea,” she clarified, but suddenly felt wary of that answer – even more so when Rylah pursed her lips into a disapproving line.

“There are many war clans of men on the other side of the sea; it is a monotonous land of hills and grass, very easy to get lost, and nothing to do but fight. You will not be allowed to wander there.” Her dark eyes glittered at Tai’gee in the sunlight, daring her to come up with another plan.

“We have no home,” Tai’gee explained carefully. “We want to find any more of us that may be out there.”

“And?”

A seagull’s squawk broke the air. Curious, the big bird dropped down to a post nearby, cocking its head to the side to inspect the two conspirators. Its flat, webbed feet stood one on top of the other and when it started to wobble it threw out its wings to keep itself steady. ‘And what?’

“We need a new home. We don’t belong in Greece anymore.”

“You are refugees – you belong where someone lets you. Or you assimilate.”

Tai’gee flared at the suggestion. She told Rylah they were the ones who would not assimilate, that’s why they were there, why they had left Greece. Sea breeze twisted Rylah’s many scarves, but the big woman remained quiet and thoughtful. The salt in the air tickled Tai’gee’s nose, and gathered on the back of her tongue. She was thirsty – she was always thirsty there. The Greek Amazon’s land had been land locked and they’d never known the threats of Poseidon, they’d never known the trials and promises of the sea. As Tai’gee looked out into the bay to calm herself she marveled at the expanse. A flat blue line extended as far as she could see. It looked so calm, so infinitely calm, it was hard to imagine giant waves, threatening spouts of water, funnels that would drag a ship to the underworld, the perilous lure of wondering what could be on the other side of the line...

A tinkling caught Tai’gee’s attention next and she looked up to see a man struggling with a laden cart, trying to get the uncooperative wheels over a rut in the boardwalk. The sunlight caught in his wares, blinking and winking off smooth and shining objects. She remembered Rylah’s magic and turned back to her.

“Kaija’s mind – that’s where you sent me last night.” Rylah just looked at her, expressionless. “She’s not just fighting doubt and guilt, it’s more than that.”

“But you’ve known this,” she said. She was even and noncommittal. It was difficult to know if she was trying to enlighten Tai’gee or being malevolently antagonistic. Either way, Tai’gee was uncomfortable as she explained what she knew.

“When she was a child, Cerebrius gave her that arrowhead. He said it was to show her who was a threat, to recognize hunters. Every time she’s been in danger it glows – the more danger she’s in the brighter it gets; she never seems to notice though when it changes color. Even though it looks like it’s a glowing coal it never gets warm.”

“But it is not about danger, is it,” Rylah said more than asked.

Tai’gee shook her head, stirring the salty air around her. “No. ‘The point of persecution’ both Cerebrius and Athena had called it. She said it was no longer necessary, which I didn’t understand at the time.”

Tai’gee thought back to Cresca, to the time before they had gone to the Amazons – gods it seemed so long ago and when she remembered herself and Kaija it was like two strangers looking back at her from her memory. Kaija stared at her father laying dead in the street; small as she was she looked tiny standing next to his massive body. Her arrowhead had glowed a fierce white through her fury at his murder, it seared the sky until she’d let Thalkus go. And again, in the Capitol it had flared when she’d grabbed Ahmon as the crazed warrior raged at her in an attempt to kill her. Xena had suspected the glowing stone was a measure of healing, but Tai’gee had figured out otherwise. It was a measure of persecution, of destructive energy being directed at Kaija, counting coup on the hate specified strictly for her. Until Tai’gee had entered Kaija’s mind however, she didn’t understand the arrowhead’s full purpose. It was like a lightning rod, a magnet for that persecution, funneling it into Kaija’s psyche. Under Athena’s blessing, that hatred was transformed into nursing care for Kaija. But Athena had enhanced her blessing, allowing Kaija’s body to rapidly heal itself without the arrowhead as a catalyst. The arrowhead still did its job however, measuring and recording the intolerance and odium that surrounded Kaija, but Aries had paid a visit to Kaija’s mind too and, Tai’gee suspected, made a new job for the enchanted stone – he planted a Rogue there, to be fed on the hate the stone collected – a last ditch effort to get Kaija under his control.

It glowed now, constantly, even though Kaija was not surrounded by the same hate and distrust she had been in those situations with Thalkus and Ahmon. In both instances, they had been able to convince a mass of people to fear and loathe Kaija – shoveling energy to the stone, which it hungrily collected. In those climatic moments when the truth of their treachery had come out, when Kaija had let them go, the grip of distrust they had woven over the others had broken, and the necklace no longer had a food source. The damage was done however, with the constant trials of war and retreat, of losing Pi, of the pressure to protect an entire people from oblivion the stone had found a new source of hatred and doubt to collect and funnel, and Tai’gee had met that source in the voices inside Kaija’s mind – Kaija’s anger and frustration with her own

shortcomings, failures, and doubts, her despair and worry over her own inadequacy was being set up as a veritable buffet for the Rogue.

“That’s the dark energy surrounding her, mixed in with her Mendhi, isn’t it?” Tai’gee wasn’t really looking for Rylah to confirm or deny her question because it wasn’t really a question. She knew in her heart what it was, what was going on. “Are you going to tell her? Is Ari telling her now?”

“Are you?”

“She wouldn’t understand it from me.”

“You know that is not true. And what makes you think she will understand it from either of us?”

‘Oh confound it! All these damn questions, like I don’t have enough questions of my own to answer – or try to answer.’ Tai’gee had always found a supremely frustrated person’s grasps for strangulation comedic, but standing there before her own antagonist it was all she could do to keep from wringing Rylah’s fat head from her fat body. ‘Maybe that would teach her to quit tormenting me.’

“Violence teaches nothing,” she said. Obviously she’d seen Tai’gee’s desire in her eyes – she doubted it was a subtle expression.

“Sure it does – it teaches prudence,” Tai’gee snapped at her.

Rylah gave her a mystic look before turning her chocolate eyes seaward. “You need a plan, and you need to be able to follow it – no matter what. You need to know your purpose.” The seagull flew off with her declaration as if to spread it far and wide.

“Well do you have any suggestions? Or do you just want to fill me with doubt and directionlessness and leave me to lead the last of my people into extinction?” Tai’gee was quickly going to that ugly angry place and she didn’t really care to stop her temper from taking her there.

Rylah turned her head only enough to be able to see Tai’gee from the very corners of her eyes. The effect blew Rylah’s typical sly expression into unreasonable proportions – she looked like a Trickster Demon and for the first time Tai’gee felt not just uncomfortable but unsafe in her presence. Rylah smirked at her. “You will meet many in your travels scarier than me; reserve that wariness from them.” Her eyes glittered, and Tai’gee was not entirely convinced. Turning to her in full, Rylah put her regular noncommittal expression back on, complete with infuriatingly simple smile and lifted a meaty hand behind her. “Will you come with me?”

It was a request – a real one – and if she hadn’t been so shocked Tai’gee would have been suspicious. As it was, she agreed, and they set off again down the awkward, blind alleyways on their way to who-knew-where.

~

Who-knew-where turned out to be an open field far from the busy city. Grasses knee high bowed and shifted like a gigantic flock of birds or school of fish, their stalks golden waves. It was quiet there but for the rustle of the reeds. The hiss of the afternoon breeze was indistinguishable from the dying retreat of a wave on shore. Some butterflies fluttered laboriously over the weed tops, erratically dipping and diving in a heedless dance that would send them crashing into the golden waves, perhaps rending their wings and leaving them crippled and forced to walk on sturdier legs.

Suddenly a head popped out of the grass and then the torso of a laughing child. He threw up his hands trying to catch the butterfly Tai'gee had been watching, missed, and laughed all the harder for it. Then he sank back down to hide, waiting for the next ambush. Tai'gee could hear him laughing, then talking, yelling to some sequestered comrade. A second head popped up, hands grabbing at the air where the same butterfly had just left. The field was filled with children, six in all. Tai'gee looked to her companion. She stared at the field with what Tai'gee thought was a melancholy look. "My way is to provide a home for my children. I am a mother. Every decision I make is based on the effect on my children."

Tai'gee watched as two more heads popped up, they surprised each other, then the girl gave chase to the smaller boy. Shouting they hobbled through and over the grass, screaming and laughing and picking up more chasers and chasees as they ran.

"You are a Queen."

"And my every decision affects my people – I know that."

"I don't think you do."

Tai'gee's eyes went wide with incredulity. "What could she presume to know about me – because she commanded broken rainbows she could judge my position?" Before Tai'gee could tell her whatfor, Rylah continued.

"This is the field where we met the Little Lion's father. We were lying in the grass over there," she pointed carelessly. "If you can imagine such a huge thing just rising from the ground. Soundless. And nothing we had ever seen before. But we weren't afraid. You know, people want to destroy what they fear, rather than learn about it – even before they learn about it."

"He taught me to see the Mendhi, how to allow the visions my mother had told me to suppress. He told me of the dangers of suppression."

"You make him sound chatty," Tai'gee cut in. "I never knew him to say so much. In fact, he would never even use my name – just called me Little Scrap." Tai'gee could taste her own bitterness – it coated her tongue, making her frown.

“Was he wrong?” She smiled at Tai’gee but Tai’gee did not smile back. She folded her arms across her chest and looked out to the field; the children had all dropped back to hiding. Tai’gee tried to imagine the great sphinx striding across this plain, tutoring a young visionary. It was hard. She’d only known him as an uncompromising killer; obviously Rylah and Kaija had known him very differently... ‘maybe your name has to end in “uh” to appreciate the Great Sphinx’ Tai’gee sniffed. ‘And I was a little scrap.’

“He told me I would see my purpose in my visions.”

“He needed to tell you you would be a mother? Come on, most women are meant to be mothers.”

Rylah cut Tai’gee a sharp look. “Not my way,” she corrected her tersely. “My *purpose*. The purpose for my visions, the purpose for my affiliation with the Mendhi.” The look in her eyes strengthened, sharpened to an intense point, boring through Tai’gee like she was so much glass. When she next spoke, Rylah’s voice was distant and unfocused, nothing like her eyes. “Once I’ve done what I must, the visions will be gone. But there is motion now that needs direction or all may be lost.”

The field took a sudden chill, as though winter had settled over them, frigid and unsparing. With a snake’s quickness, Rylah’s hand shot out and grabbed Tai’gee’s wrist, not roughly but solidly. Her boring gaze retreated so that she looked directly into Tai’gee’s trepid stare.

“You must wait for others – there will be others. They will be destroyed without you, as will the knowledge they possess. All is not yet lost but it can still go tumbling into chaos. When you have them all you must go west – farther west than men have gone in thousands of years. Not for you to find, but there is a place there for you. Your purpose is to keep them alive and together so they can be lead elsewhere. Your way is of a Queen, but that is the purpose of your life.”

She released her and the ring her hand had made around Tai’gee’s wrist felt like it was thawing and cooling at the same time. She looked at it in disbelief, not sure if it was hers, even though there was no discoloration or mar that might make it otherwise. ‘Not a prophet, huh?’

“His purpose,” she continued with hardly a breath between, “he told me was to raise a daughter who would save a world and preserve an existance.” Rylah looked at Tai’gee again, with an impish twist to her lips.

She was waiting for Tai’gee’s prompt. Still very mystified, her voice came out quite small. “And yours?”

With a significant pause she maintained her expression. Then, “to save her.”

Tai’gee’s mind reeled. “I don’t understand.”

“Surely you do.”

The air around them warmed, slightly, enough to keep a man from freezing to death though not make him comfortable. Rylah smiled, keeping her teeth hidden, spreading the wrinkles of her face into wide creases and chubby peaks. “But you will have much time to ponder as you travel.” She turned to go, leaving Tai’gee staring blank and bewildered at the field. Her body trembled, mostly from the adrenaline that had flooded through her when Rylah had grabbed her. The rest was her own intimidation of Rylah’s enigmatic proclamations. Behind her, Rylah chuckled.

“He never called me by my name either. I was ‘Big Pain.’”

‘No, he wasn’t wrong.’

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Once everyone was gathered on the pier, together again for the first time in several days, the Amazons warily eyed the ship that would carry them. The wet wood gleamed darkly in the dim morning light, and the rocking hull creaked against its moorings to the pier, which also creaked while it rocked. The masts waved to the gray sky above them, sails drawn up and withholding any expression they might have of hope for the impending journey. Oar holes set evenly along the length of the hull stared blankly, naked and uninspiring. Tai’gee had to admit that even some of her own excitement for the seaward adventure was evaporating as she studied the weaving vessel. A wide range of emotions hung over all of them: fascination, fear, indecision, and pulling those feelings down like a lowering ceiling of razor sharp spikes was the frank desire to settle – to find a home and rebuild their lives as quickly as possible. They’d been wandering nomads, wind chasers, for almost a year. Tai’gee shook her head.

We aren’t wanderers. Our spirits have roots, as did our traditions and beliefs; our society and culture was not built around mobilization. Grounded was the base of who we... were. I can’t say “are” anymore. I have no idea who we “are”. I need to find somewhere to replant us, so we can grow and display our leaves, flowers and fruits in a new garden.

Habel, Eponin, and many dockhands that would come with them to help balance the Amazon ignorance, had spent the majority of the earlier morning hours loading the ship. Eponin’s much insisted on horses had already been settled, food and water, blankets, furs and rugs piled high and secured. The unboarded Amazons carried all the remaining supplies, mostly their weapons, armor and the few worldly possessions they managed to not have to sell. Selling the valuable remnants of their lives was starting to look like a bad trade when faced with their swaying home for the next – “How long are we gonna be on *that*?” Ghiran demanded skeptically.

“Depends,” Habel huffed. “Could be forever if you sink us. Stupid girl.” As usual, he muttered the last insult under his breath.

Tai’gee shot him a dirty look before turning to her Amazons. “My sisters, we’re here, finally, standing on the threshold of our new lives. This is no different than the evening before a much anticipated battle.”

“Yeah, but we know how to fight – we don’t know how to sail!” shouted Ghiran smartly. Her guardmother gave her a sharp smack to the back of her head for her insubordination. Had it been any other child than Ghiran, Tai’gee may well have been inclined to denounce the punishment; but she was fairly sure she was looking at the next generation of anti-royalists and her inclination shriveled faster than a grape set out in record heat. Uncharitable to Artemis’ decree of individual expression, sure, but she had a reign to establish and she wasn’t going to get very far if she allowed a child to demean her efforts.

“Maybe...maybe we should go back,” one tenuous voice offered. “Maybe this isn’t the best idea.”

Lots of heads turned, but Tai’gee couldn’t identify who spoke. She frowned.

Beckries cleared her throat, indicating she would like to speak. She was still trying to re-establish herself, reaffirm her position after the debacle that claimed Eutries’ life. Beckries was uncomfortable asserting herself in Tai’gee’s presence and preferred to take a subservient role while she felt out her standing. Truthfully, the young Queen wasn’t making it easy for her – Beckries had yet to apologize or otherwise acknowledge her lapse in judgment. Until she did so, Tai’gee wasn’t comfortable reinstating her to such a high position as second in command. Insight was needed there, and Beckries had to get that before Tai’gee felt she could trust her again. With a slight incline of her head, Tai’gee gave Beckries the floor.

“It might be a good time to go back... We heard yesterday that Caesar has been killed.” She looked at Tai’gee preemptively apologetic; “We tried to tell you yesterday but...”

“Well that’s great right?” Latrez looked around the pier, insistent and excited. “We should be able to get back and reclaim our land – no Caesar, no Rome.”

Many previously dulled pairs of eyes lifted, looked at Tai’gee hopefully. ‘We could go home now’ – it glittered in seas of newly inspired brown, blue and hazel.

“We don’t know Rome’s plans,” Tai’gee said cautiously. *How could I tell them my vision of us with the Northern Amazons when what we most wanted dangled before us like the tantalizing Golden Fleece? How could I tell them I saw us struggling north through wind and cold, huddling against each other in precipitation I’d never even seen before? How could I explain the necessity of hardship while sirens sang a homecoming into their lusting ears – especially when it was a song I wanted to succumb to as well?*

‘Carefully; I have to be careful.’ “If Caesar is not in power someone else is. We can’t assume we have an all clear to return.”

Hope sobered but didn’t extinguish. That was good, that’s what Tai’gee wanted. From her place at the back of the group, Dotra looked up, stretched her neck and stood on her tiptoes. In the weak morning light it was difficult to discern her expression. “My Queen, what do you see we should do?”

‘My Queen.’ Tai’gee thought she would never get used to hearing that, especially from her elders. The weight of her position resettled itself on her shoulders. A flicker of her earlier conversation with Rylah passed through her mind – ‘my every decision is based on the effect in my children... You are a Queen.’ Tai’gee straightened, stiffened her spine to support the intangible weight of her responsibility. She thought briefly what decision Kaija might make, and the immediate answer was that she wouldn’t; that wasn’t her position – she would defend to her death whatever decision Tai’gee made. Then she thought of Ephiny. That answer came immediately as well – go north, wait for others, regroup, do what had to be done to survive. Survival wouldn’t happen if they returned to Greece; and it was Ephiny’s reign that taught Tai’gee that they were more than Greece, more than Artemis.

‘We are the stewards of womanhood, shepherdesses of femininity, cultivators of First Woman and all Her promise to our being.’ Tai’gee had been unsure, at first, to hear Ephiny speak in such a way – was it treason? Artemis was their mother, their patron goddess and benefactress; how could any of Her daughters say they are more than Her and not turn their back on Her sanction or renege on their oaths binding them to Her service? ‘Because, being in Her service requires us to survive with Her message; to exist and thrive without Her voice in our ears. Are we not still Amazons even though She has not been here to advise us on the paths of our futures? She has given us these gifts: identity, insight, free will, war skills – it is our oath to use those gifts in Her name, not to forsake Her blessing because She is not paying us the attention we seek. Devotion goes beyond just following lustily after the idol; we must live the lives She expects of us.’

“We should go north, as we have originally planned. We need to find a place where we can rebuild; and though it hurts my heart deeply, I would be lying if I said I thought we can rebuild in Greece. It may be lost to us. But that does not mean we are lost – we have sisters in the north, we can wait for more of our sisters to join us. I know we want to return to our home, that is what we know, that is where all the roots of our lives are left withering now without our care. But we have to realize that we take our home with us – we are Amazons, Artemis’ chosen daughters – we are Amazons everywhere we go, and that knowledge puts our home inside of us.”

Tai’gee’s voice was firm, her own confidence impressed herself, and she smiled with the rightness of it. But her followers were all quiet, silent, reserved, and Tai’gee felt her confidence slip just enough to make her blink and be aware of her smile. The cumulative reserve lasted only for a beat, though, before a wild cheer broke out; there was clapping and smiles in return. There really is nothing more reaffirming than a smile – except of course the unified stomp and earsplitting chant of “A yé! A yé!” fit to rouse the entire city.

Their queen patted down their enthusiasm, called for calm. Seema and Meica had wormed their way to the front and stood jumping up and down with one hand each jabbing into the air above them. Once there was some semblance of peace, Tai’gee acknowledged them.

“Queen Tai’gee –” one began

“– does this mean –” the other cut in

“– we still get to go on the boat?” they finished together.

‘Cute; I wonder if mine will speak as one.’ Tai’gee felt herself freeze in that instantaneous panic that left so quickly it was rarely outwardly noticeable, but inside her body was a tumult. She was pregnant – she had accepted that somewhere along the way. Hardly missing a beat, Tai’gee told the bouncing young girls they would in fact still be getting on the ship, making them squeal with delight and jump together in each others’ arms. But Tai’gee’s jolt of insight had stripped her of her initial tide of giddiness that would sweep her and the rest of the Amazons onto their ship and on to a new state of life. She began searching the crowd for Kaija, whom she hadn’t seen at all since Ari had taken her the day before. In fact, she’d only seen Rylah, an obnoxiously brief encounter, right after the portly woman had ushered her brood out into the early hours of the morning. At Tai’gee’s window she had peeked in.

“I will see you again.” And the window was an empty black hole again. Kaija hadn’t appeared after Rylah’s departure, not at dinner the night before as she sat awkwardly with Rylah and her many children amongst full bowls and scooping fingers. No smiling Ari met Tai’gee on her way to the dock, to return her kidnapped wife, shake her hand, wish her a fair trip. Tai’gee was starting to worry if she was going to get Kaija back before the trip, or did she need to go find her, rescue her from herself perhaps. She was growing increasingly apprehensive about what Kaija might be struggling with, debating, was deciding or demanding of herself. Tai’gee feared that she was doing more damage to herself, feeding the Rogue, making it grow in her mind. All Tai’gee could do though was wait and hope that Ari or Rylah had explained everything to Kaija and kept her from hurting herself.

It turned out that Kaija had returned while Tai’gee was speaking; she was standing discreetly just off the pier by an outbuilding. Because she was so much smaller than most of the other Amazons, and because Tai’gee had braided her hair down to tameness, she wasn’t as easily identifiable amongst the throngs as she could have been. As the wave of new sailors moved to board, and the crowd thinned, Tai’gee did spot her, standing alone and unassuming by the entrance, waiting her turn. It was way too crowded for Tai’gee to push her way back to Kaija, so she waited too, and when finally they could be together again, they took each other’s hand and boarded the ship quietly and hopefully.

PART 3

I

The laughter died down subtly, the conversation ending in a pleasant stillness. Kaija lay wrapped around herself beside the Amazon Queen and Tai’gee was content to thoughtfully stroke her mane while they rested. Eponin cut herself another chunk of blackroot, popping it into her mouth carelessly. They were surrounded by ease in the company of these new people, these Khaziks. Their overt friendliness was relaxing, soothing, refreshing. Unexpected, but definitely refreshing. After the treacherous Habel and his poor attempt to betray them to slavery it could be expectedly difficult to trust any new people they met. But they weren’t so hard as to give up on

all mankind; they'd weathered the rest of the Black Sea on their own, after killing Habel and his crew – weathered it with little mastery, an unfair amount of luck, and perhaps the blessing from the ghost of a dead god, so, therefore, they felt they could survive introductions. If the new acquaintances proved ill-met, they would rectify their meeting, simply.

Presently they were in the company of a jovial group of nomads. They were a weathered people; they weren't beaten down by their hard lives but that they worked long and hard everyday was visible easily in their skin and bodies. Still, the Amazons rarely saw any of the Khaziks without a smile on their faces, true and lasting glee for life; they were humbly invested in finding the humor in life, and shared their lightheartedness with them with a good will. They also helped the Amazons to know just where they'd ended up sailing themselves – hardly north at all, it turned out; they'd gone almost directly across the Black Sea, due east. They had ended up directly in the middle of the isthmus Tai'gee had been trying to avoid, but apparently far enough outside of the borders of the Kwarims that she needn't worry about a retaliation against Amazon "invasion".

Meeting the Khaziks couldn't have been a more fortuitous occasion. Once the beleaguered, windswept and surf-tossed Amazons had gratefully grabbed hold of the dry land many were convinced they'd never again see, it wasn't long before most of them realized they weren't nearly as steady and hearty land-lovers as they had been when they'd first set sail. Nearly all of them suffered from vertigo for hours. Once they could stand up straight, they had to hold tightly to each other as they took tentative steps, not trusting that they could find their footing on their own. Drunkenly the newly landed Amazons swayed about the shoreline, nauseated, disoriented, using swords as canes – or trying to. The soft, shifting sand wasn't quite the best planting ground for sharp, clean swords... Into their misery came some tiny, chestnut skinned travelers who pulled behind them long sleds full of dried and salted fish.

They were a God-sent – or perhaps a Goddess-sent – miracle. After their month at sea, with tensions running high, food and fresh water running low, and more hard treasure than was useful to hungry and thirsty bellies, sleds full of something they hadn't spent weeks on end eating was just what they needed. Alcai helped communicate with the few men that had happened by them – being the only one of them well practiced in making up hand signs to communicate, she was an excellent translator.

They traded a good many of Habel's artifacts for the fish from their sleds, as well as the sleds. The Khaziks were less eager to trade the salted fish; the best Tai'gee could tell was that they had bought the salted fish from a salterie in Bathys, south of them. She'd only rarely seen salted fish herself, and their value was in how long they stayed preserved by this method, and it was clear these people did not intend to stay by the sea. The dried fish, sturgeon mostly, they'd probably caught and treated themselves, and they could do more of that if they wanted.

Had the Amazons made land anywhere near an actual port, they would've been able to make a great deal of money off the ship itself. As it was, they were many miles south of a decent seaside city and there was no possibility of the Amazons getting back aboard in order to get the ship to a decent seaside city. So, they scavenged everything they could from it. Stripping the ship was easy, and the Khaziks helped and provided guileless advice the whole time. Once everything was

laid out, there were forty-two barrels, most empty, two still full of water, one half full of rotting apples, three tightly sealed of oats, one of ale, and much detested remnants of smoked meats. Bedding, blankets, curtains all were piled and arranged on the beach. The sails they cut down, folded and rolled into manageable lengths of fabric, very heavy but useful. Every tool, weapon, mealware, and knick-knack was carried off and sorted amongst those that had need of them and potential sale or trade. In Habel's cabin, there were several small chests of valuables – Tai'gee had of course discovered and kept those not long after they had overthrown the overreaching captain. What she hadn't told anyone, except Kaija of course, was that she'd raided the cook's quarters as well, and hidden away small pots of herbs, salt, two highly valuable bottles of olive oil, one of wine, and curiously, a beautifully treated length of leather. She hadn't wanted to raise much suspicion among her sisters, so she did leave some smaller pinch sacks of salt and herbs – if she'd taken it all they would have known someone had run off with it and been spoiling to find out who and get it back.

As Tai'gee stood with Eponin and Kaija, she marveled at just how much stuff that ship had contained. It had taken them the fullness of the day to remove everything that was reasonably removeable, and now it splayed out before them in great piles of wealth...if they could capitalize on it.

There were dismantled wagons onboard, which they were able to reconstruct fairly easily. However, with only three horses, two of which were in no way bred for wagon pulling, it wasn't immediately clear how exactly they were going to make good use of them. Here was one of the places the friendly Khaziks became so dear. One of the younger boys had been sent back to the main bulk of their people, wherever they had made camp, to tell them what they'd found in the unexpected run-in with the Amazons. More importantly, he'd been told to have them all pick up to join them, bringing everything, including their herd of hardy ponies. It might take a couple of days, but by the time the rest of the nomads arrived, the Amazons would have the wagons built and a readier opportunity for trading wouldn't be there until they got to Sochi.

And Sochi was where the Khaziks suggested the Amazons go next. It was a seaside city, not nearly as big as Bathys, but friendlier and more lively in trade than purchasing.

"I've heard of this place before I think," Shingari offered. She thought a moment, then nodded as if agreeing with herself. "Yes, back in Byzantium – something about slave trading, a hot business in slave trading."

Eponin scowled at that. "Maybe that's where Habel had planned to take us in the first place."

"That doesn't sound like the type of place we should be casually walking into to trade scavenged goods at the sake of our lives..." That came from Aikaterine, a Returnee painter roughly the same age as Turtle. Tai'gee found she had an annoying habit of being close by discussions not entirely meant for her ears.

But the Khaziks had continued to smile and point in the direction of Sochi, nodded encouragingly. Alcai couldn't figure out how to hand sign their worries about slavery; every pantomime they tried resulted in much laughter and clapping from their unintended audience.

“Does it seem odd to anyone else that they speak no Greek at all? This area has been under Greek rule for centuries.”

Tai’gee shrugged at Xerra’s question – she wouldn’t have any idea what was spoken outside of Greece, the customs of others, or anything more delicate than basic geography. She’d seen a map of the Mediterranean twice in her life before boarding Habel’s ship. In his room, she’d found more maps, and equipment probably meant for reading the maps. But the documents were of areas she’d never heard of, in languages she couldn’t read, and the equipment was no thing she’d seen before at all. Her ignorance was building a fantastic frustration inside her, and when she looked at the happy nomads cheerfully signing them on to more parts unknown she bit her lip, hard.

One of the men, the tallest in the group (though that wasn’t saying much compared with the towering Greek women), seemed to come to an abrupt realization as Alcai continued to try to communicate with them. He forcibly thrust his finger at Tai’gee, his smile gone. Again he thrust his finger at her, made a concerned face, pointed north, thumped his chest with a closed fist, then crossed both his hands behind him as if they were tied. In that position he nodded to Tai’gee. She nodded back. Finally someone understood. She watched as he turned to the others and explained the Amazons’ concerns.

“What’s going on? What’s he saying?”

Eponin looked suspiciously at the now chattering nomads. When the others began nodding, Eponin’s squint grew slimmer. Some of the Khaziks, especially the women, began making dismissive gestures to what was being said, pointing at the Amazons and putting their hands in the air to show their obvious height. Apparently they thought no one would dare to try to capture and enslave them, they were too big and monstrous. That made Tai’gee quite happy.

During this entire time, Kaija had waited patiently and unobvious among the others. When the Khaziks talked with Alcai, Tai’gee and Eponin, Kaija stayed back among the milling group, listening but obscured by the arms and shoulders and hair of others. She’d explained that she hadn’t wanted to scare these people, and as long as they didn’t notice her they may be more willing to keep helping them. Tai’gee had glanced down at Kaija’s necklace, at its constantly irritated red glow, and wondered if this new concern from Kaija about scaring people was really a new fear *of* people. She’d done well helping to fight the traitorous sailors, but she hadn’t been as aggressive and fierce as she’d been in other battles – Tai’gee had chalked that up to the unsettled tossing and confined spaces of the ship. Kaija hadn’t the space and trees to expand to her full fighting capacity.

But now she moved forward, studying the Khaziks with more intensity. When the women had made clear their doubts, the men nodded thoughtfully and looked back to the Amazons. Then, in twos and threes, they first noticed the odd looking Amazon among the others, the awkward mouth, the irregular eyes. They backed up, and the stone at Kaija’s neck pulsed with their fear.

The last thing Tai'gee wanted was to provide that terrifying Rogue anything more to feed on. Wasting no time, she moved to Kaija, reaching out her hand to her. Kaija took it and together they posed before the Khaziks, Tai'gee showing an exaggerated affection for her wife and Kaija keeping her head lowered and a docile posture. The demonstration did assuage their immediate intimidation, but they all maintained an undisguised wariness. Their children hung behind them, using the robes of the adults as shields to peek around before ducking back again. With her head resting close by, Tai'gee could feel Kaija smile at them – and that had broken the quickly built wall of tension between them all.

They moved north in one giant caravan to Sochi. It was a sprawling city of low buildings, some stone, some mud and timber. Bright fabrics made awnings, thick rugs lined the entrance ways to homes; the roads were hard packed and clean – or at least the parts through which they were walking. Every city had its slums. Busy and bustling everything certainly was, and there was a great deal of wealth moving through this city – but it wasn't Byzantium. The houses weren't painted, the stucco was rough, there were no frescos or tiled murals, and only a few pools and short fountains.

There were two major markets open that day, and Tai'gee didn't think they were going to be able to get anything bought or sold at either of them. They were thickly crowded, and their four wagons of goods were caught in a sludge of humanity. Being a relatively small group themselves – just enough warriors to keep an eye out for filching hands, and the only two merchants they'd had as Returnees – was only a minor blessing. They needed to have come into the city earlier in the morning; it was mid-morning and the height of industry as they tried to find their way through all the commerce.

“There's no way we're going to get through this,” Eponin growled from atop her pretty, dappled Arabian. But they'd pushed and cajoled and wedged their way onward, and finally made it to the market that was closest to the piers after being hustled away from the city-center market.

Ametha, their pottery maker and basketweaver, deepened her perpetual frown and reiterated her concern about their need of vendor licenses. “In Athens, I've heard they confiscate all a vendor's merchandise, and if the vendor isn't drummed out of the market, he'll end up in jail.”

“Well, we're not in Athens, are we?” Eponin shot back. “The Market Lord said we could go to the piers to do our business. Stop fretting.”

Upon reaching the piers, it was clearly obvious the difference between an organized, cultivated, patrolled market... and an open fareway. A hodgepodge of tatty blankets laid strewn about, covered with ‘things for sale’, as Tai'gee put it. That was as nice a description as she could make overall – calling the broken, half finished, cheaply made, ill-painted and shoddily built bits of whatever someone felt like dragging to the water's edge “goods” would've been too generous. It also meant that anyone shopping in this area would expect to not pay very much for what was being sold clearly out of desperation. Price negotiation would be perfunctory at best. The young Queen felt her hopes for a high flux of income dive like a darted bird.

She cut Eponin's no doubt similar, but more vulgarly expressed, sentiment off before she could make it. "Go find a cooper," she said tersely as the second of their wagons moved by her. "Most of what we have to sell is the empty barrels anyway – we'll get a better price for them from someone who'd actually want them."

To their immense satisfaction, Sochi still predominantly maintained its Greek influence. Though the accent was odd, Tai'gee recognized all of the pandering and wheedling between shoppers and vendors. There was a lull to the commotion as they moved by; curious eyes overrode wagging tongues. Self-consciously, Tai'gee wished Kaija had come with them. The Lioness had stayed behind, guarding the remainder of their valuables, strengthening her relationship with the Khaziks. The half-sphinx had said she did not want to freeze again, useless amid a crush of people when she was needed. Tai'gee thought that was fair, but two things still hung heavily about her. Again the concern for Kaija's mental stability, the worry that her wife's own self-doubt was building, that those weaker voices of her unworthiness were growing louder, talking more. Second, was much simpler – Kaija made her feel safe, and she would defy anyone to naysay it who had basked under her powerful protection. As studious eyes followed their wagons, their horses, their women and critically evaluated the weapons meant to guard each thing those eyes observed, Tai'gee shifted in her spot on the wagonseat and tried to look as commanding as Kaija could.

Eponin strong armed the cooper down to the piers to evaluate their barrels. He was younger than Tai'gee expected he would be, and after a few minutes quick conversation, she found out that the actual cooper was still back in his shop. The man Eponin had brought was his number one apprentice and was just as disinterested at seeing their barrels as his master was. "So you've got a bunch of used barrels," he grouched, "big deal. They probably reek of whatever was in them – we wouldn't get a shimmed dinar for the lot of them."

Tai'gee gave the young man a hard look. But he knew his business, even if he wasn't the master cooper, and he had sufficient amounts of either respect or fear of his master to not be coaxed into bringing him undesirable barrels.

Ametha stepped up then. "You're here; you might as well take a look at them and at least give us a price on ones you could use. They're not all bad."

The young man's face stayed sour. "Where'd they come from anyway?"

"What's it matter?" Eponin glared back.

"I don't want anything that's been stolen, that's what it matters. Nothing stolen or taken unrightly. There's other people in this city for you to talk to if that's the case."

Ametha stepped in again, primly shouldering Eponin out of the way so she could do her work. "We haven't stolen anything. We scavenged these from our own ship. We've already kept what we wanted, but we don't need them all, and the rest would go to waste on the beach if we didn't try to sell them."

While Ametha talked, the young cooper had begun his begrudging examination of the barrels. Much to Tai'gee's surprise, he started by smelling and licking them. Subtly, she leaned over to Ametha and asked what on earth he was doing. The man had good ears however.

"I'm finding out how much of the sea is in these barrels. And it's a good bit. That you got them from a ship checks out."

Eponin forced her way back in. "Do you want them or not?" Her lack of patience and disinterest in finesse irritated Tai'gee. Even Kaija didn't have so little tolerance for negotiating. What else Tai'gee had noticed was that people were watching the cooper's apprentice evaluating their barrels – if they didn't get a good deal from him, that would set the threshold for anyone else buying the leftovers. She had to get Eponin out of the conversation. Not wanting to chase off their best chance of a good turnover on the barrels, Tai'gee ordered Eponin to take the wagon that was full of the other wares to an open area where they could sell them. When the guard started to argue with her, Tai'gee felt her eyes widen into a scathing glare of disbelief that Eponin would dare be so disrespectful. It worked – she hobbled off without another word.

After watching the surly warrior move away, the cooper's apprentice leaned in to Tai'gee and pressed something in her hand. Whispering, he said "this is less than what I'm going to say, but it's a fair price. Trust me."

Before Tai'gee fully understood what he had told her, and before she could make any response, the young man stepped back and spoke loud enough for anyone nearby to hear him.

"There – I'd give you more, but I don't have enough to buy as many of the barrels as I'd like for what they're worth. That," he nodded to her hand, "covers these nine; I'll not give you less, as that would cheat you, and my master won't tolerate unfair dealing."

Tai'gee blinked at the young man before nodding slowly. He continued to hold her gaze and then Tai'gee realized her line in the play; "Thank you. This is twice what I was expecting."

"It's the fair price for the quality you have here. If you take less, you're a ragged fool." With that, he marked the nine barrels he wanted with a simple motion, and walked away.

Ametha sidled her way over to see what the apprentice had put into Tai'gee's hand. She started to frown but before she got too far in outing their ruse, Tai'gee spoke up. "This is your baseline," she advised the woman quietly. "The cooper's man said this is a fair price. Hopefully, most of these people will rely more on what he said than what he paid." Tai'gee put the coins into her coin purse. "You can trade also, but make sure you get the same value as he said; and of course don't trade for what we don't need."

Leaving Xerra to oversee sales of the wagon full of wares, Tai'gee went with Eponin to meander back through the city-center market.

"What was that back there?"

Eponin gave a petulant shrug, which she tried to mask by adjusting her crutch.

“Ep.”

Eponin took a couple more steps in sulking silence, then admitted she'd thought she'd brought the actual cooper.

Tai'gee couldn't help it – a big laugh escaped her before she could even think to stop it. “Oh Eponin. Is there anything you can bear to think you don't do well?”

The crippled guard continued to huff but the irritation had drained out of it, so it was really more chagrin than anything else. After a while longer, and some exaggerated studies of some undeseriable goods at the first few stalls, Eponin gave a conceding sigh. “Yeah well... reading people I guess was never one of my strong suits.”

“Ha!, well don't admit that too loudly in a market.”

“Yeah...” Ep turned all about, eyes attentive but unrelaxing. “So, what're we looking for here?”

“Information mostly. I didn't bring a lot to trade with, but sometimes people are willing to talk for cheap. Or free.”

“Talk about what?”

“Anything useful. We don't know what we don't know. And the Khaziks won't be able to tell us a whole lot.”

Eponin chewed on that for a bit, then suggested they should have kept some of those maps they'd found. “Maybe we could've used them. Or asked someone about them. Whether our people can be found by them.”

Tai'gee smirked as she pulled one of the more detailed maps she'd held aside from the small pile she'd given over to Xerra to sell. None of the Khaziks wanted them – well, none of them seemed to know what they were to begin with, which translated to much the same thing.

The map Tai'gee held had been the most detailed of the ones scavenged from the ship, however it wasn't the most expansive in the area it covered. It identified numerous cities, and even villages around the Black Sea, the rivers and mountains crawling into and around the banks like clutching fingers, the unsailable Lake Maeotis, but nothing farther east or north than that. She didn't expect anyone to know exactly where the Northern Amazons lived, but what if the closest anyone could get them wasn't even on this last map? Her next thought made her tisk at herself – why hadn't she brought Blue Wren with her? The scout would've benefited most from hearing what any other traveler had to say about the new territory into which they were venturing.

“-best slaves are bred. And you need good women for it.”

The insistence in the man's voice was what drew Tai'gee's attention as she and Eponin moved past the men talking in a tight knot between a couple of warehouses.

"You're really brilliant Taig," Ep complimented as she reached to see the map. Tai'gee tried to keep half an ear on the conversation going on next to them while she passed over the parchment.

"-some women."

"Nah, not ones-"

"Do you suppose –" "-obviously developed" "on this" "they've got weapons" "Nah, nah, nah" "It's a great opportunity." "Too many of 'em! You're crazy." "Taig?" "But, you get my idea."

"No Ep, I don't think they're going to be on that map. I think they're a lot farther north."

"Where'd you go just now?"

"I was listening to those men behind us. When we get back, we need to tell everyone to keep an eye on our children. Don't. Don't turn around, just keep walking."

Tai'gee controlled their walk to the market so that they could continue to listen to the various talk around them. Of course very little of it was anything consequential, but listening was free, and picking up discardable tidbits weren't going to add unmanageable baggage. Once they were back in the market-proper, eavesdropping was a bit more difficult. After slowing to a reputable amble, disinterestedly browsing various textiles and trinkets, Eponin suggested they find any traveling vendors. "Traders might have information we can use. All these people just sit in this same city day after day."

But the idea proved easier to have than to build on. Most of the traveling vendors were pushed towards the docks; the more reputable of them sold their goods to the established shop owners and moved on. So, they moved back to the docks after a considerable perusal of the main market, and to reconnoiter with their sisters. Most of the barrels had been sold – about half a wagon full was left. Of the other odds and ends they'd had varying luck. Of course they could have sold everything had they lowered their standards, but refusing to be browbeaten into prices unworthy of the value of their goods reduced their sales footprint by a great deal. Tai'gee knew they wouldn't have had any problem selling every single thing they'd had if they had a spot somewhere in the main market. Ametha backed that up the first chance she got.

"Maybe we could rent a spot with the market boss tonight and come back tomorrow?"

Eponin didn't like the idea. She thought they didn't have enough goods to make the expense of a stall rental worth the extended stay. Tai'gee didn't think so either, plus she had well over two-hundred Amazons waiting for them out on the roads into the city. They should move on, get away from these highly trafficked places where every man could be considered a potential slaver.

“At least let me find out how much the rental would be. We’re here already; what’s the harm?”

The harm turned out to be a reasonable price at a decent location. Either Ametha was an excellent bargainer, the market boss a desperate man, or some force wanted to help them or tease them – but Tai’gee would really have preferred the easy choice an exorbitantly unfriendly rent proposal would have given her. She massaged her face, tried to ignore the giddy self-satisfaction radiating from Ametha, and not feel pressured by the cool shadows on her skin from the setting sun.

“Ok,” she decided quickly, “you, Xerra and four of our guards will stay tonight with the two wagons that still have something to sell. We’ll go get something for dinner for you all, and the rest of us will go back to the others with the other wagons.”

Everyone listened quietly. Suddenly Tai’gee felt... there was a moment of significance as she realized she’d grown into her role, that she earned their trust of her leadership, and she had confidence in what she was doing.

“Sell everything you can by midday – after that, whatever’s left, pack it up and follow us out. I’ll send Blue Wren to you so you’ll be able to catch up to us. Make sure you are not followed.” She gave everyone a significant look. “We’ve already attracted a fair amount of attention. We don’t need attention turning into interest.”

Returning to the sprawling temporary camp of her sisters felt like a drink from a cool spring. Tai’gee was very glad to be back with her people, out of the stuffy, sun baked city. Like a lot of more successful seaport cities, it had a healthy river flowing into it. However, by the time it was flowing out, it was used and dirty because the inhabitants had forgotten how to deal with their own waste sustainably. She thought about following it out, up into the mountains surrounding the city, north. But a river can only become so dirty if it is used for more than waste disposal, and a city that made its living in trade and shipping would use its river a lot. Hugging the waterway would be dangerous.

But the guards let them in, the fires were hot, the smell of fish and sweet potatoes filled the air. Children laughed, dogs growled over scraps, strange music was played – Tai’gee could hear the audience trying to clap to it, but the tempo was completely unfamiliar. As she moved through their camp, she refilled on the twilight settling of her sisters – homeless, hapless, and, overall, happy. Of course, a large part of that happiness may well have been relief for having survived the damn ship. Still, she marveled that she was still leading them all, that they still allowed it – after *everything*. With a deep breath, her thoughts turned to Kaija – who, despite *everything*, was still with her. She was playing with the children now. They would be safe, they would all be safe under her golden gaze, and Tai’gee smiled with the realization that her fear of unknown, clumsy men coming to steal them away melted, evaporated, and was gone.

~

Sochi had been months behind them by the night they got an unexpected visitor. The Khaziks had traveled with them through the hills and mountains. The land-worked people had shown

them how to modify the sails to make sustainable tents. They made clothes from the leftover fabric. They learned of the new fish found in this land, the new plants with their unfamiliar fruits and nuts and roots. They began to learn the winds, the smell of the new air, the feel of the new sun – colder now than they were used to for the late summer. This land had treasures for them, but they had much more to learn before they could mine them.

Cho-chin standing guard nearby, straightened herself at some sound only she could hear – well, her and Kaija, whose ears pricked in that general direction. Tai'gee saw Tristan emerge from the bend and speak to Cho-chin lowly, nervously looking towards her queen as she relayed some information. Cho-chin's brow furrowed at first then she nodded sharply. Formally she turned to Tai'gee, Tristan at her side.

“My Queen, there's a ... woman ... who wishes to meet with you. A Queen she says, from a far land.”

“Don't be rude Tristan, bring her over,” Tai'gee said with a wave. She was happy and languid, and mistook the curiosity in Cho-chin's voice for ceremony. The hour was late, and after several weeks of traveling with the nomadic Khaziks, Tai'gee had relaxed under the freedom their solitary sojourn had provided them all – the Khaziks knew how to move through the land without running into other people. And she was enjoying the relief of not living under a constant cloud of suspicion and hypervigilance.

The woman who stepped into their midst was no kind of woman Tai'gee had ever before seen. Her head seemed to brush the sky she was so tall. Her scalp glistened in the light because her hair was shorn to just visible – but her height was not what shocked Tai'gee most. ‘She's blue’ raced around her head as Tai'gee felt her eyes go wide – the blue of the night sky surrounding a crescent moon, dark, deep, intoxicating.

Tai'gee sat forward to stand up but as the woman stepped forward so the others could see her, Kaija recoiled with a shattering hiss, teeth bared beyond her canines, mane bristling, and a very real threat burning in her eyes.

“Kaija –” Tai'gee began to admonish, but the damage was done. Around them, with immediacy, the guards pulled their weapons and surrounded their newest visitor in response to her wife's reaction. The little Khaziks pulled away, scared, wide-eyed.

The woman they surrounded remained silent, hands hanging limply at her sides, her body practically bare but for a well worn loin cloth and a massive amount of necklaces covering from her neck to well below her breasts. Her breathing was calm, her face expressionless, her eyes staring intently at Kaija. Kaija had gathered herself into a defensive posture, no longer hissing, but a decided sound of dissatisfaction crawled from deep within her and filled the area with a grating tension. The longer they stood there, the louder she got.

Turning to the Blue Queen, as Tai'gee had termed her, Tai'gee ordered the guards to stand down. They were reluctant, and justifiably so – Kaija commanded their defenses to a much stronger degree than Tai'gee commanded their etiquette. Tai'gee decided to address the visitor instead.

“I know it’s difficult, but do not stare at her in the eyes. It’s threatening to her.”

The woman looked for an instant more before dropping her gaze, then raised her eyes to Tai’gee. “I apologize,” she said with slow deliberateness. “I mean no threat.”

With that the guards felt comfortable to lower their weapons. Kaija remained as she was, a feline growl still very prominently disclosed her opinion. Tai’gee was torn between embarrassment and caution now – of course Tai’gee trusted her safety to her wife, but as a Queen, Tai’gee had a responsibility to entertain royal company in a manner of welcome – this would most certainly come off as offensive to any culture. Their guest had the graciousness to acknowledge this.

“I must look very strange to her; she reacts as a protector should.”

“She usually isn’t given over to looks,” Tai’gee replied, “though you are certainly no one we have ever seen before. What’s your name?”

“Selah,” said the woman with a bow of her head.

“I’m Tai’gee,” Tai’gee said and reached for her guest’s arm in greeting. Kaija wasn’t having it however and hissed again when Selah moved, forcing the long limb to freeze before it had fully cleared her side.

“Kaija, enough,” Tai’gee scolded. “Be civil or wait for me later.”

Tai’gee was surprised – and moreso disappointed – when Kaija began to back away into the underbrush rather than calm herself and remain. The growling disapproval dissipated as she disappeared into the darkness and though there was still a degree of tension between all of them, a wave of relaxation none-the-less rolled in to caress most of the tension away. After a few moments Tai’gee turned back to their newest guest.

“I apologize. She is very protective, but if it is as you say, you need not fear her if you’re here in peace.”

Tai’gee extended her hands to indicate they should all regain their seats. The Khaziks all moved closer together, eyeing this new woman curiously, and for the first time Tai’gee noticed not a single face retained even a ghost of a grin. They seemed to be communicating amongst themselves without saying a word, and studying Selah all the while they did so.

The Blue Queen moved lithely, with a wild grace not unsimilar from Kaija’s. She had a lot of length to fold as she took a seat opposite Tai’gee; her long, thin limbs seemed to stretch beyond human proportion and Tai’gee spared a moment to wonder if she, like her wife, was entirely human. Her silence was just long enough to draw attention to the fact that Tai’gee was assessing the new comer, and Tai’gee felt the eyes of their group turn to her momentarily before looking back at Selah.

Selah seemed to take it all in stride. "I cannot say you have nothing to fear from me because I do not know what you may fear," she said plainly. The accent coloring her Greek was melodious; she was purely exotic, and Tai'gee waited to hear what else she might say rather than interject some statement. "You seem comfortable enough with your security to be willing to entertain a stranger."

"A foreigner," Eponin added.

"As are you," Selah offered with a smile. "But I believe so far I have exceeded your travels." She was given a cup of tea which she sampled before continuing. "I come from the south; beyond the land of the Pharaohs, beyond the land of dunes, beyond the jungles behind the dunes. It is a land so far south, people of your kind have never heard of it and we have never seen you there."

"You're not a Moor then," asked Beckries.

"I am no Moor. *I* am an Afrikan."

Afrikan... Tai'gee had never heard of such a person. But there seemed to be enough similarities between them that they could work with for conversation.

"What brings you so far from your home?" Tai'gee asked.

The Blue Queen turned midnight dark eyes to Tai'gee and regarded her thoughtfully, seemed to study her as though she already knew her intimate details. "I wanted to know what was beyond the Serengeti," she answered. "I had heard these places existed," a lazy wave of the hand to indicate the world around them, "I wanted to see them. I am sure if you knew about my land you would want to see it as well. Curiosity is a powerful motivator."

Tai'gee regarded her as well. She had an easy demeanor, and everyone seemed to now be at ease with her – perhaps the Khaziks still had need of some convincing. Listening to her, Tai'gee decided she wasn't entirely convinced either. "But you're a Queen, how can you leave your people to fend for themselves while you chase your curiosity's whims?"

"I am a leader, yes, but my people also expect their leaders to be ambassadors. Currently my husband provides for them; or was when I left."

Internally they all bristled though none of their dissention met outward expression. Of course Amazons would not relegate their rule to a man in the absence of their Queen, but that was their culture.

"You lead these women? I see no men like you," Selah stated curiously.

"We are Amazons," Beckries provided proudly. "Men have a marginal place in our society."

Here Selah smiled, sporting gleaming white teeth – a streak of brilliance flashing from blue skin. “Amazons; of you I have heard! A tribe of women!”

Tai’gee wasn’t sure if it was sincere enthusiasm or mocking that lilted her voice. Selah, apparently highly sensitive to subtle thoughts, noticed her suspicion. “I mean no offense. Where I come from, we cannot abandon our men – to hear of women who have done so is what made me question the nature of these other worlds. We could not survive without our men.”

“Have you tried?” Eponin extended in challenge.

“But you do not know my world, as I do not know yours. We have no half animals to protect us, so we use the brawn of our men.”

Everyone bristled again, this time out of respect for Kaija. Tai’gee could feel her women closing rank around her and it made her proud. Again Selah addressed what had not been spoken.

“I do not belittle your Simba to compare her to men. She would be a god to our people.”

“She is no god,” Tai’gee said flatly. “But she does not compare to men either.”

“No,” she offered humbly. “Forgive me. I speak from excitement only.”

Tai’gee granted her that courtesy. Succinctly Tai’gee dismissed the others, ending their evening communion. “If you are a Queen,” Tai’gee said, “you’ll have an entourage? I suggest you announce them so that my guards and my wife don’t mistake them for enemies.”

“There is only me.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You travel to lands beyond lands, a chief of your people, and you go alone? What proof is there of your rank or the purity of your story?”

The blue woman opened her arms wide from her seated position. “I have none other than the trust you give me.”

“There’s more to your story than you’ve said, I think.”

She smiled, though did not show her teeth this time. “A traveler far from home, an emissary on a quest, alone, will not reveal all to everyone she meets – as you do not. And you are not alone – even now.”

Very true. Kaija patrolled behind her, just far enough not to be seen or heard, but close, very close. “I can respect your silence. Your ways are very different from ours, but you seem a powerful and independent woman – those are qualities we can identify with.”

“You mean that you find me interesting despite your wariness.”

Dark eyebrow lifted at her verbal parry. Tai'gee was, in truth, fascinated, and Selah's acuity only increased that. Every comment Tai'gee made that had been a subtle attempt to get more information – every lead in, no matter how disguised – she countered with something that was equal parts terminating and turnabout. This was a strategy Tai'gee had perfected in Cresca, needling new comers for information and motives without them even knowing it. And they *always* provided – Tai'gee could get them to sing her their story, verse and chorus, in no time, whether or not they were bards. This woman, however, was as tightlipped as one of Medusa's statues.

“Yes, I find you interesting,” Tai'gee allowed, “and would like the time to get to know you and of your land and culture as you would permit. You mentioned a quest – perhaps we could aid you with that...”

“Perhaps you could,” she said with a majestic incline of her head. She excused herself to find a place to sleep for the night, and as Tai'gee watched her seamlessly melt into the darkness she wondered again if Selah was a god, or perhaps demi-god.

“You can come out now Kaija.”

At first Tai'gee thought her wife was going to ignore her and stay in the underbrush. There was a long pause before Tai'gee heard grasses and branches parting and her wife's cat eyes flashed in the firelight as she approached. Kaija sat away from her, leaving them room to talk and find each other.

“It doesn't do for us to offend royalty,” Tai'gee opened. “Was it just because she was staring at you?”

“I do not like her.”

Kaija was still tense, Tai'gee could feel it radiating from her like a rabid bonfire. This wasn't like her – even with her distrust of Mathus she hadn't made a display like that. “But you don't know anything about her. She was unarmed. What threat do you see?”

Tai'gee made a mistake with that, a big one. Kaija's tension moved into a standoffishness Tai'gee would ultimately regret. That was the first time, she thought, that she had dismissively countered Kaija on her first impression, choosing to cater towards someone Kaija opposed. Kaija returned to the underbrush without another word. Tai'gee sighed. Kaija – her wife – royalty... ‘No, it won't do to offend royalty.’

II

Selah was a huge hit with the Amazons. The stories she told of her homeland were incredible; the animals, the vastness, the diversity of people. She was an entrancing storyteller, and her exotic appearance made the tales she told seem more like a description of some land Zeus might have created while he dreamed.

Tai'gee decided they should keep moving, and by midday they had packed their camp and were ready to continue their sojourn. The Khaziks had already moved on themselves, their small tent town packed up and dwindling against the horizon by the time the first Amazon cart was whipped into motion. Selah and Tai'gee rode together at the head of the caravan, her usual guard hanging back to give them some privacy. Tai'gee hadn't seen Kaija since she left the night before, but she wasn't particularly concerned; she knew Kaija would never be far from her.

"Your company is very efficient for a culture not used to living like nomads," Selah pointed out.

"You become efficient at what will keep you alive when you're endangered. Or you perish. We aren't the perishing type."

"How do you preserve yourselves without men? It seems that would endanger you more than anything else."

"We aren't concerned at the moment with procreation – the road is no place to raise children. Once we've settled then we'll focus on other parts of our survival."

Selah seemed to process that. "And you are married to the Simba?"

"What is this 'Simba'?"

"Ah yes. Simba to you is Lion, I believe."

"Hm; well, yes at any rate; she is my Consort and Champion."

"I have heard there were other creatures here, half human... horses, serpents."

"Is there something in particular you want to know or are you just pointing this out?"

"I am curious."

"Centaur's are part horse, part man. Medusa had snakes for hair and a serpent's lower body. Kaija's father was a sphinx – part man, part winged lion. They're the children of gods – Zeus, Aries, Athena – they all had interest in creating beings that were purely theirs. A mascot. A signature pet."

"The Simba does not seem like the pet type, though it appears you have her tamed."

"Make no mistake – Kaija allows suggestion and cooperation, there is no taming involved." Tai'gee paused for a moment, thinking to choose her words carefully, then just decided to have it come out as it would. "She's not taken with you. You seem to put her off for some reason."

"As I said, I am sure someone who looks so different than what you are used to can be pretty threatening."

“And as I said, Kaija spends very little time judging based on looks. If you have some motive other than what you’ve stated, she will know it in your energy. You’d do better to own it rather than try a charade.”

Selah’s blue skin flashed in the sun. “So the Simba does not like me.”

“You make her uncomfortable, yes.”

“When I went to Egypt I thought I had seen all that I would of a mixing of creatures. Your gods look like you do, for the most part, but theirs...” She shook her head. “Men’s bodies with bird’s heads, dogs that walk like men. And a special affinity for cats. Cleopatra said she would always have respect to the Greek Goddess who made the sphinx –”

“Cleopatra?”

“The Queen of Egypt, you know. She told me –”

“You met with the Queen of Egypt? She’s dead, years ago.”

“And I met her years ago. She told me of a warrior from a land of wine, raven haired and ferocious.”

“Xena.”

“Yes. She spoke fondly of her.”

“Why would she speak of her? She hardly just comes up in conversation in countries across seas.”

“Because of the cats you see. She told me the land of the Raven Warrior was where there was the last of a great cat, half lion, half man, much like the giant statue she sees from her palace.”

“So you were looking out the window and discussing Xena and sphinxes...”

“I am on a quest – a mission. My land is the land of birth; all that lives originated from the sands, waters and air of my land. Travelers came to my country and told us stories of creatures we’d never before seen, ones struggling to survive outside of the Mother’s Womb, because the people do not respect them. So I have come to bring them home, where they can live as gods among my people.”

Tai’gee eyed Selah with supreme suspicion. “Cerebrius is dead – and even if he wasn’t, I doubt you could convince him to travel so far.”

“But he’s immortal... I don’t understand.”

“He gave up his immortality.”

“But why?”

“To save his daughter. But I’m sure you knew this since apparently you’ve been tracking us.”

She conceded with a submissive nod.

“The whole story now. Are you a hunter? Do you think to come after my wife for sport?”

“No Sarabi, no sport. What I said is true. I have traveled far from my home on a quest. I am no hunter, I am a Queen, a chief of my people, a –”

“liar,” Tai’gee said frankly, ending what she was beginning to recognize as Selah’s way to begin some long preamble. From their position at the front of the caravan Tai’gee didn’t have to worry that any of her other Amazons would overhear their conversation, and so felt free to be blunt with this dark woman. “Perhaps you once were a Queen, but you’ve been exiled and now wander the world brandishing a mantle that is no longer yours to bear. That’s why you have no entourage.”

Tai’gee could feel Selah staring at her, but she didn’t bother to turn her head to see if she was surprised, amused, upset by her deduction. Their horses tramped on amidst their brief silence.

“I underestimated you. You are more perceptive than I gave you credit for,” the dark woman said on a sigh.

“And you are dishonest.”

“Yet you do not sound angry. Are you this calm with everyone you denounce?”

“I have no need to be angry with you – at this point you’ve only proven yourself a fraud; more than that you would not survive the repercussions, which would be quick. I will have no time to be angry.” Indeed, Tai’gee hadn’t so much as raised an eyebrow outwardly, but her insides were burning. Sitting as Queen, even in the small space of time as she had, required exercise in double play – what the Queen thought and felt could not always be open for public viewing, and Tai’gee took the cultivation of her self-control very seriously.

Tai’gee could hear the hint of a challenge in Selah’s voice: “You have that much confidence in yourself?”

“I have that much confidence in my wife – she’d get to you before I would.” But her anger was mixed with a wash of guilt, faced with the same shame of choosing some enchanting new fling and leaving her devoted wife to skulk in the shadows, rejected, but still committed to her suspicions and love for Tai’gee. Kaija had been right not to outright trust this dark foreigner, and Tai’gee had betrayed the service of her instincts. Tai’gee felt unworthy all over again of such a precious gift as her wife, and here was this woman riding at her side without even the decency to apologize.

“Though you feel differently, I have not yet lied to you. I am a Queen in a far away land of the far distant south. What I told you about seeking the creatures of lore is true – none remain in my homeland. It is also true I have been following you and the Simba, and almost had caught up with you – but I was not able to follow once you entered god-protected boundaries. I have been looking for years to find the great beasts of the world, the creatures of gods who, like me, are unappreciated for what they are.”

“And what is that?”

“Great leaders. I am a great leader.”

“Obviously not so great if your people have banished you.”

“But they did not do it of their own accord. I ruled a great people – as great and vast as your Amazons once were. My husband and I both ruled, though he at my side. Then one day a person came who can control minds, a person who bent my people’s mind against our natural order. I was a great Queen in the prime of rulership – and this witch came, greedy for rule, and bent their minds to think incorrectly. That is why I am exiled.”

“A witch?”

“A mind bender. Neither alive nor dead, both man and woman, a master of magic is a witch.” The dark woman shivered. “A powerful enemy, able to reach into people’s minds and manipulate their thinking, have them think what it wills.”

Tai’gee frowned, unimpressed, and flicked her reins to correct her drifting mare. “There’s no such thing as magic,” she said certainly. “Xena taught us that. Only trickery and cleverness and people who want to believe in it.” On the side she asked herself what she considered Rylah’s lighted performance to be, if not magic.

Overhead a solitary hawk stroked on the air currents, silent, watching, listening. Tai’gee wondered if it could hear their conversation, if not understand it. Their senses are so sharp, Tai’gee wondered if it could detail what they were wearing, look through what they carried in their wagons in search of something to hunt. ‘What if a person had senses like that?’ The hawk loosed a screeching cree as it glided away. Tai’gee thought a moment more then said: “Perhaps this usurper just speaks the mind of your people and more than likely you’re upset at losing your throne.” Tai’gee removed a piece of fluff from her pant leg with a casual thump, waiting for whatever elaborate debate Selah would give next.

“That is what I knew I would face in leaving my land for help, the disbelief and doubt. I have not lost my throne, I have been bewitched out of it. My people do not think for themselves on this – their minds have been overpowered. I am sure you have seen such things happen on a lesser scale – a conartist, a smooth talker weaving a story for purchase of your credulity.”

Tai’gee gave her a patronizing look at that, “Then I can believe you are a witch, no?”

Dark eyes lowered in acceptance of her rebuttal. “But I assure you, I am not. I do not have the power, nor the desire, to be a mind bender.”

“I think you may be worse by parading in falsehoods and greedy aspirations.”

“I am a Queen,” Selah exploded flatly. “And I have been denied my queendom by dark magic and evil persuasion. Whether I seem greedy or ambitious makes no difference to the fact my people have lost freedom over their own thoughts, which is the real injustice. Your entire civilization is built on the basic right to make your own decisions.”

“We are free to think and decide as we wish,” Tai’gee affirmed. “We are made in Artemis’ image, virgin as she is.”

“And expected to protect that right no doubt?”

“Asked to,” Tai’gee punctuated.

“I’d be greatly surprised if any of you refused. There’s magic in that though I’m sure you don’t see it that way.”

Their road rounded a slight bend, allowing Tai’gee to turn and view the rest of her company. They all trailed at a respectful distance. Weaponry and armor, as such that they had, glittered in the sunlight, and peppered the quiet air with common clinks and clanks. To their left, twenty feet from the flat dirt road, an idle wood spread back to the west. To their right, an undulating plain, punctuated with craggy boulders and finally another wood. All was calm and quiet.

“You would choose to fight for what your goddess has given you – will you not help others attain it for themselves?”

“What you seek is not entirely in the interest of your people,” Tai’gee pointed out.

“Rarely is there only one goal with any endeavor. Fortunately the goal of freeing my people comes with other results that would – yes – be to my benefit.” Tai’gee said nothing, just gave Selah space to fill out her answer. As expected, the blue woman pounced on her opportunity. “It would not be an undeserved position.” Tai’gee shook her head with disapproval. “You can shake your head as you like – you have your queendom, your position, your subjects.”

Tai’gee was growing tired of the foreigner. “They are citizens, not subjects.”

“As you like.” Selah straightened herself on her saddle, which slowed her horse enough to let the dark haired Queen move in front of her. Tai’gee could feel dark eyes studying her, which she didn’t mind; while eyes studied, lips were quiet and Tai’gee would enjoy her few moments of peace.

“And this all has what to do with Kaija?” she asked at length.

Selah lifted her head slightly, but kept her eyes low as if considering something. “Your Simba is an incredible being, unlike any other in the world. My people would revere her as a god, and give her the homecoming befitting such a deity.”

“Kaija and Cerebrius were never from your land. They are Athena’s creatures.”

“They are gifts to Athena – originally,” Selah said calmly.

“Gifts from who? I’ve never heard of any such transaction.”

Selah lifted a hand idly towards the sky. “Deposed gods. Long, long ago – even before the reign of the Titans, the Egyptian gods ruled the world. Before them, the gods of my world. Both hierarchies are much diminished now, but there were interactions between their exchanges of power. As Zeus and his clan rose to prominence, an Egyptian goddess thought it wise to bestow some acknowledgment of her own twilight. Her closest counterpart was Athena in the new race of gods, and to her she gave a beast, the signature of her dominion – adapted from a conquest of the realm far to the south in a previous era. Cats are revered all over the world – heavens included – you will find.” A small smile played over broad, dark lips, and the dark woman only paused a moment with a quick cut of eyes to her listener. Tai’gee knew Selah could feel her questioning disbelief as palpably as the air filling her lungs. The pause was long enough for her to insert a question.

“You mean to say the sphinx has exchanged hands three times?”

“I mean to say what you now know as the sphinx started as the greatest of all cats in my country and has been adapted by various gods as they saw fit. Many a mutation over many a millennia. There are only common simbas in my land now – I am sad I was not in time to see the last of the Great Simbas.”

“Cerebrius was the last?” That was a daunting piece of information. Tai’gee half swallowed her question as it came out – it became no wonder that the Protector Sphinx had been persecuted so terribly throughout his life. His gift of regenerating health at the expense of his immortality suddenly became incomprehensibly extravagant – Cerebrius hadn’t just given his life for his daughter, but his entire race... and Athena had let him. ‘What does that mean?’ Laboriously Tai’gee pulled herself away from that line of questioning; that was not a road for her to travel just now. That was philosophy, and Tai’gee had a stalker to deal with first and foremost.

“You have not explained your pursuit of us; you say you’re on a quest to find and take back with you those unwanted creatures who are suffering – Kaija does not qualify and yet you hunt for her.”

“This witch is strong – possesses a great force to control as many minds as it does. To be successful I need something more forceful than what I am fighting against – something so big it will shock my people from its control.”

Tai'gee could feel her eyes go hard with anger. "You want those like Kaija to come with you to show that you command 'gods', so your people will revere you more than this witch." Tai'gee nearly spat the last of her words and ground her teeth as Selah finished her clarification.

"With an army of beings like the Simba behind me, the creatures of legends, my people would have no choice but to recognize me as a mola. I would have the name Manini and they would look on my servants and their spell would be broken. Our legends are very powerful; this would be a revival of the old magic. I was hoping for your help. I'm sure Xena would take the quest, and she seems to hold the Simba in such high regard –"

"Xena is dead, as should be your hopes for our help. I may have offered you aide if you'd come in the spirit of truth." Now her anger with this woman was building, her impertinence irritated the young Queen. "The help you want is no longer mine to give and Kaija will not help restore the power you seek."

"Power is not sought," said Selah prophetically; a distant, hungry look crossed the blue woman's dark eyes then. "There are those," she continued quieter than she had been all afternoon, "who think this witch is powerful; I do not. The witch takes control by reaching into people's minds and bending them to do what it wants, that is not power. There is only limited command in fear, and all the rest is force. I want control of trust – when a person – when a people give me that – when they choose to give me their ability to make decisions, they give me energy. Yes, I'll feed on it – the more they give me, the greater I will grow – to command loyalty, to harness that willingness to follow – *that* is power. It is the energy given to you by others; their willingness to be controlled. Power is a thing to be maintained, to be cultivated."

A shudder ran through Tai'gee in the sunlight. Beyond them the road of flatness extended for miles. They moved north, and Tai'gee had no intention of turning them to follow the chilling words of this charlatan. "Regardless. You have worn out the welcome of our offer."

"I suppose you think your refusal is noble," said Selah with hardness. "You are more noble than I? I have a destiny, a role to fill, and I am being cheated of it. I've always known my place, while you were put into yours – my foresight does not make me less noble. Nor does my willingness to accept my position however high it can go. What if I am to be a god among my people – who are you to denounce me?"

Selah said no more, which suited Tai'gee just fine. She was hoping Selah's final statement would be the closure she needed to turn her horse and leave them. It didn't seem so, since everything remained the same as if they'd had no disagreement. Tai'gee started to turn to Selah and make clear her dismissal when she felt something shift in her mind. Tai'gee felt an airy detachment, languid willingness, and a slowness she'd only be able to compare to a night of too much drinking. There was a subtle shift into complacency, as if she were floating off from the world and that was alright. Her mind buzzed and what few thoughts she had were sluggish, and she felt herself tilting.

Then the world exploded around her. A deafening roar thickened the air, filling it – so it seemed – to the point of stopping time. Tai'gee blinked heavily and had to force her eyes open again.

When she did, a dark body hurtled passed her, startled her horse into a skittish prance. Activity was everywhere. Tai'gee was trying very hard to focus on Cho-chin and Eponin who were thundering up the road, vacantly curious at the look of battle hardening their faces. They had their arrows drawn and trained on something just off the roadside. Beckries was at her arm, pulling on her horse's reins. "Come with me, my Queen; they've got her – this way!"

But her fog cleared slightly and Tai'gee watched as Selah's horse trotted riderless up the road, and Amazons were everywhere, brandishing weapons and shouting. Her sluggish thoughts were catching up to tell her there was danger. "Danger... Where's" "Kaija!"

"She's got her, my Queen. You're safe – this way," said her insistent guard with another tug to her reins. Beckries pulled her horse between Tai'gee and whatever was going on off the road, trying to force her big mare to retreat. But Tai'gee's horse knew her rider's orders through her legs and neither of them had any intention of going anywhere.

"What's going on? – move Beckries." Beckries' worried face filled her vision. She was trying so hard to shield her Queen from whatever was going on off road, but Tai'gee was re-gathering her faculties and was intent on looking around her guard and her skipping mount to see just what was going on behind her.

"The Lioness has her, my Lady; if you'll just come with me –"

Kaija – that was the blur flying by – "Move Beckries!"

"Queen Tai'gee, I don't thi-"

"Get out of my way!" and Tai'gee finished her order with a kick to Beckries' dancing horse. The big, black stallion moved enough to let her bully her way by and Tai'gee went to the road's edge to assess what was happening. Dutifully, Beckries reined in behind.

Tai'gee had to puncture an entirely fortified semi-circle of artillery. At its heart, a ring of guardswomen, including Eponin and Cho-chin who had traded their bows for swords, stood with weapons drawn and aimed. Before them, Kaija had the length of Selah's inky blackness splayed along the ground, pinned by her neck, in a lean rip against the earth. Four other guards stood with them, all with arrows drawn and poised to make Selah's position a permanent fixture.

Directly above Selah's face was Tai'gee's snarling wife, and her eyes were ablaze with intensity. Kaija breathed deeply, almost an angry pant, but Tai'gee wasn't so concerned with that as she was with the alien look on her face. Her snarl had pulled her lips so far back over her extended canines that it was painfully obvious just how large those particular teeth were. Teeth aside, Kaija's eyes glowed with fierce intensity, gold electricity sparked within them, just as her black arrow point pulsed a saffron red – a bright, bloody red. Her great hand flexed on Selah's neck, constricting her airflow.

"Withdraw yourself." Her command was even, firm, and in a tone Tai'gee did not recognize at first. This was a deep voice, a baritone that made some part of everyone vibrate. This was a

voice that had to be obeyed. A couple arrows wavered slightly, the guards unsure if Kaija was talking to them.

But she wasn't; she was talking to Selah, who was in no position to move, which made Kaija's order all the stranger. Selah lay in calm submission, just staring passed the weaponry and protective guards at Tai'gee. Suddenly, Tai'gee realized 'But I know that voice!' and just as she'd thought this, her mind buzzed with the recognition of the Great Golden One from Kaija's mindscape. Around them, the dipping sword tips and arrow points regained their confidence, and assertively repositioned themselves in deadly threat. Kaija's paw-like hand squeezed a bit tighter around the throat of her prostrate prisoner, indicated by a strangled gasp from Selah.

The Blue Queen's squinted eyes, still trained on Tai'gee, flexed. The young Queen felt something shift in her mind, something heavy and cumbersome moved – or rather, it tried to find space to move. There was a swirling and then a removal of the awkwardness; it left so suddenly it made her lightheaded. She must have swayed because the ever-present Beckries extended a hand to steady her in her saddle. Tai'gee continued to watch, though, refusing to blink, needing to see; and as she did, she saw something dark and serpentine recoil from her into Selah. It slammed into the prostrate woman's chest with such force it took her breath away. There was a moment of panting between the both of them, Kaija and Selah, and then something of calm.

Selah lifted her eyes to Kaija then, who remained in a sincerely threatening position over the dark woman. Tai'gee was disbelievably surprised when she realized Selah was now staring at Kaija – dared to stare at her! Something was passing between them – or trying to – Tai'gee wasn't sure of its success because there was a friction emanating from the two that was making everyone around them break into cold sweats. Tai'gee jerked her head back when her eyes fell on Kaija's arrowhead; it had moved from bloody red to something hot and hungry, sickening in its pulse. Further up still, a blaze of light strengthened in Kaija's eyes – the electric gold in them before seemed dull compared to this – the glow overtook everything: iris, pupil, even the whites turned into molten golden lava. But all of this was in moments – this burst of intensity was just that – a suffocating heartbeat of a moment. Then Selah blinked and it was over.

The light that had filled Kaija's eyes receded but did not go out completely; a golden glow remained, as did the voice that no one else had heard before then. "You will not try that again, with any of them, or it will be your end." Selah panted under Kaija's grip but managed something of a nod. Then the spell broke between them. Kaija sagged as though she'd been unexpectedly dropped. Arrows and swords moved closer, reinforcing their threat.

When Kaija lifted her massive hand from Selah's throat, it was as if she were picking up an anvil. She stood on unstable legs with slouching shoulders, a posture of exhaustion. "She stays with us," she practically slurred, speaking with the very last of her breath; "do not harm her." And she pushed herself to stand, swayed terribly, and staggered away into the trees, each step a clumsy awkward motion. Those left by the roadside looked at each other in confusion. Tai'gee was horrified at the site of her wife struggling to move. Everyone watched her go, looked after her in that stupor that embraces wonder at what to do when something great seems wounded.

Tai'gee was regaining her own composure, and after a few more moments the Queen told her guards to stand down. Reluctantly arrows were removed from their strings, knives resheathed. Wondrous murmurs accompanied the general shuffle back to the abandoned caravan. Eponin, Cho-chin and Beckries stayed on hand, continuing to direct their weapons to the prostrate queen. Beckries dismounted and drew her sword, just as a precaution. Eponin and Cho-chin's sword tips were so close to Selah's body that only a minute thrust would have run Selah through.

Sword points followed the obviously weakened woman in her efforts to sit. Selah was a mess. She tried to pull in her long limbs to support her in sitting, but they were clumsy and uncooperative. No one made a move to help her. Once she'd finally managed that position, she raised a clumsy palm to her head, shaking it slightly as though she had an unbearable headache. "I – I should go," she muttered weakly.

"The Lioness said you will stay, so you will stay," Beckries replied with hard precision. The three swords surrounding her made for strong punctuation.

"What did you do," Tai'gee demanded. She was still a little breathy, but mostly recovered, and she wasn't sure yet if she needed to recover to anger or just wary curiosity.

Selah shook her head again miserably. "I entered your mind."

"What?" Eponin and Beckries both exclaimed.

"How could you do something so foolish?" Tai'gee pressed. She could feel herself squinting at Selah like that would help her understand the Afrikan's motive or thinking.

Selah gathered her long limbs together and tried to stand; she wasn't successful and stayed in a huddled hunch instead, knees drawn into her chest, head down. "I meant no harm," she answered as she brought her long fingers up to massage her temples. Sword tips followed the woman's every move, ready to stab forward. Tai'gee hoped she had the wherewithal to recognize her position.

"You say that a lot, Selah."

"It is the truth. I did not mean to go so far so fast. Your mind was so open – you have been to a spirit plane recently." Her voice began to waver, her body trembled and Tai'gee could only assume it was an aftereffect of whatever thing she had done.

Eponin kept looking between the two of them, questions shooting from her eyes; she held her peace but Tai'gee could tell she wasn't so sure of people entering other people's minds. She was a good guard, and since the Lioness had witnessed something she deemed as a threat that was good enough for Eponin to mark this woman, if not for death, then for limited life. Tai'gee could see the guard fighting her Amazonian impulse just to kill her for the simplicity of a guarantee against any further treachery.

Tai'gee wasn't going to go into explaining the whole mind plane part yet. She was more concerned about her retreating spouse, and the full bodied flight she'd made to knock Selah from her horse. 'That was a hunting pounce,' Tai'gee realized.

The dark haired Queen lifted her eyes to the place where a still staggering Kaija was just disappearing into the distant trees. She wanted to go catch her, but Tai'gee had a troupe of bewildered Amazons and now a prisoner to attend to. She looked back at Selah; faint sunlight glistened off a new sweat breaking across her nearly bald head, bowed and shaking 'no'. Tai'gee could feel her guards looking at her with nervous glances, unsure if they wanted this strange information to be true or the rant of madness they would now have to baby-sit. Tai'gee wanted to relieve their uncertainty, but she wasn't willing to say anything that would give Selah any more information to work with, nothing that could further endanger them or feed her fancies.

"Take her to camp. Confine her, but do as Kaija said – do not harm her. Do not allow any exchange between her and anyone of our tribe."

They started to wrestle the foreigner up to cross the road, but found she was still weak and fairly agreeable to their direction. Beckries and Cho-chin had an easy time escorting her to camp. Eponin hung back with her Queen. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah... I think so... What happened?"

Eponin looked judgingly at her leader, determining her state of rightness for herself before continuing. Tai'gee waved off the scrutiny, "I'm fine Ep. Just tell me."

"I don't know really what happened. We were just behind the two of you, everything looked normal enough – you were just talking. Actually it started to look like your conversation was winding down, so I started to move up. But then you started – over, like you were going to fall off your horse. And Kaija came flying – literally flying from the woods at Selah." Eponin missed Tai'gee's knowing look, because at that moment the warrior was judging the height and distance Kaija had covered in that leap and took some time for awe-full reverence. "She cleared her from her horse and they landed off the road. That's when we took off. At first I'd thought she'd tried to murder you or something – I didn't know what was going on."

'Yeah... I'm going to have to get that figured out.' Tai'gee shivered. Something had been started, and she was sure it was something that was going to bring no happiness. Tai'gee mounted her horse and turned her mare back to the road to follow the others. Eponin asked if they weren't going to look for Kaija. "No, leave her some space. She'll come back when she's ready."

Truthfully, Tai'gee didn't feel she had the right to go after her. 'I should have listened to her,' and the young Queen's guilt paralyzed her. Kaija was always a strolling, prowling, stalking, moving thing of grace – Tai'gee'd never really seen her stumble before, it was unnerving to see her unsteady – and all Tai'gee felt she could do was hope that the drunken stagger was the only consequence for her indiscretion. As day dropped to dusk, Tai'gee sat in her camp, refusing water when it was offered, dinner when it was served, choosing to sit and debate with herself

what right she had to invade the privacy her wife had sought. Tai'gee fiddled with sticks, rocks, stalks of grass, whatever her roaming hands came across, frowning into her fire as she berated herself for her failure. Around her, night things began to emerge, which meant Kaija was nowhere near; they wouldn't dare a chirp or creak if she was moving through the trees.

Finally, fully disgusted with her indecision, Tai'gee gave a frustrated yank at a hank of grass beside her, and pushed herself up from her solitary funk to go look for her missing wife. 'I have to apologize at least.' It was dark now, and fires were lit throughout the camp, and around each fire low tones of gossip and guessing that murmured to a silence as Tai'gee passed. Tai'gee forced herself to walk not slowly but discreetly, so not to draw any more attention to herself, and with it company. Her slower pace also gave her more time to think of what she could say to Kaija... 'I'm sorry I ignored you for the umpteenth time' is not really how she wanted to start.

On her way passed the last few fires at the edge of their camp, Tai'gee realized she was going to pass Selah. The Blue Queen was sitting alone in the newly established people cart, bound, head bent, a plate of untouched food beside her. Tai'gee looked at her and felt a true sympathy for the woman. Her erotic darkness was faded, her eyes darkened and dull, like a fog covering a new moon. Within that fog also seemed to hang the funk of real remorse, of regret. In a word, Selah looked absolutely miserable. She even looked fragile in her energyless state, and it was difficult to see her as an enemy as she was now; she posed no threat – she didn't even have it in her to look up as Tai'gee approached. 'If she had just handled things differently, we may well be surrounding her in cheerful fellowship rather than watching her with guarded and attentive suspicion.'

With soft, moon damp debris underfoot, Tai'gee made little noise as she walked over to the wagon. Selah knew Tai'gee was coming even though she wouldn't look up, and even before she'd finished her approach the dark woman was shaking her head and starting an apology. Selah's voice was heavy, her Greek thick and slow as regret dragged at it like boulders being pulled behind a rickety chariot. "I made a terrible mistake."

Tai'gee sighed. "You did. And Kaija knew you were going to make it. How?"

Dry, bleary eyes raised in question, so Tai'gee elaborated. "The pounce Kaija made to unseat you – I know that pounce. She can only do it when she's set – when she's stalked something and knows the moment to strike for it. She expected you. Why?"

Selah nodded slightly. "Because I had already tried it with her."

"Last night, when you were staring at her," Tai'gee supplied. The younger Queen pulled in her lips in understanding. "That's why she hissed at you."

Selah nodded and raised her midnight eyes. "I was rejected so soundly I knew immediately she would be the only weapon against the witch I needed. But I knew I would need to go through you, Sarabi, to get the Simba's help. I only meant to demonstrate a small amount of what the witch could do, give you an example to know what I am fighting against. I did not mean to get pulled in like that." She shook her head again. "Did not mean any--"

“-harm. Yeah, I know your line. You never mean any harm, but harm has been done. So you are a witch then.”

“No. No Sarabi, I am no witch. I cannot control a mind – only maybe look around on the surface, very superficial. That is really all I can do. I really meant only to see if she was real.”

Tai’gee crossed her arms. “You are so foolish.”

“I needed to know,” the dark woman insisted, her bone necklaces clicking about her neck in punctuation.

“And you learned nothing? So you tried it on me? And again with her?”

“She absolutely rejected me. I never got close. There is something strong in her – and that is how I know she would be successful against the witch. She is the only one – the right one.”

“Well, she’s no longer an option for you. If you survive our internment, you’ll have to come up with some other plan.”

Selah shook her head again, dropping it like a heavy sack. “We could have been sisters... you and I,” she mumbled.

Tai’gee thought about that and felt a quick sadness for her as she studied Selah’s slumping shoulders. Tai’gee didn’t disagree, and said so. But Selah was her enemy now. “Do not try to run. We will find you. And I guarantee, you will not like being found.” Tai’gee waited for her to respond, but Selah remained silent, and Tai’gee left her in the gloom of her self-pity to go look for her wife.

III

For as long as she lived, Tai’gee would never be able to fully thank any and all gods throughout existence if any were involved in getting her to Kaija when she did. Finding her in the twilight was a relief until Tai’gee saw her condition. Kaija was in a narrow clearing not far into the woods on the opposite side of the road they were following earlier. Her state of agitation was extreme – to the point of madness. As Tai’gee rounded a thin, young sapling she could see her wife stumbling and staggering with her head between her hands like it was going to split in two. She was a piteous, moaning, abysmal figure; her unsteady steps tripped her up and she thudded to the ground on her knees. She tipped forward to smash her head against the hard packed earth, forcibly, and Tai’gee gasped as Kaija began to push herself forward, her head bumping along the ground like a dull plow. Eventually Kaija lifted her head, clawed at her face with sharp fingernails, leaving deep, bloody scratches from temple to chin. A pine tree stood before her, and she used it to help her stand from her kneeling position, then gripped the trunk and smacked the side of her head against it so hard her teeth clacked together. Then she dragged her face down the rough bark, further slicing and cutting herself. Kaija’s self mutilation had probably gone on for hours, but her powers to heal quickly had already closed the gashes she’d made in

her face and were working on the pine rash next. Only the blood from her previous efforts all over the clearing and her clothing was left to testify about the tirade Kaija was waging against herself.

Miserably she moaned then immediately seized her head again, eyes shut tight against the skull cracking pain she was experiencing. She looked like some wildly rabid thing that desperately needed to be killed for its own good.

In an instant, Kaija reached from the paralyzing squeezing of her head and dove down to pull her boot knife from its sheath – she whipped it up to place at her temple between both hands, apparently to drill into her skull for the relief she sought. Tai'gee would never know how she moved so fast, especially given how quickly Kaija had moved. Tai'gee covered the last distance between them and had taken the knife so fast Kaija hadn't even managed a tighter grip on it. In desperate frustration she ripped handfuls of her thick brown hair out by its roots then dropped again to her knees in a pathetic heap. A rock the size of a box turtle protruded before her and Kaija immediately began banging her head against it.

“Kaija no!” Tai'gee dropped the knife and herself before her and pushed her miserable spouse upright by her shoulders. Unphased, Kaija tried to pitch forward again and knocked her head sharply against Tai'gee's. “Ouch!” Of course she released one of Kaija's shoulders to rub the stinging spot, which in turn released Kaija to further attempts of agonized mutilation. All Tai'gee could do was helplessly watch her. “Kaija, what's wrong?”

“Her mind is rebelling,” a voice answered from the dark trees – or at least, they should've been dark. Selah was entering the clearing, or, to be more accurate, being pushed into it. Her hands were bound behind her back and Eponin encouraged or discouraged every move she made with a knife very close to the point of vitality in Selah's neck. Eponin held a torch out in her other hand.

The elder guard couldn't believe what she was seeing. She'd heard of people being tortured for various reasons, and would shake her head at the brutality of the idea, but she couldn't say she'd ever actually seen someone being tortured before. Kaija was a wreck – she was foaming at the mouth in agony, beating her head with her fists and grabbed a hand-sized rock to do the same when the power of her fists proved unsatisfactory. Tai'gee jumped up again to restrain her, but Eponin could see that the torment of not being able to bash her own head open was driving Kaija mad.

“Kaija,” Tai'gee called, trying to penetrate the madness but Kaija only whipped her head side to side more violently.

Tai'gee wheeled from her, danger and protective fire burning through her whole body. “You did this!” Tai'gee yelled at Selah. “What did you do to her?”

Selah was stunned, mesmerized by the self destruction before her. Eponin's knife pressed more closely against the big artery in her neck. “Her mind has become unstable.”

“How? Why? What are you talking about?”

Kaija wailed again and again clawed her face and again dropped to her knees, hitting herself over and over. Tai’gee went back to hold her arms down, which was damn near impossible – Kaija was almost entirely muscle and in an animalistic craze probably only an elephant would be able to overpower her. Still, at her touch, the spasms ever so slightly paused and Kaija took a ragged breath and opened bloody, red eyes – “Too many” she wheezed before the torture took over again and she bucked and writhed in anguish against the ground.

“Help her,” Tai’gee ordered of Selah.

“I cannot.”

“You will help her,” Tai’gee said firmly, “or you will die.” Eponin’s knife now nipped at the dark pulsing flesh under it, a hungry thirst from the weapon for blood.

“The voices in her mind are rebelling – I cannot go in there, she forbade me even if I could get inside in the first place,” the dark woman explained. “Killing her is her only salvation!”

“I will not!” Tai’gee screamed. “You unsettled her mind, you will fix it!”

“I can’t get in,” Selah insisted.

“Then tell me how to.” Tai’gee grabbed Kaija again as she began beating her head against a raised tree root cutting across the clearing. She bucked and heaved in Tai’gee’s rigid hold and the Queen could see the dark circles of anguish building all around her eyes – dark and large enough for anyone else to think they were bruises from a fight. ‘Not that they wouldn’t be right in that guess.’

Eponin pushed Selah further in, bringing with her the small torch she had grabbed on their way out of camp. “You can’t go in there, it’s too dangerous-” Selah began, but Tai’gee cut her off.

“I will do whatever I have to to save my wife.”

“You don’t understand – you could get lost – you could die! There’s no telling what is going on in there!”

“This is your fault,” Tai’gee hissed. “Whatever you did to her back there caused this. If you want to see another minute of your life you will help me! NOW!”

Kaija bucked back again from the force of Tai’gee’s words, “No more!” she cried. Pain and torture were exhausting her, and as a suffering man with a last bit of strength will often choose, Tai’gee could feel that all Kaija wanted was one good chance to dash her brains and find relief. She looked back at Selah, who in turn asked Eponin to untie her.

“You need a connection to this world so you can make it back out – that is all I can provide. You must stay with me and come back when I tell you.” Selah took a position behind Tai’gee, sitting on her knees. “This is dangerous,” she mumbled, frowned, but placed her long fingers lightly on Tai’gee’s shoulders.

In the dim, flickering pool of light provided by Eponin’s torch, Tai’gee offered the best smile she could to her frightened guard. Eponin shook her head no, eyes pled for her not to do it, and knuckles whitened around a razor sharp knife that was utterly useless.

“It’ll be alright Ep. We’ll be back.”

With determination, Tai’gee turned back to Kaija who sat facing her, making every attempt to free her arms so she could hit herself. Tai’gee let go of her wrists, placed one palm onto Kaija’s forehead, the other right over top of that and almost instantly was jerked from the dimly lit clearing. Kaija wailed the most pathetic and powerful scream Tai’gee had yet heard, and as Tai’gee dived through the planes dividing outside from in, the unfettered belt of pain morphed into the words “*Not more VOICES!*”

Inside Kaija’s mind Tai’gee was crushed amidst riotous chaos. The pressure was excruciatingly suffocating. Voices shouted from all directions, squeezing and smashing against each other like grapes being crushed for wine – ‘only they could break their skins and stretch out’ Tai’gee thought – but there was no room for this thought, and the constricted space constricted even more – all existence around her was besieged with crushing pain, and it doubled when it writhed against itself and then doubled again.

“It’s ok!” Tai’gee tried to tell the voices moaning around her, but again it was too much and they all pulsed with the added pressure, multiplying the pain. Nothing was distinguishable among the crowd – only suffering and chaos. Kaija needed calming down, and the only thing Tai’gee could think of was to tell her Tai’gee loved her. “Kaija, I love you. I’m here and I love you!”

Everything seized with agony around her, the voices revolted in protest, the cacophony pounded against her, the screaming redoubled – “No more voices!” “Shut UP!” “Too much!” all amplified and collapsed on itself because there was no where else for it to go.

Tai’gee was getting desperate; she needed to build space in Kaija’s mind – she needed to establish a point of peace; but Tai’gee couldn’t even *think* to her. The pain was immobilizing and overwhelming – everything was soon to be destroyed. Tai’gee felt Selah pressing closely into her, silent but present. ‘That’s it!’ Again Tai’gee wheezed as the world shrank in on her – she couldn’t think, she had to stop thinking. Kaija need to *feel* her love. So that’s what Tai’gee did, she felt to Kaija; Tai’gee let her love for the small, wild, majestic half-sphinx fill her, glow in her, and radiate out from her like the warmth from a well burned fire. And it worked. Around her, first one voice quieted, then another, then by twos and threes their aggravated, raw and agonized torture subsided and soothed under the aloe balm of her love. Tai’gee moved among the quieted voices, reaching out to ones that still whimpered and cried or trembled. Finally – *finally* – it was quiet, but for a low growling off in the distance.

“Thank you,” one voice said, very close to her elbow, or where Tai’gee thought her elbow would be.

“What happened?” Tai’gee asked quietly.

“We almost destroyed ourselves,” said another voice with shame. “We were trying to stop it.”

Then Tai’gee actually noticed the growl – something unhappy but as yet pacified...or perhaps restrained.

“The Rogue?” But where is the Golden One?”

“It’s not here,” said a third voice.”

“It’s not always here,” the first small voice elaborated. “Sometimes it’s here and sometimes it’s not.”

“You were fighting the Rogue?”

“It wants to get out,” the shamed voice said.

Tai’gee moved in farther, towards Kaija’s voice of shame. “You are strong, and fighting – I’m proud of you.”

“We almost destroyed ourselves,” it said again, and Tai’gee could imagine a head shaking heavily.

“Listen,” Tai’gee said moving in more; behind her Selah shifted. “I love you-”

“We love you Tai’gee-”

“-yes, yes I know,” Tai’gee said tenderly, but before she could continue another presence moved forward.

“What are you doing here?” This was Kaija stern and wary.

“I came to help.”

“She loves us,” “She came to help,” “We almost didn’t make it, we’re trying-”

“You cannot stay here,” said Kaija Stern.

“She saved us.”

“We need to talk,” Tai’gee insisted and tried to reach forward to put out a connection to Kaija Stern.

Behind her Selah shifted again and her hold tightened. “You go too far.”

“Who was that?” Kaija Stern exploded. Around them voices edged and murmured. Another powerful voice surged forward, “Get out!”

“It’s Selah – she helped me get to you –”

“She is not allowed! Get out!”

“You have to go,” said an insistent panic.

“No, wait – she’s here to help –”

“Give her to me!” The constant growl purring from afar began to push forward next. “I want her!” It rolled at them like a bellow over a quickly shortening field.

Selah seized with fright at the sound of this voice and the line that connected her to Tai’gee went taut.

“Release her!” the powerful voice commanded.

“Let her go,” five other voices called.

The Rogue bullied closer. “She’s mine! I want her! Give her to me!”

Kaija’s stronger voices made a wall before it. Tai’gee was struggling inside of Selah’s fear-rigid grip – the pain of their connection felt like a lance through her stomach.

“Get out now!” “Release her!” the powerful voice commanded again and a breath-stealing shove threw Tai’gee from Kaija’s mind with such force that Tai’gee fell back on Selah, who landed on the dry, packed earth with a thud.

Eponin jumped forward to help her Queen up, her torch abandoned on the ground nearby, knife still ready.

Tai’gee was startled and had changed planes so quickly she needed some moments to recollect where and who she was. Eponin’s insistent “are you alright”’s were too complicated to answer right away. Tai’gee let Ep help her to sit, could hear Selah pulling herself together, then looked up to check on Kaija.

Kaija was still on her knees, bent to the point of her nose being on the ground in utter exhaustion. She heaved in labored breaths, then rotated her head to look sideways up, past Tai’gee to an uncomfortable Selah.

“You disobeyed me,” she panted weakly but still with a strength that would never be tired.

“Kaija, I made her. I needed her help.”

Kaija continued to look at Selah, who started shivering under the scrutiny. “There – will – be – consequences.” The Lioness finally gave out and pitched in an unconscious heap onto her side.

IV

Tai’gee had no interest in moving Kaija all the way back to where the others had made camp. The Queen had their tent pitched right over where Kaija remained sleeping. Eponin insisted she also move close by, and Beckries agreed – not to be outdone – and by the time all was said and done, the entire caravan had relocated. Zupé was asked in to examine Kaija, but the youngster said she couldn’t find anything wrong with her. “She’s just sleeping as far as I can see.” Tai’gee thanked and dismissed her and continued worrying all the same.

Pillows, rugs and blankets had been piled up for bedding for Kaija – she could’ve looked like some extremely pampered official, lounging carelessly in luxury if the dark circles of unconsciousness weren’t so prevalently making her look weak and unhealthy. Kaija neither shifted in sleep nor moaned over dreams if she were having any. What Tai’gee was most worried about was that there was no way to tell whether Kaija was again in the grip of the life deteriorating sleep she’d suffered back at the Amazon Capitol. Tai’gee had great difficulty restraining herself from poking her wife awake just to make sure she *could* wake up.

Selah was there too, subdued from her former tale-telling grandeur of just a couple nights before. Tai’gee had her set up on a rug at the deep back of their tent, shackles around each ankle. “I just wish we had something with which we could restrain your mind, but we’ll have to reside on the threat of death to keep you under control,” Tai’gee said. The long, blue woman supported herself on one knobby elbow, quietly resigned to her imprisonment.

Eponin was livid, mostly because she didn’t understand what was going on. Mid-morning the next day she stomped into the newly erected royal tent, as well as she could with her cane, under the pretense of checking on Kaija.

“Just sleeping,” Tai’gee answered. She sat by Kaija’s shaggy head, leaning against a tent post.

“S’not right,” Ep growled.

Tai’gee lifted a hand to ask ‘what could they do?’ and Eponin ground her cane against the dirt. “Seems like nothing’s been right since that blue demon showed up,” she continued lowly and with an equally low look at the reclining Selah. “Care to explain to me yet?” Eponin asked of Tai’gee in more of a request than her words implied.

Her slender fingers continued to stroke Kaija’s coarse hair. Her fine braids had come unraveled, leaving just the roots in tight plaits, but the rest in her usual scraggle. Tai’gee closed her eyes briefly to order her thoughts and wondered if she could really make the spirit world comprehensible to her friend. “Ep, I don’t – know... I don’t know what to say.”

“You went into Kaija’s brain?” Ep offered as a starting point. Tai’gee took it.

“Her mind. The first time was when we were in Byzantium.”

“But how? What do you mean?”

Tai’gee shook her head. “I can’t – I don’t –”

“The world of the mind is not always in the world of the body,” said Selah from her corner.

Eponin gave her a dirty look. She didn’t want an explanation from her – she didn’t want Selah to feel she had the right to speak. Selah was Eponin’s enemy, and for the disruption she was bringing, Eponin wanted for her to feel that every breath she took was a privilege. But, she conceded – Tai’gee was having a hard time explaining things and if she wanted answers it looked like she was going to have to get them from Selah. “What do you mean,” she forced out through gritted teeth.

Selah took a breath to go on, but before she got out the beginning of her next word there was some commotion at the tent entrance and Cho-chin’s head popped in. “My Queen – a woman ... here to see you –”

“Aside!” ordered a gruff voice – and suddenly the tent was absolutely full of Rylah.

The portly woman looked down immediately at Kaija, frowned, then dark eyes skipped over to Tai’gee, flicked and narrowed at Selah, then back to Tai’gee. “I said I would see you again, and I hoped it was before you met this one.” She said ‘this one’ with a hiss of dislike towards Selah.

“Excuse me, I do not know you-” Selah started.

“Nor do you need to. I know you,” Rylah said with hardness Tai’gee had yet to hear from the woman. “But you were about to explain to us the worlds of minds and bodies. Go on.”

Uncertainty glistened in Selah’s black eyes. Tai’gee imagined the woman felt like she was in a very small boat, drifting out on waveless water, and they all were on the shore, watching, quiet, holding her oars. “Let’s see how well you do,” said Rylah as Selah drifted further.

Selah blinked at all of them then settled on Tai’gee as the friendliest face in the room. “The body is of this world, everything you do and express is within the body’s permission. This world –” Selah indicated everything around them – “is where bodies can meet and act on each other. And the mind is a part of that – the mind moves the body, gives it ability and purpose.

“But this is not the only place for the mind – each mind is its own world – the mind has its own reality. What you see in this world –” again she indicated the tent – “is what the mind has chosen to put forth. Back in the mind’s own world there are all the possibilities of who and how

a person can be, everything a person wants, everything a person fears, all the aspirations, strengths, weaknesses. Within a person's mind is everything that person can be."

"This is rubbish," interjected Eponin. "I know my mind and my body, and they work together. I think and move and that's it."

Selah moved her gaze to her critic and continued. "There are many *you's* in your mind – or anyone's mind – and the one you show to us is the one currently in control of your mind's world."

Eponin tskd at Selah and began to move to the tent's exit in rejection. But Rylah was the new door and she wasn't moving.

"It was a decent start," the big woman said and picked up Selah's explanation from there. "The body is a vessel of expression for the mind," she said patiently. "Usually the mindscape is a singular and therefore unconsidered thing because it works well within itself."

"What I see outside is what you are inside," Tai'gee said, more for Eponin's advantage.

Rylah smiled briefly. "For the most part. Imagine a very small window." Rylah curled her thumb and forefinger together and made a circle, then held it to her face. "There is a lot behind this window – much going on, much there – but you will not be able to see all of me because all of me cannot fit into this –" she thrust her circled fingers forward. "This is like the body," she said with emphasis again on her fingers. With her other hand, she waved over the rest of her body behind her finger window, "and this is like the mind."

Eponin massaged her eyes, then rubbed down her face, and left her hand ponderously on her chin. "And you," she looked at Selah, "can go through people's windows and control their minds."

"No!" Selah looked like someone was trying to give her more credit than she knew she was due. "I cannot. That is more power than I have – that is the power of the witch I was telling you about. The most I can do is observe."

Rylah made a disgusted noise. "It is not the most you can do, nor is it the least of your doings!"

"Who are you to accuse me? You don't even know me!"

"I know enough," Rylah stamped her heavy foot. "You are a child insisting to run before you can stand – and as you fall from your own clumsiness you take others down with you!"

Tai'gee threw up her hands and demanded silence. "Rylah, what are you talking about what she can and can't do? What does this have to do with Kaija?"

Chocolatey eyes shifted to the only sleeping occupant of the tent, worry flashed across her face, then, deciding the conversation hadn't disturbed her, a great sigh was heaved and a meaty hand

waved in the air in a motion of continuance. “A person’s mind is a huge world – bigger than this where the body lives – and it is all in here.” She tapped a fat finger against her head. “So small a space makes that big world very complicated, very complex. It is within some people’s ability to open themselves into others’ minds, and different people have different abilities once inside.”

“You sent me into Kaija’s mindscape,” Tai’gee blurted.

Rylah shook her head. “I did not. *You* did. Your connection with the Little Lion allows you to move into her mind – I doubt you will find yourself able to do that with anyone else.”

Tai’gee was confused and sat up from her idle posture by Kaija. “But, you were there – and her,” Tai’gee gave a pointed look at Selah, “both times I went in I didn’t go on my own.”

“As I said,” Rylah continued, “different people, different powers. Exploration of other people’s minds is a very special thing, highly circumstantial and depends entirely on the strength of the person doing the exploring. You can go into the Little Lion’s mind, but only sometimes. Your connection with her is very strong.”

“And what is it *you* do,” Eponin demanded of Selah.

“I am an anchor. That is my strength,” she claimed with dignity, though no one was impressed. “I hover between the worlds like an eagle –”

“Like a wraith!” Rylah spat.

“Please, can we just get through this,” Tai’gee sighed.

Selah picked up the explanation. “I do not have the strength to dive into another’s mindscape. I can peek in, I can look around, I can get back out. The witch that has taken over my country can go further – much further and manipulate the mindscapes of others.”

“And you?” Tai’gee directed at Rylah.

“I am a servant of the Mendhi, that is all you need to know.”

A strong breeze rippled the tent flaps and stirred the air along the floor where the heavy fabric didn’t quite meet the ground.

“But you were there when Tai’gee went... uh... went... into Kaija’s mind... before? What happened? Why did Tai’gee need to go in in the first place?”

Rylah lifted a hand to Tai’gee, telling her to explain her discoveries and theories from that first visit to Kaija’s tumultuous mind plane. Throughout her description, Rylah’s frown deepened and she huffed with greater and greater dissatisfaction.

“A Rogue? So this is all Aries’ fault?” Eponin extended.

“I’m not sure exactly. I mean – the Rogue was there a long time after Aries planted it, but I don’t think – I mean, Kaija seemed like she had it under control...”

“She did.” Rylah rounded on Selah, “until you had to meddle in power beyond your ability. Your foolishness has thrown everything out of balance and endangered us all!”

Eponin was heartily surprised that she – in all her disability – became the one thing keeping the big Rylah from attacking the skinny Selah, who sat dumbstruck on her rug. Tai’gee stood and moved to the middle of the floor, ready to add her weight if needed to restrain a fight.

“How are we endangered,” the dark haired Queen asked calmly.

Rylah rounded again. “There are rules,” she said as though reminding everyone of a fundamental truth – like they should have known better. “The rules of the mind do not follow the rules of the body – a person’s mind has its own rules and realities, it designs and controls itself. What you experience in the body – the person and behavior *you* see – is what is currently ruling in the mindscape. If you enter someone’s mind, you must be prepared to abide by its rules and you must be prepared to interact with any character within that mind. That is rule number two.”

“What’s rule number one?” Ep asked.

Rylah held up a big finger, eyes blazing behind it. “Number one – the body cannot live without the mind.”

Eponin and Tai’gee looked at each other. It seemed obvious, but why it was number one did not. They looked back at Rylah.

“A dead body has no mind – there is nothing there but carcass – a ship and no crew.” They all nodded at Rylah to continue. “It takes a very strong person to enter another’s mind and get back *out*. One who goes in must keep an awareness and sense of self separate from everything else within the mindscape. Getting lost in another’s mind leaves your body with no energy to control it, and one can easily be absorbed into another mind if one is not careful. When you lose your mind, you lose your life – this is not just about the person’s own mind and body – it is about the trespasser as well.”

Tai’gee nodded in understanding and suddenly sobered as what Rylah said fully hit her. She’d ventured into Kaija’s mind twice, both times when it was in a profound state of chaos and disarray. Both times she had been expelled when she’d said she needed to stay and she wondered if Kaija hadn’t saved her by throwing her out of her mind.

“Is there a rule number three?” It wasn’t entirely sarcasm that colored Eponin’s question, but it was all getting beyond her and her only coping mechanism was to start poking fun of that which eluded her.

“Tampering is ill-advised,” Rylah answered flatly, and with a significant glare at the still silent Selah.

“Tampering? In someone else’s mind you mean?” Tai’gee looked between her two combative guests. “But – isn’t that what I did? Both times I went in?...”

Rylah’s eyes softened as she returned her heavy gaze to the young Queen. “You,” she said kindly, “are the Little Lion’s soul mate. I told you she would not hurt you there. Your connection with her is unique and strong, and she has a strength available to protect you in the greatest peril.”

Tai’gee shivered as she recalled the voice of the Rogue, and the breathtaking force that tried to knock her into oblivion. But the shiver was immediately followed by a warm sense of knowing as the Golden Voice surrounded her and kept her safe. When she looked up again, Rylah was nodding at her. “What you did was no different than what you would have done in this world. That is not what tampering is. Tampering –” she raised her voice to match the tone of scolding a hardheaded child, “is trying to force something into your own way, regardless of how it is going for others.”

Selah shook her head fiercely. “I didn’t!”

“You did!” Rylah threw her finger at Selah again, this time not withholding her accusation. “You engaged the Golden One that was keeping the Dark One under control, and you exhausted it.”

Eponin and Tai’gee looked again at each other then at everyone else in the room before settling on the sleeping Kaija.

“The Golden Voice was guarding the Rogue?”

“They were in balance,” Rylah extended.

“But – it’s ok now, right? I mean Tai’gee went in last night and settled her down.”

“Think child! The body presents what is in control of the mind!”

Tai’gee gasped. “Certainly not! Kaija would never –”

“*Little Lion* would not; Dark One would!”

“Obviously not – I mean, even if it is in control because of Selah, it’s not showing,” said Eponin.

Tai’gee’s brow furrowed as she recalled last night’s visit. “It was awfully interested in you,” she said for the first time addressing Selah. Selah recoiled, Tai’gee thought because she was hearing again the hungry growl charging for her from the depths of Kaija’s mind. “*She’s mine! I want her!*” Tai’gee’s eyes doubled in recognition –

“The anchor! The Rogue needs you to get out!”

“Precisely,” Rylah hissed. “It is my guess that the Dark One did not know of you before last night, and why the Little Lion gave the warnings she did.”

“But then it’s my fault for bringing Selah in – I had to, I needed help to get into Kaija’s mind.”

Rylah shook her head no, again kindly. All of her vehemence seemed reserved for Selah. “You did not need her – you do not need any help to enter the mind of your soul mate. The Little Lion knows this – it is why she forbid *her* to further play with minds. *She* knew this, too.”

Tai’gee’s look at Selah now blazed with anger. “You could have told me then. When I asked you! You just wanted to tag along!”

Selah instantly shook her head no, but the room was beyond believing anything she had to say. They looked at Kaija now, sleeping soundly, giving no indication of who she would be when she awoke.

“What does this mean?” asked Eponin who was still trying to catch up.

“If the Rogue gets out... with Kaija’s abilities...” Dark eyes widened. It would be everything Aries had wanted – perhaps more than he could handle. Good Kaija had been able to overpower Xena, even years before when she was much smaller and had less brawn. She had destroyed entire armies, not once but several times, single handed. But that was just physical strength – Kaija’s powers of healing, intelligence and preternatural instincts would all be at the Rogue’s disposal. An Evil Kaija was a terrifying prospect.

“So we just keep Selah from poking around in anyone else’s head – especially Kaija’s, and it’s ok, right?” Ep wasn’t particularly convinced of this overly simplistic precaution, but she felt the need to put something out there.

“The Rogue knows there are ways out now. It will be looking for a way.”

Kaija’s eyes began to shift under her eyelids, and then fluttered open. Tai’gee and Eponin involuntarily stepped back. Golden eyes made one sweep around the room. Nervously, Tai’gee moved back in and offered a hand to help her wife sit up.

“I am not well.” Kaija was soft and weak, her voice only strong enough to reach Tai’gee, who was right by her side. She moved in closer. This was her Kaija.

“I know Sweetheart. We’re going to get you better.”

~

Kaija did get better, but slowly, and not without much attention from Rylah. Daily the portly woman would come to work on and with Kaija. The big woman would lower herself to the ground, scarves fluttering and falling about her like a laundry basket overturned from an upper window. Sometimes they would sit with heads bent together, making indeterminate sounds of healing. Other times Kaija seemed to be sleeping or in a trance while Rylah wove the spell of the Mendhi and repaired the fractured energies as best she could.

Selah had been moved back to the people cart, shackled to it like a common dog and left in solitary at the very edge of the Amazon camp. Rylah didn't seem to think the mind jumper could really control herself in such close quarters as the Queen's tent. "The Little Lion needs space to heal. Keep her away."

Eponin was soundly dissatisfied with Selah's continued existence. To her credit, Eponin swallowed as much of the spirit world and its intricacies as she could. What she saw was a problem, a big one, threatening what remained of her livelihood and stability. Problems needed to be eradicated at this point, not handled, not managed – as far as she was concerned there was only one thing to do.

"I know you want to kill her Eponin, you've made that perfectly clear. But Rylah says we can't."

Tai'gee ran a hand back over her hair with frustration, and glanced again at Kaija's sleeping pile. She wasn't there at the moment.

"She's caused nothing but trouble since we met her Taig'," Eponin insisted. "And she's attacked you and Kaija! Who keeps an attempted assassin of the Royal Couple around for shits and giggles?"

"If our circumstances were different, Eponin," Tai'gee lifted her voice to talk over her friend, "we'd be treating her differently. Don't patronize me."

Eponin growled and huffed but Tai'gee continued. "Kaija gave an order that Selah was not to be harmed and Rylah agrees with it. I'm not going to counter them both."

That had been that, as far as Tai'gee was concerned. Or at least as much as she was going to discuss with Eponin. Tai'gee had made it a point to avoid where Selah was imprisoned, that whole end of camp was mentally out of bounds for the Queen because she wasn't sure if she saw Selah again that *she* would honor Kaija and Rylah's wishes. Tai'gee knew, down to every soul in her cells, that Selah had wrecked some very precious future, some future that had only a precarious possibility of being reality – one that Tai'gee was pining for but didn't know it. Selah had shifted their table of possibilities, and Tai'gee wasn't sure yet what that shift entailed – but the fact that the foreigner had damned what could-have-been made Tai'gee's dark eyes darken further with bitterness and hate.

The day after her argument with Eponin, Tai'gee found out what the shift meant.

“I’m tired of babysitting Selah,” the Queen grouched.

“She has to go south, back to her land,” Rylah said flatly.

“Great! The sooner the better!”

“And the Little Lion must go with her.”

“What?” Tai’gee’s exclamation was loud, loud enough to make her voice pitch an uncomfortable note. “What happened to them needing to stay away from each other?”

Rylah sat, fairly expressionless, on a stool near the entrance of the tent. Her light scarves picked up the low breeze unfurling across the floor, making the elder woman’s mass ripple. “They are tied together now; their fates are tied together. And the Little Lion’s fate is to face the Southern Witch.”

Tai’gee almost laughed. “You’re serious? You actually believe all that bilge she spewed – Rylah, that woman’s no more trustworthy than a rabid snake in heat! We’re not going to follow her down to lands unknown to chase her fairytales!”

“No, you’re not,” Rylah agreed. “Just the Little Lion. You must lead your people north.”

Tai’gee did laugh at that, while she looked at her incommensurate guest as if she were sprouting an unnatural body part. “I’m not going anywhere without Kaija,” she stated.

“You must find a place for your people.”

“And I will, as soon as we get back from this stupid quest.”

“You’ll condemn your Nation to extinction if you try to take them south. They need a leader to find their way for them.”

“Then Eponin and Beckries can get them started and we’ll catch up.”

“No,” Rylah negated patiently. Tai’gee’s alternatives were becoming more and more desperate, but Rylah remained placid and gentle, like she was negotiating with a small child. “They need you, you are their mother –”

“Kaija is my wife! I’m not letting her go down there without me.”

“That is not your place; you are Queen of a dying people.”

“Then I’ll abdicate.”

“You will not.” Kaija still wasn’t able to put much into the volume of her speech, but she did maintain a commanding strength that effectively ended Tai’gee’s protestations. The smallest of

the three heaved herself into the tent and let herself fall into the furs and blankets piled up for her comfort. Rylah discretely left the Royal Couple in privacy and Kaija waited while Tai'gee moved closer.

“You can't go Kaij'.”

“I must.”

“But you're not well yet.”

“I am well enough. Rylah has helped.”

Tai'gee wasn't getting the response she wanted as a loving and pleading wife, and that made her angry. It was her happiness and security being threatened now and that was a very short fuse to blow her temper. “You want to go?”

“I must,” repeated Kaija with the same patient honesty.

“So you want to just leave me here, alone? You'd rather go help this treacherous, deceitful, backstabbing snake than help your own people?” She was just short of yelling, and had stood up to pace as she ranted.

Kaija pushed herself up as well. “It is not a matter of want. It is a must.”

“And what about us? Huh?” Tai'gee threw the tent flaps aside and made a dramatic sweep of the pell-mell camp outside. “What about your charge from Artemis – what about your responsibility to us?” Now she was yelling, and more than a few heads were turning to listen.

“I am no help to anyone as I am now. I am not safe. I must go become safe so I can be good for you.”

Tai'gee was growing even more desperate. Kaija was her one constant in life, the one thing she totally depended on simply because she was always there. Imagining Kaija not being there was like having to face a day with the sun refusing to rise. Tai'gee's entire existence was being thrown into question – who could she be without Kaija? *How* could she be without her? How long would a flower last without the sun? Tai'gee's temper flared again – Rylah had no right to ask this of them. She was injecting herself into their lives uninvited – Eponin had blamed everything on Selah, but it was really Rylah who was the threat to all of their stability. Did the big woman know how guilty Tai'gee had been feeling about not sending Selah away at Kaija's first hiss? Had she decided that the guilt alone was not punishment enough, and that Tai'gee required some other compensation for taking her wife for granted? ‘That's not fair.’ “It's not fair – this can't be happening now. Kaija, we need you now, you can't walk out on us.”

But Tai'gee began to see that Kaija had already dedicated herself to this new plan; perhaps she had done so back in Byzantium when she had disappeared with Ari. Despite the many long hours of therapy and rehabilitation Rylah had done with Kaija, a deep illness still hung about

Kaija's eyes, and in knowing and loving her wife as much as she did, she knew Kaija could not and would not fake being unwell. Tai'gee began to cry, an exhausting sadness rushed through her body as she accepted that Kaija had to go on this mission, and, more profoundly, that she could not go with her. Kaija's soft and sympathetic smile swam before her, followed by Rylah's enigmatic brown gaze. Tai'gee shook with sad anger as Selah passed resignedly in front of her. Noki also moved by with stern resolve. "I will go with her, my Queen. I'll protect her."

"Write everything down Noki; everything."

"I will Queen Tai'gee."

And then there was Kaija again. There was warmth and tears, begging not to go, dizzying sobs, love. "I love you."

Late in the morning, Tai'gee started from her sleeping skins. She was ruffled and felt the heavy pull of exhaustion that follows a night of crying. She was also alone. Ignoring her dishevelment, the young Queen jumped to her tent entrance, threw it open wide and nearly ran into Eponin who was standing guard just on the other side.

"Where's Kaija," she demanded.

Eponin's wrinkling brow contracted with concern. "She's gone Taig'. They left a few hours before dawn." Tai'gee could easily read on her guard's face that the worry was because Tai'gee should know this.

Tai'gee sagged. "It wasn't a dream then?" She tried to stifle a sob by covering her mouth, her eyes pleaded to Eponin to make all of the hurt she was about to suffer untrue.

"She's gone Taig'." Eponin repeated plainly. The concern shifted to confusion. "You don't remember?" The short guard watched as her Queen studied the dismantling camp around them. All of the tents save hers had come down; they would leave the Queen to sleep. "I gotta say Taig', you didn't make it easy. You put on one hell of a guilt trip." She tried to chuckle a little to lighten the admission but it was weak at best and sounded more like she was trying to clear her throat.

"What did I do?"

Dark eyes narrowed as Eponin stepped closer to Tai'gee and took her elbow. "You really don't remember?" Eponin remembered that asking obvious questions was one of Tai'gee's pet peeves that earned a more volatile reaction and took the younger woman's silent shake 'no' as a sign of true distress since she didn't bat an eye at the usual annoyance. "You made her take your circlet. You told her she had to come back to give it to you or we wouldn't survive."

PART 4

Tai'gee would remember that awful night in more detail over the next couple days. They packed their camp with customary speed and proficiency, but there was limited chatter; the children who ordinarily would be prancing with excitement at moving, were docile and obedient. Few women would meet her eyes that first day on the road, and Tai'gee felt very alone.

Her melancholy was reflected perfectly by the weather, by the very landscape they passed through – gray. Everything was dull, disinterested, lacking even a spark of life. The sky was one unending cloud, a gray pall that hid all indications of the position of the sun – it could be early morning or mid-afternoon, Tai'gee had no sign to tell her one way or another. Grassy plains rolled away from them in gray waves on either side, wherever a boulder peaked over the stems it did so as a hulking mass of darker gray. Any birds they chanced to see were gray specks against a dreary gray backdrop. Tai'gee didn't like this country. Its resigned lifelessness sapped her energy. She longed for the vibrant greens of ferns, the sprawling fig trees and olive groves, the happy herb and flower gardens dotting their everyday life. This atrocious sprawl compared to her native homeland like a common quarry rock to a diamond.

The depression wasn't just manifesting in the landscape though; the Greeks became more and more subdued as they moved northward away from the lush and challenging environment around the Black Sea. At the beginning they were more animated, they had plenty to talk about since most of them had heard her parting with Kaija. Given that their entire caravan was moving along under her observant watch, Tai'gee was bound to hear – overhear – what those who'd watched her meltdown had thought of what they'd witnessed. Apparently Tai'gee had made yet another attempt to change Kaija's mind; shamelessly she flung the last arrow she had in her arsenal at her beloved wife.

“...didn't even know she was pregnant.” “No one did.” “When did it happen – does she know who the father is?” “Must've been back in Cresca.”

“I can't believe the Lioness just left – she just left.” “She didn't just leave – she left with another woman.” “Can you really blame her, after that?” “It's no wonder the Lioness wouldn't want anything more to do with her.” “I guess between your wife cheating on you and some stranger trying to control your mind, she figured the stranger was the better deal.”

“She's still the Queen, and the Lioness has a charge from the Goddess to care for her and us.” “What're you saying?” “She abandoned us. Any one of us would've been a traitor.”

“Her wife is pregnant – and obviously it wasn't consensual. She wants to keep them – she wants to keep those bastard children and throw it in her wife's face.” “If there's a girl she'll be our princess...” “Not my princess – not some bastard-born girl. I won't be ruled by *that*.”

“Then you will leave. You'll not speak treasonously of my Queen and any children she has. So either you can be bound by your unyielding oath to our Queen, or you can find exception at the end of my sword.”

That came from Beckries, and if Tai'gee hadn't been so sad about the subject matter she would have smiled at Beckries' noble defense of her honor. None of them had known Tai'gee had passed by their conversations, that she'd heard any part of their rumors, that she'd smiled because Beckries, at least, wasn't swayed by the whisperings. As they traveled on, even the most dedicated gossips got tired of chewing over her drama however and fell into the sullen march that had become their sojourn. New questions about if they were "going the right way", "how much longer would it take", "did all the rest of the world look like this gray hell?", were taking over whenever anyone found the inspiration to talk.

Tai'gee certainly didn't find inspiration to say much of anything herself. They'd come all this way, they'd put so much trust into the young Queen's plans, and Tai'gee felt like she'd done nothing to reassure them that their faith was well placed. She must have looked like a mad woman screaming after Kaija in an unbridled tirade. "What about these children? What about your pledge to Artemis in Her temple that you would protect the Queen and her children? What about that Kaija? How can you turn your back on your pledge?" Kaija had looked at her, patiently as always, told her she loved her, her golden eyes said goodbye, and Tai'gee's heart oscillated widely from the torment that Kaija could actually find it within herself to leave her and the sincere hope that she would be successful on her quest. As Tai'gee watched her wife disappear with her unlikely group of companions she'd never felt so desperately alone. And as they continued to trudge northward, the dark haired Queen felt a distinct and constant illness at her new status as a ruling pariah. She mulled the barbs of gossip over and over, trying to hide what hurt the most inside the dragging steps of her horse's hoof beats.

Clomp – 'she just left' – clomp – 'it wasn't consensual' – clomp – 'she's still the Queen' – clomp – 'she wants to keep those bastard children' – clomp...

But that was the one thing none of them knew for certain, because Tai'gee didn't know that for certain. Did she want these children? The young Queen found herself consumed by this question. She hadn't planned for them – she hadn't planned for one, let alone two. They'd been traveling for months now since Mathus and Maridian, and winter was coming as fast as her belly was swelling. The thought of bearing children terrified her – so many things could go wrong, so many things did go wrong. Just one child could be a woman's death sentence; Dotra was the only woman Tai'gee knew who had had twins, and even she hadn't had an easy labor – many thought all three of them would die at some point during it all. Her circumstance was totally different however. She had a stable home, a loving partner, a proper midwife, she'd been warm and comfortable surrounded by supportive family and friends and Seema and Meica had come into the world screaming along with all those well-wishers.

Tai'gee asked herself, as she had begun to do routinely whenever alone in her tent, what Kaija would want, what she would do. Every now and then Tai'gee would feel a glimmer of hope and happiness at the thought of them raising children together, their own children. Only that glimmer would be just that, more a glint, a flash of instant light that left behind a blinding darkness. Kaija wasn't here; she wasn't here to raise a family with, and Tai'gee didn't know if she would ever see her again. But then her inner voice interjected, 'what if she was here, then what would you do?' Kaija hadn't made any acknowledgment of these children – no indication that she'd accepted them, that she would accept them, that she wanted them. Tai'gee asked her

inner voice if that was true? ‘Maybe there was some moment – what about in Byzantium?’ But no, not there. There Kaija’d thrown her own tantrum, Kaija’d even seemed afraid for Tai’gee that she was pregnant. ‘Afterwards?’ They’d never discussed them again. ‘The night she left?’ No... nothing. She’d said she loved her, just her; no promises of returning to a home warm with family, no insinuations that she’d be back to help her with the birth, not even a touch of her belly to try to feel any life there. Tai’gee hadn’t yet felt any life there, but her inner voice’s point was that Kaija hadn’t given any indication that she approved of her pregnancy, or that she’d be willing to accept these children. If Tai’gee wanted them then she would have to want them for herself.

Realizing that brought Rylah’s counsel rushing back: “This is a time of choice.” What could she choose? How could she look into the eyes of two innocent children and see everyday the proof of her own violation? They would have questions about their father – Tai’gee could tell them he was a god; many women did that when they didn’t want to admit the true reason for their motherhood. How was she going to raise two children in the midst of trying to save the last remnants of her tattered nation? How would they be treated by those that looked on them as something other than Amazon? There were already mutterings that a faction of her Amazons wouldn’t honor her children as legitimate heirs, even if they were girls. What if that faction grew? How could Tai’gee bring children into such a controversial position? Tai’gee fingered the vials Rylah had given her, now warming in her hand. If Tai’gee took these and aborted these children would they end up being her last forsaken opportunity to have children? These were given to her through rape; would she be able to ask herself to lie with another man in the future, even with Kaija’s blessing, and allow him to do to her what was first done to her by force?

Running a hand through her dark locks, Tai’gee admitted to herself she was afraid; everything had spiraled so wildly so quickly. Here they were making their way to an entire other part of the world for Zeus’ sake. Tai’gee knew nothing of what they would find in the roams of the Northern Amazons – peace?, war?, famine?, nothing? She wouldn’t be able to fight, burdened by motherhood. If Kaija could be there and show everyone that she would guard and protect their children, Tai’gee had no doubt those murmurs of dissent would choke and die. Kaija was so influential to them, to her – things they may have avoided otherwise, her powerful presence gave them the courage to go forward into. She was more than a pillar of strength and reassurance – she was that breath of determination that actually pushed them on in their lives; the hand that reached back from the difficult situation and gave them courage to go through it themselves. Her absence wasn’t just a threat to their security, it left them to go into battle naked – still willing to fight, but more sensitive to their mortality.

Tai’gee was so racked with guilt and doubt she couldn’t see straight. The odd beating of her heart she’d felt in Greece as they shuttled about hiding in pockets of safety returned to steal her breath as Tai’gee sat grinding ‘what should I do’ against her teeth. Her head pounded. She had tucked herself into a tight ball, rocking back and forth, finding it hard to breathe through the tears and drainage of her grief. That was how Eponin found her, stunned, inconsolable, Rylah’s vials empty at her feet. “Tai’gee, what have you done?”

I wasn't convinced that either Rylah or Selah was not a witch. Maybe they both were. They brought us all the way back through the isthmus, and even farther south, taking the exact route the Queen Tai'gee had worked so hard to avoid, and we only met friendly caravans and nomads the entire way. No warlords, no ambushes. The most harrowing thing that happened while we made our way south was a swollen river that Mylo, Kaija's horse, refused to ford. We were forced to build a raft and ferry ourselves across it, floating ineptly much farther downstream than we'd wanted. After the mess on the ship from Byzantium, I wasn't particularly eager to be on any sort of water vessel, but at least in this case there was no one else on board that wanted to kidnap us ...as long as Selah wasn't counted.

We didn't start off in any form of chatty companionship. There wasn't much to talk about for the first many days of our journey. Everything must have been so difficult for the Lioness in those first raw days. Leaving the Queen was only part of it – the terrible things that had come out of their departure were practically mind numbing. Kaija seemed numb anyway. The Queen was pregnant; she hadn't told any of us about it, hadn't made any announcement – we would've celebrated had we known. That made me wonder if she actually wanted to be pregnant. Then this Blue Trickster... Eponin had pulled me aside as I packed my gear to tell me that this Afrikan was not to be trusted on any account. "She's dangerous. She is a danger to the Queen's Consort – you keep that demon away from her." I didn't fully understand why she was such a threat, or why we were trying to help her if she was so treacherous. But ultimately it didn't matter – the point was I wasn't going along just as a chronicler; I was also a guardian. The Lioness seemed to need it, she was so despondent as we moved farther and farther away from our tribe, farther south.

It took weeks to reach the Arabian Sea. During our long trek it would seem that I had plenty of time to become better acquainted with all of my traveling companions. We were on seemingly endless roads, sleeping next to each other in all manner of discomfort. The stretches of time from one civilized human populace to the next were so long we were our only source of stimulation, sometimes for days. I was especially eager to have the opportunity to spend so much time with the Lioness. We were the only two that made sense in this journey – the Afrikan was suspicious; the Blue Traitor was a sneaky, lying conartist. Rylah was... too mystical to be believable. She always had an expression that suggested she was thinking about things far from our world – things that gods think about. She made me nervous. Kaija and I were the only ones to be trusted. We were the only two that made sense.

Even though Kaija didn't talk much, I still found comfort in being around her. In quiet times around our camp, we sat next to each other tending our weapons, me keeping an eye on Selah at the same time. Like had often been the case before, Kaija would take me with her hunting, teaching me tricks and traps. If I had been more open to it, there was a thing or two I could've learned from Selah, as well, in regards to hunting. One day we were walking the horses, Selah had picked up a sizeable rock and was playing with it in her hand. Eventually a rabbit jumped away from the road side as we approached – a fairly common thing. But, uncommonly, Selah reached back and flung her rock so quickly and with such accuracy, the rabbit hadn't gotten two lances away before it lay dead. Demon though she may be, I had never seen anyone do that before; beside me Kaija had nodded. "Now we need another one. Who will get it first?" It was Selah – no one else rose to the challenge.

Rylah was really the glue of our group, or rather the joint between two parts. At night, after we ate dinner, she would work with Kaija, I had no idea doing what. Sometimes their work was brief and they stayed by our fire to do it. Sometimes they needed privacy and they took themselves off to a more secluded place. But always Rylah gave Selah a warning before she left – “if you do anything, I will know it.” It was almost like a child being warned by her mother, and once that child gets to a certain age she realizes her mother doesn’t actually have the omnipotence she claimed... but Selah never did act like Rylah was bluffing. She sat with the utmost sedation. During the day Selah got to be a little freer. Unlike we three, Selah was an extravert, a talker. Being forced into lengthy quiet must have been a true test of endurance for her. Rylah knew it, too. So the larger woman would plant herself right next to Selah and ask questions, tell stories about her children, make any little conversation to get Selah started so that the Blue Trickster could find some release in conversation.

Eventually we made it to a port city. I asked Rylah where we were, what the name of the city was. She could’ve said “I don’t know”, but instead she said that some places don’t have names long enough to be a place. “Fine, what country are we in then?” But she only smiled and turned away from me.

It was still very early in the day when the four of us rode into Someplace. There was an inn with a stable right on the outskirts of the city where we put up our horses. Remembering that the Lioness didn’t do well in cities, I suggested we stay at the inn while Rylah and Selah made arrangements for the rest of our trip. “I will stay, you will go,” Kaija said. Rylah agreed. “Come with me. And you,” she pointed at Kaija, “will sleep. You must stay and rest.” Kaija had smiled, in her way, and said she would sleep.

The lady innkeeper couldn’t have been more surprised when we four lumbered through her door. Given the early morning patronage slung about the main room, it was probably odd for any other women to be there – let alone women as distinctly mismatched as we. I wanted to get two rooms and continue with my great efforts to keep Selah as physically far from the Lioness as possible. But we would need as much money at our disposal as we could have, and paying for an extra room wouldn’t have been the most frugal of ideas.

“Just one room?”

“The largest you have please. And a tub.”

“The largest room is currently occupied,” the innkeeper said slowly. When she was given a very persuasive amount of money, she eyed us all, especially Kaija who was hanging back to avoid scaring her. “I’ll make some arrangements,” she agreed and said to give her some time to set up the space. “Come back in an hour.” Kaija chose to stay in the main room and wait while the rest of us left our gear with her and moved out to find what we needed in the markets.

It was the first time I had been away from Kaija, and, more importantly, I was uncomfortable with the idea of being alone with the mystic and the mind jumper. Rylah made no pretense of disliking Selah. The big woman ordered her to walk in front of us, like a servant, and to keep her

thoughts to herself. Selah had frowned, even narrowed her eyes, but she didn't argue. Rylah was so big and pushy, and Selah so thin and spindly, I think I would've done the same if it were me – even if I had a rock in my hand. Though I did like to see Selah getting bullied, the tension between her and the be-scarfed Rylah made meandering the bustling and mostly cheerful market pretty unpleasant. Most vendors were calling out to potential customers, shouting prices and advertisements, even jokes if I was reading the chuckles of others correctly, but when our three scowling faces walked by they quieted. It was the same as if I had cupped my hands over my ears – the din was still audible but oddly softened.

“What is it we need so we can get out of here?” I asked Rylah.

“Clothes mostly, and ship passage. This is a very nice market.”

I looked around for what made the place so nice, and only looked into suspicious, covered stares. Selah came over to us with her hands on her narrow hips. “If you're going to stop walking it would be helpful to let me know that.”

“Not necessarily. You could walk off the end of a dock and your drowning may be very helpful to me.” Rylah lifted a bright, thin scarf to study, folded it neatly, and replaced it on the cart. “Let's go look for ship fare first. Come.”

I wasn't thrilled about getting onto another ship and had already asked if it was absolutely necessary. “Very few things are absolutely necessary. We can walk, and take many years to get to this southern land if you would prefer.”

“You could just say ‘Yes’,” I threw back at Rylah.

Finding ships was the easy part. Finding a ship going where we wanted to go wasn't difficult either. We even found a whole section of the port that spoke Greek. It wouldn't have mattered, however, because once I found out how much the captain was charging for the three of us I couldn't answer him in any language. Selah moved up to continue the conversation.

“I have sailed with you before and did not pay such a high price. I respected your good dealings.”

“Yes, I remember you.” The grizzly man stroked his chin as he eyed Selah warily. “And I charge what is fair for the journey – perhaps when you sailed with me before the sea was calm, my passenger load full, the distance short. I am sailing under different circumstances now.”

Selah made a show of looking around. Huge barrels of water were being rolled onboard up springy planks. Men were catcalling to each other, and didn't sound much different than the obnoxious seagulls squawking from every direction. Selah tilted her head to the side, like she was considering something. She was actually tilting her head so she could be closer to the shorter captain's eyelevel. “You are taking this trip no matter if we join you or not. So why should we pay you double a normal passage if not only to line your greedy pockets?”

“Normal passage,” the man said oddly.

“Exactly. But since you’ve made all of your money for this trip, don’t you feel generous at this point? Half the normal passage would put your conscience at ease I believe. That is what we have for you.”

“Yes. That would be plenty. More than enough.”

“Oh? In that case, here – I don’t want you to feel like you got too much for something you’re feeling so kind about doing.”

I couldn’t say I was anything other than completely stunned. Selah handed him a paltry palmfull of coins. We got the rest of the information we needed and walked away as if we’d handled everything in the most legitimate manner. Selah moved ahead of us again, and vendor after vendor we visited suddenly started feeling liberally negotiable.

“This is why I wanted you to come along. To see how Selah can conduct business. It is good for you to know.”

“She’s manipulating their minds? That’s not right – it’s not fair. We can’t accept these sales. It’s practically stealing!”

Rylah was already shaking her head at my outrage. “She has not, yet, left her self. She has a way with people... a way that encourages people to do things for her. She is a master at it. I have never seen such artful manipulation.”

“But Elder, this isn’t *right*.”

“What is right? Do you want to give them the money they were asking for? You may find your own generosity ill rewarded if they feel they were scammed.”

“Well, I’m buying my own supplies.”

She only laughed at me as she piled fabrics into my arms. I think the real reason she wanted me along was because she needed a mule.

It took us a lot longer than an hour to get back to the inn. Actually it took us all day. It was early evening by the time we – or rather, I should say I – wobbled into the inn with armfulls of purchases. The barkeep pointed me upstairs with a careless throw of his hand, and I made my way up the creaking staircase guessing where each step was below my foot. I was glad to be back, to be free of watching Selah’s exploitation of every merchant she approached. Rylah had been right, the Blue Trickster was indeed artful and therefore watching her work couldn’t be avoided – but I also watched with a certain amount of disgust, like a chariot crash that couldn’t be avoided, witnesses can’t turn away, but everyone cringes at the disaster.

At the top of the stairs I went just to the left and spent a minute negotiating how to get the door open. Finally with a curse I bullied my way in, and in my rush, dropped almost everything I was carrying. ‘So much for being quiet.’ The Lioness, to my surprise, was wrapped in a tight curl around herself on the high bed, golden eyes staring widely at me. She looked somewhat startled. I was somewhat startled. Then she yawned, and pulled herself out of her position, leaned way back to stretch out her arms and back as far as they would go – her large square hands reached out in a grasping stretch to awaken every muscle down to the fingertips. Each muscle stood out in dazzling relief since she had on only her hide pants and nothing else. Then she leaned forward to stretch everything on the other end of her, giant hamstrings flexed, calves flexed, toes flexed. Her head went back, her breasts perked forward; even they had thick muscle to stretch. The Lioness couldn’t have looked more feline, more graceful or elegant in that moment, and Rylah saved me from my gaping stare by pushing me through with a gruff shove.

“We only need one door, and you would be a poor choice. Why are all my fine purchases on the floor?”

I was stuttering and flustered, and my heart beat the drums of arousal, a song I had only felt in the past with physical contact, not just visionary appeal. It took an awkward moment for me to realize Rylah had asked me something, and I mashed together an answer in one mouthful: “Because no one helped me get the door open.” Or I could’ve just stayed quiet for all the notice Rylah paid me.

Rylah and Selah stayed in the room for the evening serving – the big woman also didn’t like to have Selah and the Lioness in too close of physical space. She said we could send something up to them and that would be satisfactory. I rather enjoyed the look of disagreement from Selah.

Downstairs again the main room was split into two areas, the bar and the dining hall. Both were busy. We drew attention as we descended the staircase – there’s no way we wouldn’t. Kaija was so exotically distinct she had to be examined. Any glancing eye would stop and look back. She wore her black fighting leathers, her mane she had tamed, somewhat, with heavy grease on the ends, and, as she had every day since we had left our tribe, she wore the Circlet of the Queen. She was a stunning figure of lines and curves and primal unpredictability.

I can’t say I wasn’t also contributing to the attention; I wasn’t so sheltered that I didn’t realize the interest my looks drew from men, or from women. I, too, wore my fighting leathers, comfortable buckskin that flattered every part of me that made me look like a warrior. If anyone hadn’t guessed we were Amazons I wouldn’t believe it, we were much too obvious.

We waited at the edge of the main room, me trying to spy any empty table. There were none, but that didn’t stop the same woman who’d met us when we first arrived from coming over and shoving a man to a new table and new acquaintances to make room for us. “I’ll be right back, we’re very busy. Sorry about that. Just a moment.” I’d never actually seen a person literally trying to do three things at once while turning a circle; it turned out to be much like the chariot crash scenario. She did come back though, and I thought it was a bit odd that she seemed so friendly now; when we’d first met her she seemed to be teetering on the edge of telling us they

were full up and we should move on. “What can I get for you tonight? We don’t really have a menu – the main thing is stew, but if you can tell me what you like I can see what we can do.”

A man, fumingly drunk, leaned over to yank on the innkeeper’s dress. “I can tell you wha’d’eye want, even though you didn’ ass me when I sa’down. I wan’ another one! Can you do that for me there girl? Git mea’nother one!”

The inn keeper yanked her skirts from the man’s fingers and gave him an undignified gesture. “I can tell you what I want – is payment for the first seven rounds! How about that you –”

“–I think we’re ready to order.” The woman’s head swiveled back to us as if the man had never interrupted, along with her sincere, though creepy, grin. “Yes, I think we need a couple servings of ... uhm, perhaps the rice and fish those fellows are eating over there. If those plates could be taken up to our companions in our room that would be great. I’d like the stew and...” I looked at Kaija who I expected to answer for herself. She only blinked for many long moments, and I realized she probably didn’t eat in places like this often, maybe she never had. I thought quickly of what she might like, then decided the simpler the better. “And meat. Ox probably would be the best. Or deer.”

The woman smiled and left with our order, ignoring every reaching hand and shouted request as she disappeared into the kitchen. I looked around us – we really couldn’t have been at a better table. We were just on the edge of the dining tables, under the suspended walkway that wrapped around to all of the upstairs rooms. Because our backs were to the wall – or rather, Kaija’s back was to the wall – we had a great view of both the bar and the dining hall, every chair, table and patron was under our watchful eyes.

“Did you have a good time at the market?”

I blinked at Kaija. The dim light made her eyes look very dark, almost brown. I told her we got everything we needed, and passage on a ship leaving the next afternoon. She nodded. “And?...”

“We sold the horses. Selah said they wouldn’t be useful in her country. We sold them to the stable guy, so they’re still here if you want to say goodbye to Mylo.”

“I will not miss the horse.” Neat, sharp teeth flashed in a smile. “What else? There is something bothering you.”

“No. Well, there is but there’s nothing I can do about it. I just didn’t like how good Selah was at talking the merchants out of their prices. We practically made money on all the things we bought.”

“Gabrielle was good at shopping, too.”

“But this was different, Lioness. Selah barely paid for anything. Gabrielle always paid us well for whatever she bought from us.”

Kaija nodded. “Trading is more fair than buying. You can ask Selah to make trades for things she wants.”

“That’s a great idea! ...no, wait... it’s no good now.”

“Why not?”

“There’s nothing else we need!” I laughed.

“Do you want anything to drink?” A young girl stepped between our chairs. I say young, she was probably a few years younger than me. She had large, owlsh eyes, almost like a pleading dog’s, and dry hair that would probably be lovely if she took some care of it. I asked for mead, Kaija for water, and the girl lingered. She was looking at Kaija with an unreadable expression, then turned to head towards the same door as the innkeeper – but not without a look back over her shoulder. For her part, Kaija let the girl’s curiosity wash over her. I, on the other hand, was bothered by it. I noticed Kaija’s arrowhead seemed bothered by it too, the sullen red that glowed constantly from inside looked like it had gained a pulse.

We waited quietly for our drinks to come. I made an offhand sniff about how long it took to bring a couple of mugs over, which the Lioness ignored. After taking more time then necessary, the girl returned with two empty mugs, this time not bothering to look anywhere else than at Kaija. I asked the serving girl if there was something wrong, and she jumped, like she was surprised there was someone else sitting at the table. She turned back quickly, and this time she was met at the kitchen door by a dark haired man poking his head out like a child from behind a parent’s leg.

“People are rude,” I said.

“People are people,” Kaija answered. “There will be trouble coming. I want you to do nothing.”

I immediately frowned. “Nothing? Lioness, I am here to help protect you. I’m not going to sit by and do nothing if there’s trouble.”

“You will. Promise me. Do not react.”

I shook my head. Kaija’s golden eyes were large and unflinching. “I will say it is an order.”

I admit, I started pouting. “Amazons fight. What good Amazon sits by if there’s trouble?”

Kaija put a hand on my shoulder. “One that can rise above fighting as a solution for every problem.” She sat back, the Circlet glinted in the thin candle flame that was sitting at our table. She didn’t look nervous or worried or particularly bothered by anything, and I decided that if she, who could destroy whole armies alone, was going to remain calm and unflappable then so could I.

The man that had ducked his head out with quick whispers to the serving girl was the next to come to our table. He brought mead to pour into my mug and a bowl of lackluster stew and set them down hard before me. Then he turned to leave. "Excuse me," I called after him, "we had two orders."

He turned back, and the light caught in the deep crevices of his dour face. "We don't serve animals here," he sneered.

Instantly I moved to jump at him, but Kaija had woven her foot around the leg of my chair and held it firm to the table. The most I accomplished was banging my knees against the bottom of the tabletop. Golden eyes bored hard into me. Around us chairs were scraping as people moved away, dragging their tables and dinners with them. The idle conversation around the room dissipated, and nervous glances and whispered conversations filled in the awkward quiet instead. Men turned to look over their shoulders at us, but jerked their chins back if they saw me returning their attention. The dark serving man took comfort in the suggested disapproval of this questionable patron and crossed his arms as he looked down on us. "Animals eat outside, you can find something out there."

"I will eat here. Please bring me my food."

"I don't serve beasts," he spat, then walked away without a look back.

I was outraged, absolutely furious, and a sizeable chunk of that anger was for the Lioness, who let this man publicly insult her and get away with it. She was looking around, smoothly, quietly, acquiescently, and, even more irritated by that, I jerked my chair to free it from her foot, and stabbed my spoon into my bowl. I forced in a mouthful of the stew to keep myself from saying anything disrespectful to the Consort, but I might've done better for myself to find some other way to hold my tongue. Honestly, I could not understand how these roadside places could make such terrible stew when it was something they made everyday – we rarely had stew in our dining hall, but when we did it was made for hundreds of women and was never such unidentifiable, tasteless sludge. To help myself swallow, I took a large gulp of mead, which was much tastier, and slammed down my mug because I was still mad.

"How could you let him talk to you that way," I ground out.

"There will be more. He will try something else. When he does, duck."

"What?" I nearly shouted with absolute incredulity. "I will not!"

"You will."

Now I was insulted. There was even a moment that I regretted volunteering to come along on this trip. I didn't have long to sulk though, before something whistled right in front of my face. Before I had the wherewithal to realize it was an arrow, Kaija had turned my chair over and forced me under our table. Then she was gone. All over the room everyone else was doing the same thing, ducking, scurrying, running – rough, grown men squealed, some turned their tables

over and pulled their chairs to cover them like blankets because they didn't know who was doing the shooting or who was the target. There was a curse from the kitchen door before it flew open, and the disgruntled serving man bulled his way into the dining room with his bow jerking about wildly looking for his missed mark. Side, side, down, down-side, up – the arrow point froze, and I looked up to see Kaija sitting neatly on the thin edge of decorative mantle below the upstairs boardwalk. Her arrowhead glowed brightly now, giving her away in the darkened corner like a light-tower on a dark night. How she got up there I have no idea, but her athleticism was evident given the mantle was probably half as wide as my hand, and she was perfectly perched on it. Before I could shout a warning, the kitchen door swung open again and out came a pot. Followed closely by a clay jar. And then a screeching hydra.

“You worthless ingrate!” Whack! “Stupid meathead!” Whack! “Ignorant goon!” Whack!

Laughing pulled me from under the table, where I found the bow and arrow discarded, the shooter crouched in a defensive huddle, and the previously cowering grown men giggling at the lady innkeeper who was pounding the stricken man with a frying pan. After each insult, she swung again, and a new round of laughter echoed off the overturned furniture.

“You dumb” – whack! – “spineless” – whack! – “prune-brained” –

“Stop.”

Kaija had descended. Mid smack, the frying pan hung in the air, and the innkeeper looked apologetic. “I'm so sorry for my slush-gutted brother, Your Grace! So very sorry!”

“Don't apologize – it's an animal. We don't serve animals,” the beaten man slurred. I wasn't sure he actually knew what he was saying anymore.

“Shut-up you impotent worm!” Whack! “Where do you think today's meat came from, you dim-witted slug!” The pan raised again –

“Stop.”

Again the innkeeper looked up. “What can I do to make up for this lousy scum's behavior?” she asked while giving her brother two sharp kicks. He grunted but stayed down, disoriented and undoubtedly embarrassed.

“Do not hit him anymore,” Kaija said regally. “We only need our dinners. Everything else is fine.”

“Are you sure, Your Grace? He's a no good” – kick – “loutish” – whack – “buffoon!”
WHACK!

More laughter, raucous now; the other patrons guffawed and held their bellies as they pointed and elbowed each other, brave now that the threat was neutralized.

“Enough,” and this time there was a finalizing force in Kaija’s voice. “Two orders of venison, one roasted, one raw. That is all.”

The innkeeper bowed lowly, and on her way back up she grabbed her brother’s ear and drug him from the dining hall, cursing him the entire way, laughter covering their wake. Kaija righted our table with an easy motion and held out my chair to me while seating herself in her own. The atmosphere was much lightened now, jubilant even. I looked at Kaija sheepishly. “How did you know he was going to do something else?”

“Because he is a fearful man. He had not done enough yet to alleviate his fear.”

“He didn’t seem fearful to me, just stupid and mean.”

Kaija smiled, and pointed at her nose. “I can smell these things.”

That widened my eyes. I wondered if she was serious – I’d heard that cats could smell fear, but was never sure if that was a wife’s tale or natural fact. What I did know was natural fact was that cats sleep a lot, and as I replayed the innkeeper’s comedic punishment of her brother, I realized something: “What did she mean ‘where today’s meat came from’? You were supposed to be sleeping!”

“I did, after I went hunting. Trust me, you did not want what they had before I contributed.” She winked, and looked very happy when our food came.

II

Some of the unfairness of being a displaced people, Tai’gee decided, is that when someone does something worth recognizing there isn’t a lot that could be bestowed on her for her achievement. If they’d still lived in their home land, Tai’gee might have had land to offer as a reward, or a celebration, or valuable weaponry and treasures. For warriors who showed exceptional abilities in battle Tai’gee could promote them to higher positions of leadership. But displacement had robbed them of the ability to bestow tribute, and Blue-wren deserved tribute – high praise – perhaps even worship. Blue-wren brought them through to the Northern Amazons without a speck of trouble. The fact that she was even able to find them was astounding enough, but to guide over two-hundred, faith-failing refugees a thousand miles from their home country when most had never been off Amazon land was a miraculous feat.

“I believe their village is on the other side of these woods.”

“Are you sure? Absolutely sure?” Tai’gee squinted at Blue-wren. She didn’t want to give this news to the others if it wasn’t true. And it would’ve been a lot more disappointment than just not having found their northern sisters – this land was much more lush and beautiful than the gray, grassy plains they’d been trudging through for a month. Tai’gee could just hear the groans of rebellion if they were wrong. Blue-wren nodded.

“Still, I want to make triple sure. We’ll take ten warriors as a greeting party.”

Blue-wren, Eponin and Tai'gee led their small contingent. The wood was nice, broad tree canopies spread overhead, the deadfall decomposed on the wood floor with a pleasant musk. But the way Eponin turned up her nose could make one think they were passing carrion. "There are no sentries," she sniffed with disapproval.

Behind them Beckries also growled that there were no totems, no border markings, "there are no shrines to Artemis."

Everything that defined Amazon Land was missing and Tai'gee glanced at Blue-wren in doubt, but the squint-eye tattoos pinched with a look of certainty and the scout moved ahead of them. Eponin moved up into her place. "If this is Amazon Land, their outer defenses are completely unacceptable." Tai'gee couldn't disagree. At the same time, she didn't want to make their premiere entrance criticizing their sisters' practices.

Tai'gee couldn't say she had no expectations about what they'd find upon entering the mainstay of the Northern Amazons, but what she did expect wasn't outrageously ludicrous. At most, an armed welcoming committee, because unexpected company could have been an attack. At least, an occupied village. They found neither. The streets – well, paths would be more accurate – were empty; the light breeze blew dead leaves across them in a depressingly lonely huff. The investigating group peeked into windows, looked underneath their raised huts but found no one in the entire mainstay. They regrouped at the other end, scratching their heads, completely flummoxed.

"Maybe they've all gone hunting."

"Or are in a battle. Maybe they need our help."

"It doesn't matter what they're doing, they've left the entire village unguarded." Eponin stabbed her cane hard to make her point, and everyone nodded with her. Before Tai'gee could offer her reasons for remaining open-minded about this irresponsible abandonment, there was a shout from Cho-chin from farther outside of the village. The big guard waved her arm at them and called out. They all made quick speed to meet her. "I found them," was all she said before turning and leading them away to the grassier western side of the mainstay.

"Something's wrong I think," the rarely perturbable guard said tightly. Several of them asked why, but she only shook her head and kept walking. Cho-chin led them up a grassy hill, where they could look down and see about thirty young women and girls all laying flat out on the ground as if struck.

Tai'gee's first thought was that they'd been attacked, and Shingari echoed it. "They've been murdered!"

They ran down right away but didn't find a single arrow. What they did find was a ring of women, all laying on their backs, eyes wide open and staring, their bodies twitching every now and then, uncontrollably. Some had thin streaks of blood dripping from their noses.

“Are they sick?”

Beckries and Shingari reached out to help, and Tai’gee stopped them just in time. “Don’t touch them! Don’t touch them – just leave them. They’re not dying.” Everyone stood up again, backed away, looked at her for explanation. “Xena told me about this – they’re in a trance. This is some kind of ceremony. We can’t touch them; if we move them we might kill them.”

“Are you joking?” Eponin scoffed. “Tai’gee, tell me that’s some kind of joke.” But Tai’gee shook her head.

“We can’t interrupt them.”

“This is incredible. They’re totally incapacitated – the entire village is laying here totally exposed. This is ridiculous! No Amazon would do such a thing!”

“Eponin calm down. We don’t know what they’re doing or why they’re doing it like this – maybe there’s a good reason. What we can do is make sure they stay safe and talk to them when they come out of whatever this is.” Tai’gee gave her main guard a stern look meant to keep her quiet. Which, it did – Eponin swallowed whatever else she was going to say, and turned around on her cane to stomp back up the hill.

“All of you stay here,” she growled out to the confused guards. “I’ll tell the rest of them to set up camp in this –”

“Eponin.”

“area,” she mumbled weakly, and stomped away back towards the mainstay.

Tai’gee turned heavily back to the circle of prostrates. They were dressed very differently from anything the Greeks would wear – these women were covered from head to toe in clothing and had armor plates of bone on their chests. In fact, bone looked like it was very important to their dress code. All of them had bone piercings, jewelry, one of them was wearing the skull and top jaw of a wolf on her head as a headdress. Tai’gee could only assume she was the leader of these... youths.

There was really no other way to describe them. Even ‘Wolfhead’ looked young – they didn’t have a single elder among them. Few of them even had the fullness of womanhood in their bodies; they were mostly saplings. As Tai’gee looked at their twitching bodies she tried to remember what Xena and Gabrielle had told her about this northern band of Amazons. It hadn’t been much; Xena always looked uncomfortable when they were a topic of conversation. What Tai’gee did remember the most clearly was her description of their limited number and the strange practices of rituals they commonly performed. “They’re very ... in tune with moving among alternate planes of existence.”

“There’s a lot more nature there than here,” Gabrielle added. “I mean, this place,” she said as she gestured to their bustling mainstay, “is Athens compared to their place. Here there’s stone work and farms, and a developed order and history. There, everything’s trees and grassland, wild nature all around, there’s nothing tame about any of it. Even the Northern Amazons.”

Well, so far Tai’gee couldn’t disagree with anything Gabrielle and Xena had said. These had to be the Northern Amazons, but the Greek Queen wasn’t sure she really wanted that to be the case. Shaking her head in disbelief, Tai’gee turned and followed Eponin back to their remaining caravan. The stalking guard was easy to catch up to, though Tai’gee guessed she wasn’t really trying to be uncatchable. “Ep,” she called, and, reluctantly, the crippled guard pulled up but didn’t turn around. “I know you’re disappointed –”

Eponin’s free hand sliced the air. “No! I’m not disappointed Tai’gee – I’m pissed off! We came all the way up here to seek help and protection from a bunch of stupid kids! They don’t even have the wherewithal to think of a single protection for themselves as they go ...do whatever in Tartarus they’re doing over there! Not even a dog here to bark.” Eponin swallowed because she was getting so worked up she was starting to spit. “Now, here we are, the remnants of one of the world’s most elite war powers to beg from the hands of ignorant, bungling children!”

“That’s right Eponin. We are. Because this one of the world’s most elite war powers couldn’t save its own land in order to be the ones being begged for help.” Tai’gee felt her jaw harden with her own rising anger. “They have land, we don’t, it’s as simple as that. We can only go where we’ll be accepted, and no one said this would be the end of the line for us. If they decide they don’t want us here, we’ll be moving on again. So you better think of that before you go storming back to the bulk of our sisters with tales of how ill-suited these girls are to be our salvation.”

Eponin was a perfect rage inside. She was grinding her cane so hard into the ground she’d drilled a couple inches into the hardpack in just the few minutes they’d been standing there. She rolled her eyes up to the sparsely blue sky, swallowed again, and apologized. “You’re right. I am disappointed. They just – they don’t appreciate what they have enough to protect it. We lost everything.”

Tai’gee put a friendly hand on her friend’s shoulder. “We can help them as much as they can help us,” Tai’gee said to her with soft assurance. “We can help them understand the price of freedom.”

Eponin had the grace to know she wouldn’t have anything nice to say about what they’d found by the time they made it back to the rest of the cavalcade, so she stayed behind Tai’gee and let her do the talking. “We have arrived!” Tai’gee congratulated all of them on their perseverance. Seema and Meica pushed their way up to the front, as they usually did, jumping up and down with questions.

“Do they have other kids?”

“Do they have dogs?”

“Is there a swimming pond?”

“Is there school?”

“When do we get to meet them?” they finished in unison.

“Girls. Step back from the Queen right now.” Dotra grabbed a daughter into each hand, unceremoniously, by their hair. They were excited, Tai’gee was glad they were excited. Before she realized she was doing it, Tai’gee’s face softened and her hand rubbed the curve of her belly.

“We arrived during an awkward time; they’re in the middle of a ceremony right now and can’t be disturbed. But I think for now we should set up our camp on the other side of these woods where the land was flatter. When their ceremony is complete then we’ll be able to have a proper meeting.”

There were more questions, though none of them were posed to the Queen directly; she could hear them being asked in general, see them in a sea of curious eyes. But everyone turned back to the wagons, smacked the horses to move, and their adopted dogs jumped and yipped after them. Several looked back, perhaps thinking Tai’gee wasn’t watching, and instead of seeing their questioning gaze, Tai’gee saw the vacant stares and twitching heads of their salvation. Her earlier fears were returning, or rather, had mutated into scarier fears. She was very afraid now that she’d made a mistake pulling them out of Greece. A very big, unforgivable, unfixable mistake.

But, Tai’gee told herself forcefully, she couldn’t afford to think like that – not yet. They’d just gotten here and she couldn’t jeopardize the beginning of a refuge they just had to have. To keep herself from thinking of all the things that could go unbearably wrong, Tai’gee went to help set up her own tent. It may be an honor to set the Queen’s tent, but just then it was also much needed stress relief. Actually, it was hugely refreshing to *do* something. She’d done so much administrative planning, prophesying, and cheerleading over the last months Tai’gee was sick of not *doing* something. She was mentally exhausted, and what had exhausted her most had been the suspicious, judgmental peeks from all the women who’d begged to repledge themselves to Artemis’ service, who Tai’gee had told remained virgin just as they were when they left the Amazon path, as they decided whether or not they approved of her pregnancy. Tai’gee hadn’t yet ruled through controversy, and experiencing this bit of drama made her wish she had the annals of other rulers to see how they weathered their own storms.

Once she dumped the contents of the vials, Tai’gee decided that she couldn’t let anyone else’s judgment into her mind. She accepted that she was no longer virgin, her freedom had been robbed from her the moment Mathus took her for his own pleasure, there was no choice for her in that. This pregnancy wasn’t really her choice either – sure, Tai’gee could have ended it, but Tai’gee was only half their lives, half their existence, they already had their own lines of energy twining around her, asking her for her blessing. Tai’gee didn’t really have a choice other than to give them that blessing, just as she had her Returnees – they all had their moment of doubt that

they could go forward with their own choice without her reminding them that they'd already made their decision, chosen what they wanted; for her to do or say anything to subvert them from the path they'd selected for their lives would be to rob them of their virginity.

Tai'gee smiled to herself as she pounded in the last bit of stake she was working on – it was profoundly satisfying – short lived, but satisfying. “Ah good – you're finally done with that. The Queen'll be pleased. Now, you need to start moving in her trunks. They're over there, and I can tell you've got energy to spare.” Eponin neatly snatched Tai'gee's mallet away and waved it at an unwieldy pile of crates, rugs... stuff. “Better get to it – it'll be getting dark soon.”

“Hey – I might not have been done with that you know!”

“I do know, actually. You forget who's been the primary overseer of setting your tent for the last five months.” Tai'gee rolled her eyes at the self congratulatory pride and snatched the mallet back.

“I'll have you know there was one more tent pole I saw right over th- Um, wait – where'd that other stake go?”

“Oh you mean this?”

“No, not your cane, my tent post.”

“The thing laying here, like this?...” Eponin hobbled over to the tent entrance and laid her cane down so the bottom was poking out and gave the young Queen a cocky grin. “I was taking a nap.”

After giving Eponin a playful shove, and calling over several helpers, Tai'gee set to work bringing in all of the things she hadn't gotten to unpack since Cresca. There weren't a lot of things she had still from her home back in Greece; mostly what constituted her furnishings were things Tai'gee'd bought and collected as they moved north. It was nice to finally be able to spread rugs over her entire floor. Most of the time they weren't stationary long enough for such comfort. It was a gamble settling in so much – the dark haired Queen was gambling that the Northern Amazons would wake up and welcome them to stay; they could wake up and demand the Greeks move on. Tai'gee wondered what she was prepared to do if they weren't wanted here. Her women were all doing the same as Tai'gee, settling in. From the morning they set out from Greece to this day had been almost a year of traveling. Cresca was a respite, they stayed there during the five months of winter rains before moving on again. Maridian was five months ago. Byzantium, three months ago. Kaija's departure, two months ago. Every footstep hit the ground with the purpose of finding haven with their northernmost tribe. If they said “leave” Tai'gee wondered what her Amazons' reaction would be: despondency, anger, defeat, would they want to fight and forcibly take over? Would Tai'gee lead them in that? She needed to talk to whoever was leading this tribe; their incapacity only made everything more awkward for all of them.

They'd gotten very good at pitching their tents. The entire camp was set up in a few hours. Families that didn't have tents had already found friends who did and were sharing home space. Rosa and Rickel had moved in together and given their spare tent to two other Yearies. Eponin hadn't really been napping in the Queen's tent, she'd been directing the construction of their annex. The fact that it had the general shape of the Greek mainstay made Tai'gee smile. Eponin had even left a sizeable space for an eventual building of a temple to Artemis.

Gently, wistfully Tai'gee unpacked crate after crate, eventually coming to Kaija's few things, mostly blankets and some keepsakes of Pi's. She'd left behind her armor; Tai'gee wished she hadn't but assumed the half-sphinx had her reasons. Holding the beautiful, heavy breastplate up Tai'gee smiled at her memories of Kaija wearing it.

The first time had been the most comical, but wearing armor wasn't a natural thing so Tai'gee was sure that everyone looked and felt pretty awkward moving with it on. Kaija had looked... strangled. "It's ok to put your arms down Kaij'," Tai'gee had laughed. "You're standing like you're getting hugged by a squid." Kaija had insisted her regular leathers, though many hides thick and very heavy even for a lot of men, was plenty. But when Kaija had been sparing and one of the kid's arrows had gone askew and struck through all plies of her leathers, Tai'gee had put her foot down and said Kaija had to get metal armor.

What Kaija had worn that first time wasn't what Tai'gee now held; that had been what was handy at the armory. But what Hepidius had made for Kaija with her profound skill and artistry, and the practice Kaija had gotten banging around in that first awkward set, made Kaija wear this new plating like a second skin. Even Kaija had smiled when she'd first put it on and said how nice it felt. With a last thoughtful smile, Tai'gee put Kaija's armor back into a trunk, along with the remainder of her clothes. Her circlet Tai'gee pulled out and put on – its thin elegance was all Kaija, and hadn't been nearly the struggle the armor had. Kaija wore a headband of leather to hold back her hair almost her entire life so replacing the leather with silver was mostly decorative. There was very little that Tai'gee had here that didn't have Kaija's smell or essence or touch on it, and surrounding herself with the last pieces of their life together and the many things they'd collected as they struggled north made completing arranging her tent alone very hard. Again Tai'gee found herself rubbing her belly; maybe looking for the two lives developing slowly inside her to console her loneliness.

Not that Tai'gee was really alone at all – Eponin had been a constant presence and reassurance since Kaija had left. Tai'gee couldn't say of herself that she was always particularly pleasant company, especially if she'd overheard yet another revived rumor about Kaija leaving her for Selah, or that Tai'gee had slept with her brother in Cresca and these children were incestuous. But Eponin, like Beckries, would try to shield her from as much of that idle chatter as she could, or pull her from the funk it would spawn if she saw her Queen sinking into it. Tai'gee appreciated Eponin's patience with her, and the elder warrior's way of reminding Tai'gee of her position and responsibilities that inspired rather than burdened her. She was easy company, and Tai'gee sorely needed that in the presence of her missing wife.

Tai'gee had hoped everyday that she would look up from their dusty trek and find Kaija loping along next to them like she'd never really been gone. Everyday Tai'gee'd hoped her quest was

over and she would catch up to them at any moment. So many times dark eyes had squinted into the trees thinking they'd seen a familiar silhouette keeping pace with them like a guardian shadow. Tai'gee's disappointment that they were all *just* shadows goes without saying. And each day her worry compounded; every now and then a profound despair would settle on her, just behind her eyes, when Tai'gee would re-realize she had no way to get in touch with Kaija, no news could pass between them, and it might be that way for the rest of her life. Even as she lay in peace and safety warm in her bed with a nurturing administrator by her side, an anxious chill worked through her body making her shiver.

“Cold?”

“No,” Tai'gee mumbled. “Just thinking.”

Ep hummed. Anything she might have said was interrupted by a knock at the tent door frame. Eponin called in the visitor.

“Queen Tai'gee,” bowed Blue-wren, “something's happening with the others. We think they're waking up.”

Shingari, Cho-chin, Beckries, Emelia, Drexel and Alcai all ringed the prostrate women. Their weapons were drawn, poised, they stood on their toes in anticipation. Tai'gee had told Blue-wren to bring Zupé over as well. “They might need some medicine.” As Tai'gee approached, Beckries nodded towards the woman they had considered to be the leader – Wolfhead. Her previously vacant, staring eyes were blinking dazedly. It didn't seem she was aware yet of the added observers, so the Greeks continued to wait quietly, watching as more of them started to blink and move.

First one then another made a ragged gasp for air as they came out of whatever trance they'd put themselves in. Wolfhead was first to sit up, breathing heavily. She wiped the blood from her nose and ran a shaking hand over her chest and stomach before seeing unfamiliar people standing over them. Tai'gee was sure they were quite a surprise. Wolfhead froze and as the rest of her tribe came to, looking to her to acknowledge their return, they registered her stricken face and looked around as well.

“Who are you?” Wolfhead managed at last.

“You're Gabrielle's tribe!” one of the others exclaimed.

‘Wolfhead’ got to her feet, wobbly but steadied quickly. “Gabrielle's? You're Greek Amazons?” She looked at Eponin who leaned heavily on her crutch, at the frail and sickly looking child healer. “What's happened?”

~

I hate ships. I hate sailing. I hate everything to do with Poseidon's realm, from the smell, to the endless monotony, to the fact that I spent most of the trip hanging over the side of the boat. The

arrhythmic breathing of the sea was thoroughly nauseating. I hated that I was trapped on this tiny, wooden thing, without a speck of earth in sight, there was nothing green, nothing living around us except vile, ogling men who occasionally pulled some equally vile, ogling fish out of the water. One particularly ugly man with a particularly ugly fish came hobbling over with a disgusting leer. I don't know what language he spoke – no one else seemed to speak Greek but the captain – but the language of lust and lechery is comprehensible no matter the words used.

Needless to say, given the motion of the ship, my homesickness, my despisal of these seamen, and that I had only managed to keep some water down and nothing else for the last two days, I did not appreciate the goon's advances.

“You will not have it for long if you don't get away from her.”

I was even less appreciative that it was Selah coming over to defend me. Fishman slushed off with a look at Selah like she was the asshole that wakes a guy up in the middle of a really good wet dream. I rolled my eyes – a big mistake, because it made the lurching of the boat much worse – and turned away from both of them. And I heaved. The men hovering behind us laughed and elbowed each other, said something condescending. I don't know if color is something a person can actually feel, but I could feel the mosaic of my face: dark around my eyes, red in the hollows of my cheek, green around my mouth, gray everywhere else. Leaning over the rail to watch the water go by gave me some relief, but really...land was going to be my only salvation.

Selah moved up to lean against the rail next to me. “He didn't say anything you haven't heard from other men, I'm sure. You're very beautiful. They think because they have a captive audience their chances are better.” I heard her give a shallow chuckle. I wasn't in the mood to share a laugh. “Sometimes the motion isn't so bad if you stay below decks.” I don't know how, but the word ‘motion’ sounded just...disgusting. “Hey, are you ok? I can –”

Before her hand moved more than a few inches there was a phht-duhng-Z-z-Z-z.

“Do. Not. Touch. Me.”

Low oohs hissed behind us with an undercurrent of awe. I felt oddly strengthened, steadied, getting to throw a knife. I hadn't used any of them for anything other than practice in a long time, and I had wanted to make myself clear to Selah for just as long. We weren't friends. We weren't companions. We weren't in this together. I left my knife in the railing, the handle waving back and forth, saying ‘No’ all by itself; I walked away, never looked at her. I was sick of everything, sick of being sick, sick of being uncomfortable all the time, sick of babysitting my enemy, sick of this journey and we hadn't even gotten to the country we were supposed to be going to. I swayed past the previously nickering men and found a new perch on the port side of the ship, away from Selah, away from the crewmen, just me and sea breeze and misery.

“This will not grow planted in a ship.”

The handle of my knife poked into the corner of my vision, and I pulled my heavy head up to follow the hand, arm, shoulder, neck, oddly pulled lips up to twinkling golden eyes split by a sun-slit pupil. With little energy I received my blade.

“Are you fighting?”

“I don’t like her,” I returned, tucking my head back down among the crooks of my arms.

“You do not trust her,” she said in a manner of correction.

“Lioness –”

“Kaija.”

“What?”

“You are Noki. I am Kaija.”

I sighed.

“You do not like using names?”

“No. I mean yeah, I do, that’s not it. It’s just she makes me so mad. I don’t like her.”

“You do not trust her,” Kaija said again. “That is different. You need to learn how to deal with her.”

This time I did turn to face Kaija. Given that she was supposed to be half cat, it was astounding to me that she didn’t look as ship-worn and ragged as I did. Weren’t cats supposed to hate water? But no, she stood next to me solid, steady, and absolutely beautiful. She was wearing her battle leathers again, but her hair she had managed to braid down into tight plaits with oil to keep them slick and shiny. She wore the Queen’s Circlet, and she wore it like a Queen. Even though she was about a foot shorter than me, Kaija always *felt* taller, bigger. The crewmen didn’t bother her like they bothered me and Selah, I think because they didn’t know what to make of the Lioness. That she was a beautiful female they all agreed, whether they wanted to or not, because their eyes always followed her, and their jaws went slack. But at some point they would realize while looking at her, her animalism would register and they would shudder and look away. If they met her gaze they would blanch. If she walked by they would slink away. They found it very hard to do their work when Kaija was around, so she stayed below deck most of the time.

The gold of her eyes was bright in the sunlight and she looked back at me with that unnerving stare of cats; I too felt a little ‘off’ meeting that stare. “That’s easy for you to say.”

“You think so?”

My cheeks flushed immediately. “N-no. I just mean you’ve got Rylah to help you with her.”

“Rylah can help you, too. There are things she can teach you. You need to learn what she has to teach.”

My own hair was braided in one long bolt, and thumped against my back like a heavy tail as I shook my head no. Kaija looked disappointed. “You do not like her either?”

“I just – why do we need to trust either of them? Why are we doing this for them? Look what they’ve gotten us into.”

“Are you saying you had no choice?”

“Of course I had a choice. But Selah had choices too, and she’s chosen to be untrustworthy. *She*,” I said with a stab of my finger back at Selah, “attacked you. *She* attacked the Queen. Why are we trying to help her?”

Something very tired settled into Kaija’s face. Her eyes flinched. “This will not be help for her.”

“Lioness?”

“Kaija.”

Champion though she may be, she could also be supremely frustrating. I turned away from her and back to the ocean. I tried to imagine the white caps as bowing grasses. Back at our mainstay I had an older friend who had told me the way to get handy with knives was to practice with grass stalks. “When you can move a stalk of grass through your fingers as easily as a stick your knives will be like tickling the wind.” I believed everything she told me, no matter what it was, and I practiced with grass every day. I would get so frustrated, just like this now with Kaija; the grass was so light, so flimsy, it would bend between my fingers limply, and I had no stability to work with. The other kids started calling me Green Tips because the chlorophyll would dye my hands, and because I was always dropping the grass I looked clumsy. I can’t say that I ever got good flicking any reeds through my fingers, weaving perhaps, but nothing like my friend led me to believe I could do. I also can’t say that trying to for years didn’t make me a pretty damn good handler. I found a home in the control of knives, directing their speed, their paths, the depth of their penetration, slice, stab, trace, knick, carve, cut. I had the control. Here I had none.

“That makes you nervous, what you have just thought.”

“Nervous,” I sniffed with an unconvincing smile.

“Anxious.”

“No, why,” I tried again, but my nonchalance sounded much the same as my previous attempt.

“Because it smells the same as fear.” A thick lip raised and a very sharp canine glistened in the reflected light of Apollo. Golden eyes flexed, hardened, and wide nostrils flared to grab more of a scent that attracted their attention. My throat moved to swallow, but my mouth was too dry to provide anything to make it an easy motion.

“Y-you can really sm-ell fear. What does it smell like?”

Her lip raised higher and I felt a very strange, unfamiliar feeling of uncertainty, like I’d lost track of what we were talking about but if I said the wrong thing that would be bad for me. Her lip raised higher. “Exciting.”

My seasickness was gone – a new queasiness had replaced it fully. My throat didn’t work at all this time and I breathed shallowly through my parted lips. Then, something else flexed in Kaija’s expression and I could see that the raise of her lip was softer than I thought – she was smiling. I was being teased. “So you do have a sense of humor.” I tucked my knife into the sheath tied to my inner forearm and crossed my arms to look on my teaser. “You’re funny. Very funny,” I laughed.

Kaija laughed too and finally turned to join me in facing the sea. “There is nothing to fear in learning new things. Ignorance may prove very dangerous for you. It will be good if you study with Rylah.”

Finally I agreed. Kaija wasn’t unlike my older friend back in Greece; I believed everything she said, too.

My lesson did not, however, last long. Kaija looked at me evenly as I came barreling up the stairs from the sleeping cabin. “Monster! Demon! Magic! Witch!” I shoved men out of my way as I fled towards Kaija’s safety. Her eyes asked “what?”, but she didn’t say anything. “She – there were – she broke a rainbow. She *broke* it!” Kaija looked at me like the significance of that revelation was entirely too small to be recognizable. She blinked. “She – she...” I blinked back. “You don’t expect me to go back down there. I’m not going back.” Kaija continued to wait. The sunbright deck got hotter as she looked at me. “She waved her arms around and the world exploded. She’s cursed or evil or something.”

“She learned from my Pawpaw.”

Ahw shit. She couldn’t’ve told me this before I’d insulted her father’s student? “Kaija...”

The Lioness’ glittering gaze looked far away, and later I decided she was trying to think of what her father might have said to give her comfort if she’d seen something that had scared her. “She is safe, and I am here. Go back.”

“Kaija...” I whined again. She didn’t repeat herself, just kept on waiting. Of course I relented; cats have a way of making people do that. I moved back to the dark stair-ladder that disappeared into the hull of the ship. I took one step slowly, then another, and I did not like how the light of day dimmed with each descending rung.

Battling my insecurities over Rylah and what she had to teach, my impatience with Selah's existence, and my constant and ever-present seasickness did the trick of filling in the rest of my time until – finally – we reached land. The thin strip of dark gray tentatively materializing on the horizon stretched and grew and so did the relief it inspired in my heart. Unfortunately, it also made very clear just how much the ship was tossing about in the shrinking depths of the sea; long, exaggerated waves up, deep sinking troughs down, and after I satisfied myself that the man who'd called out that land had been sighted wasn't lying, away I retreated to the dark, directionless underbelly of the ship.

The look on Selah's face when we arrived in her country was a look I longed to express. Her eyes glistened with joy, her chin lifted, her smile was wide with relief and excitement. "It's been so long," she breathed. "My Afrika."

The salt air was heavy around us. The port was busy but uncrowded. There were vibrant colors everywhere, contrasting beautifully with the dark skin of the Afrikans. Color, culture, spice engulfed us with much the same flare as it had in Byzantium. It was exciting, I was excited, but I couldn't deny my accompanying apprehension. This strange land was farther than any place I had ever known, anything I could have ever dreamed up, and the only similarities I saw with what I knew was that the humans of this land walked like we did. They ate and breathed and spoke; anything else about this place was an exotic unknown.

I couldn't tell what Kaija's reaction to this place was. Her face bore her usual lack of expression. I heard she froze in Byzantium and I watched her for any signs of panic or distress but saw none. She looked... focused, I decided. Rylah was behind us as we offboarded, quiet, enigmatic as always. I suppose I was the only one who bothered looking plainly relieved to be off that damn ship.

We had sold everything before leaving Someplace, including our horses. Selah said having horses in her country would be an invitation to danger – "There are animals there that would hunt them for sport – and where they are, we are." The prospect of walking for months on end did not appeal to me in the least, but I shouldered my pack without complaint and followed the others out of this new port town.

Describing this country would take more pages than I have. As soon as we cleared the shanty houses at the edge of the port, wild plain spread before us unhindered. I thought I was looking ahead days into the future, the land stretched so far. Heat radiated from the baked earth in rippling waves, throwing the future out of all proportion.

"We're walking across that," I exclaimed.

I liked even less that Selah answered me with a bright smile. "And it gets more beautiful the farther you go."

I couldn't believe it. I looked at Kaija again. She studied the plain in silence. Then, unannounced, she started off. I wanted to cry. There was nothing in front of us but uncertainty

and no one seemed uncomfortable with that except me. Selah extended her long gait and followed after Kaija. After a long moment I used to regain my composure, I started off as well. After only a few steps I looked back over my shoulder at Rylah who stood calmly in place.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No,” she answered plainly.

“But... but why not? Why did you come all this way just to stay here?”

At this point I was really getting tired of people answering me with smiles. When Rylah’s lips turned upward a live streak of irritation shot through me. Her calm, even voice did nothing to soothe it.

“The same reason you have come all this way and continue. We have purposes, and I have fulfilled mine.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t worry. Just remember to practice. Your tests will come soon enough, but I believe you will be ready.”

“Elder, what are you talking about? Why would you abandon us now?”

The way she looked at me I now know was with a great deal of compassion. At the time I thought it was a teasing dismissal and I grew angry. “Fine then. Run away. If we fail I’ll make sure you pay for it!”

“If you fail, we will all pay for it. Keep control of your passions young one; they, like the mind benders, can mislead you.”

I threw my hands at her in rejection and reshouldered my pack. I didn’t even bother to look back as I jogged out into the plains to catch up to my dwindling group.

III

Everyone sat in council together in the main space of the Northern village – a trampled openness of hard packed earth stomped into submission by bare and booted feet after decades of dancing and ceremonies. The Greeks were the largest group obviously, with current citizenship totaling two-hundred and thirty-seven.

“And more are coming?”

“More may come,” Tai’gee answered the leader, Wolfhead, Cyanne. “We left a trail of symbology only an Amazon would be able to decipher and follow. If any decided to join us we didn’t want them to be bereft.”

“Of course...” The blonde woman, Cyanne, Queen of the Northern people, was not happy to see the Greeks; a lot of her people weren’t happy to see them. Which was understandable – *‘our being here meant many things, and none of these things was pleasant.’* The most unpleasant –

“Xena and Gabrielle are dead? Both of them?”

Tai’gee nodded gravely, not wanting to really give any sort of answer. The Greeks bent their heads in mourning and respect. The Northern women looked around, confusion, disbelief, grief in their eyes.

“How?” Cyanne pressed. “How could this have happened?”

“We don’t know. All we could gather was that the wagon they were riding in went over a cliff. We sent scouts to see the wreckage...” Ep shook her head. “They couldn’t have survived.”

“Some people that lived nearby said there was a bunch of explosions – they couldn’t see what was going on because they hid in their house, but it sounded like they were ambushed.”

“And you couldn’t get their bodies back?”

Blue-wren answered that one. “By the time we found the wreckage, tides had washed in and out maybe a dozen times. There was hardly any of the wagon even left. Someone had already taken their bodies.”

“No one’s boasted having them – no reward collection, bounty, display, nothing... they’ve disappeared,” Beckries added.

One of the Northern women, a young woman barely into womanhood, let tears spill freely over her cheeks. She had a high-pitched, dreamy voice that could make her come off as particularly flakey. “But what about Eve?”

It was the Greeks’ turn to look around confused. “Who’s Eve?” asked Tai’gee.

“What do you mean? Eve – Xena’s daughter. She was just a baby...”

Tai’gee and Eponin shared a look. Beckries’ face narrowed in incomprehension. “Baby? Xena had a child?”

“Oh yes,” the same waif answered. “She and Gabrielle brought her here to make her an Amazon Princess.”

Again all the Greeks looked at each other, unquestionably disbelieving. Tai’gee was floored. Beckries was indignant; the Greek Queen could feel the guard’s offense radiating from her as she tensed up next to her. Tai’gee would admit, if this was true, she was somewhat offended, too. *‘Why would they come all the way up here to initiate Gabrielle’s daughter rather than come to*

us – her own people?’ The question sat heavily in the eyes of the Greek women and Tai’gee decided no good would come to leave it unaddressed. *‘Seeds of jealousy would not grow anything fruitful for us.’*

“We’re all Amazons,” she said steadily and felt her women direct themselves to her words. “Gabrielle was a Queen everywhere she went and if her and Xena’s daughter was inducted here it is the same as being inducted at the Capitol.”

The Northern women looked startled; they shifted uncomfortably. Cyanne looked stiffly at the foreigners surrounding her, as though it hadn’t occurred to her they should feel slighted by their participation in such an important event – and the Greek’s subsequent complete exclusion.

“We didn’t even know she’d had a child!” Ep growled later after they had returned to Tai’gee’s tent and tried to absorb this new information.

“Ep, we were roaming all over Greece at the time, war torn and unstable – they would have been fools to bring a baby into that.”

She shook her head, not wanting to accept that truth, but she couldn’t deny it either. The elder warrior leaned on her cane, which had started to creak with its constant use. When she shifted her posture it let out a small squeak and Tai’gee knew Eponin was going to change the subject.

“A baby... a daughter. By who? Who would Xena let... close to her... like that?”

Tai’gee laid back on her bed, rubbed her overextended stomach in thought. It mayn’t have been a choice for her, like it hadn’t been for the Queen, but the idea of Xena being forcibly impregnated didn’t sit well with Tai’gee. “Hercules,” she suggested. “We all know they get along well. She liked men as much as women you know.”

The Queen laughed at Ep’s expression of distaste.

“Did you ever want children, Ep?” she asked idly.

Eponin’s answer was succinct. “No,” and for some reason Tai’gee was disappointed. She rubbed her belly more, feeling the babies shift inside. Ep extended a little more. “I never wanted to bear children. I wouldn’t have minded being a parent. I had a great time helping Ephiny with Xenan.”

Tai’gee smiled slightly. She hadn’t gotten to meet Xenan. Ephiny’s only child was a son sired by a centaur. She’d had him raised mostly in the centaur village that was nearest to Amazon land. That village had pretty much been abandoned by the time Ephiny died and sending out an informant to find Xenan and tell him of his mother’s death had been difficult – as difficult as following up on the rumors of Xena and Gabrielle’s deaths. No one wanted to bear the truth. They also needed all of their warriors as their population was cut and cut again. Tai’gee shivered.

“Thinking again?” Eponin had moved to sit on the edge of the bed, letting her friend think in peace. At Tai’gee’s nod she gave her a patronizing look. “You know, maybe you shouldn’t think so much about things that make you shiver – people will start thinking you’ve got ants in your underclothes.”

That struck the pregnant woman as really funny and she let out a bolt of laughter. ‘Oh, laughing feels so good – I haven’t laughed in ages. I think mostly I’m tired of being tense.’ And it seemed the babies were, too; they began moving. “Ep! Feel! They’re kicking!”

Tentatively Eponin rested a hand on Tai’gee’s stomach, but withdrew it immediately when she tisked at her. “You can’t feel anything through all that,” the Queen said indicating her new and thick clothes. “Give me your hand.” Before Ep could protest, Tai’gee grabbed her hand and pulled it under her clothes, letting it rest just over the bottom curve of her stomach. Eponin’s hand was warm and fine and her fingers twitched against Tai’gee’s stretched skin. Obliging one of the babies gave a particularly strong kick just then and if Tai’gee hadn’t still been holding Eponin’s wrist the guard probably would have ripped Tai’gee’s clothes by jerking her hand back in surprise.

“Wow!” she breathed, and a flush crept up her dark face.

Dark, happy eyebrows waggled. “Pretty strong, huh?”

“Zeus yeah –” Another hefty kick made her pause and a wide grin spread across her face. They shared a moment of wondrous glee before Ep withdrew her hand. For that moment everything felt not only like it would be alright, but promising as well.

~

After leaving the port, we walked all morning. The heat escalated so that I couldn’t tell if my own body wasn’t a walking flame. I desperately wanted to take my clothes off but Selah insisted I keep them on. “They are longer than you are used to but your skin is not prepared for the sun here. You will burn without them.”

“I’m burning within them,” I groaned uncomfortably. At some point – I assume it was midday or nearly so – we came to a place where Selah felt safe to stop. I didn’t bother checking for myself before collapsing into the shade provided by a small hill. I immediately fell asleep; in fact, I was so far beyond exhaustion dying seemed like a peaceful respite. The problem with going to sleep like that is that you inevitably wake up totally disoriented and usually in the middle of the night.

Never in my life had I been afraid of the dark. I won’t even claim any shame for admitting I was scared – anyone who would laugh is a fool I won’t acknowledge. What I awoke to was a sound – a terrifying howl of a sort – well, I don’t know how to sort it. It was its own sort. The night was alive with sounds and they weren’t pleasant pond noises.

As I came to, I realized I'd been covered by my blanket and stretched out fully by a sizeable fire. Selah had her dark length folded into a comfortable cross leg before the blaze, a large spear clasped in her hands. She noticed me waking up and shifted her eyes from the fire to me. Blinking a few times before sitting up, I looked around and resettled my blanket around me. Considering how hot it was during the day, it was pretty cold at night. "Where's Kaija?" I rasped.

"The simba is ranging," she answered loudly. I blinked at her, my still sleepy mind wondering if she thought the fire would make her harder to hear. "Seems she gets somewhat restless at night."

"Restless? You mean she's not here?" 'Goodbye sleep-fog.' I stood up, not caring about the cold anymore. The darkness seemed absolute – well, when I looked out to the horizon. The sky itself was so vast and so littered with stars it was impossible to find any of the constellations I was familiar with. There was a particularly large smear of stars stretching the length of the sky like a belt and discerning one single point of light would have been like seeing one grain of sand on a beach. All around us were noises, sounds – animals, animals I couldn't begin to imagine the shape of, though I could well imagine all of their intents. My eyes grew quite round when some particularly shrill sound pierced the air around us and I fastened on Selah. "It's just us here?"

Selah nodded. The lance she held pointed straight to the sky, secured by both her hands. "The fire is no guarantee of our safety. Mostly the animals don't like it, but if any are hungry they will not care." She rested her head against the staff and studied the ground at its base.

I sat back down, slowly, tensely, pushing my blanket aside so I could keep my hands free, and pulled my knives from their sheaths. All around us things chattered and shrieked – it was awful; it sounded like things – people – babies were being tortured and murdered. "Do you... know what is making those noises?"

"Mostly hyenas," the dark woman answered without looking up. "Not at all fortunate for us. They are vicious, relentless, and ugly."

"Ugly?"

"Quite." She lifted her head a little then and the firelight made her eyes gleam. "Of course that only matters if they catch you. It's no good getting ripped apart by things that look like they should be in hell."

"Hell?"

"The Underworld. Demons. Skulking demons."

My palms grew clammy with every word and I felt my mouth go to an unquenchable dryness. When a voice spoke to us from the darkness I thought I would jump straight to Olympus and into Zeus' lap.

“There is no need to scare her. There is nothing close to us enough for worry.”

Kaija emerged from the night like a shade – only part of her was visible in the firelight, the rest was shadows and darkness. The most of her visible were glowing eyes, green-orange as the fire shown from them like in no one else’s. The glowing was only a brief flash as she blinked and turned her head towards me, and it occurred to me that perhaps she couldn’t see when the light caught her at certain angles. ‘If all the light coming to her eyes is being reflected out of them... that could be dangerous... we could all be in great danger in one moment of her blindness.’ I tried to swallow my sudden fear, my throat worked convulsively over it but nothing changed, other than to crowd it all together in one great lump. Through that great lump I could feel Kaija’s gaze lingering on me, but I could not bring myself to meet it. If she could smell fear, which I in no way doubted, then I should have been of great rank to her, even at our distance.

Which was why it was a surprise to me that she would override a rank offense in favor of offering me comfort. She placed a large hand on my head, rubbing the full curve of her hand back along the grain of my hair, still pulled tight by my ponytail. My defense cracked under the pressure of that knowing touch, and became a full fracture when the pressure of that hand was removed as Kaija lifted it, only to be placed again at the front of my hairline to stroke back a second time. The lump dissolved into a painful pipe just large enough for me to squeeze an oversized sob through, trailing my shame behind in barbed tendrils.

I reached my arm out to circle around one of her thick legs, leaned my head against her knee, sought respite in that limb like a shy child.

“You are overtired,” Kaija’s deep voice rumbled down through air and muscle alike – I could hear her tones through the thigh my ear pressed against. “You need sleep.”

I sniffed. “All the world sleeps but these ghouls and us – our only other likeness is in roaming the night in fear of death.”

Muscle shifted beneath my cheek as Kaija lowered herself to squat before me. Her face was serene in the moonlight, a point of quiet amidst the horrendous shrieking by the culprits of the night. I could no longer see her eyes now that her back was to the fire, but I didn’t need to see them to be able to see the intensity with which they studied me. My body betrayed my panic and trepidation, even while I tried desperately to clamp down on my unruly whimpering, I could feel myself jerking with the effort to restrain myself. I was supremely jealous of Kaija’s composure, and the evenness of her voice while soothing to my nerves irritated my spider-cracked pride.

“I told you fear could be exciting, now I will tell you why.” She paused, I guess for my approval and continued at my nod. “Fear is an indicator of value – it is exciting to know of something what it values. If you come to no longer value your life...I will be worried.”

“Amazon warriors aren’t supposed to fear death,” I mumbled.

“If I was worried about that being some kind of fault I would not have allowed you to come.”

She reached up to pat my cheek, hesitating just before touching me. I sorely wanted the contact – I wasted no time leaning into it, lowering my head to press the top of it against her chest. I felt much safer as she wrapped her arms around me.

Suddenly I became aware of Selah sitting behind Kaija, opposite the fire and felt uncomfortable with her watching our interaction. I raised my head, keeping my eyes closed while I wiped away my tears with the back of my hand – I was still very tightly clutching my knives. When I did finally open them, I shifted to see Selah sitting as she was when I awoke – watching quietly. Her eyes were focused on our campfire but I wasn't convinced that was where her attention actually was. Bringing my gaze back to Kaija I found her looking at me with some humor. "What?"

"Your knives will be pressed into your hands like claws if you do not loosen your grip." She smiled and the sharp canines that were an easy giveaway to her parentage flashed at me. I just sniffed a laugh.

"I'll be glad to go ho..." A new wave of sadness swept away the rest of my sentence – when we left, if we left this place, we wouldn't actually be returning anywhere. Greece was no longer ours and we were pretty much moving into whatever the Northern Amazons would allow us to have until we figured out what to do with ourselves. I hadn't any friends among our tribe – I wouldn't even be reuniting to anyone when we did meet back up with our people. A vast loneliness settled over me as I swallowed missing my sister – my only family back at the Capitol. I was all there was left of me in the world and there was nothing – no one – to claim me or for me to claim to solidify my existence now. That knowledge made me feel even smaller sitting in this vast, rolling plain in the night. I sighed. My eyes grew heavy from my crying and the late hour; exhaustion makes it much easier to deal with such depressing thoughts. Finding myself lying practically in Kaija's lap with a heavy arm draped down across me helped as well. 'She's half sphinx... At least I'm not the only being alone in the world,' I thought before paying a visit to Morpheus' world.

IV

The land they had come to was, in a word, harsh. Wind rolled over and through the hills and vales with little mercy and winter seemed to be at the tails of each breeze. The Northern Amazon village weather seemed to carry a guarded winter nip constantly. Greece would yet be warm, sultry even, at this time of year. None of the Capitol Amazons were used to the constant cold and Tai'gee feared illness and despair may yet take their tolls on them. They had been lucky so far in avoiding suffrage of those sorts, but Tai'gee could sense it coming just as an arthritic old man knew the rains.

Seti was first to get sick – all the children were, except, somehow, Zupé. That child, Tai'gee thought, would forever be a mystery. Everyone else suffered from deep, long, hacking coughs, terrible pain in their joints and muscles, fevers Tai'gee feared would literally roast them to death. Poor Zupé's illness came in not knowing what to do for them – "I don't know the plants here, my Queen; I don't know what's ailing them to even begin to put together a medicine." She was very hard on herself and stayed up long hours to work with the Northern Shamanesses to unravel the illness. The best they could do in the end was brew teas to help with the discomfort and gather

snow from the light falls that had already occurred, and use the ice flakes to keep their sweltering bodies cool. The illness quickly passed to the rest of the Greeks – all but three of the adults suffered at some point; Tai’gee avoided it by quarantine. Only Northern Amazons attended her, as they seemed immune to the epidemic, for fear of endangering her late pregnancy. Eponin stayed with her in her tent and also escaped contamination, though boredom and general restlessness almost did her in. Mépol was the other, which is also a wonder considering the intimate care she provided for her fellow Yearies.

“We should have made your tent bigger,” Eponin grouched. “Hades, I mean there’s really not enough room in here for just the two of us – how in Tartarus is it supposed to be enough for you and twins?”

“It’ll be fine. I promise the place will totally open up once I drop the baby weight – my belly’s throwing everything out of proportion.”

Ep snorted at the offhand humor then ground her cane into the floor irritably. In a huff she forced herself from her chair. “I gotta pee.”

“You just went.” Tai’gee wanted to laugh but she knew the cranky guard well enough to know it would only have compounded her irritation.

“Yeah well there’s nothing to do but sit and drink and piss the time away. So... I’ve sat –” she yanked up a cup, carelessly slopping liquid onto the floor while she took a hasty gulp – “I’ve drunk, and now I’m going to piss!”

Tai’gee did laugh at that, despite her resolve not to. “You should be the one who’s pregnant – you’re much better at the erratic, moody temper than I am... and you even go to the bushes a lot more!”

Ep wheeled from the heavy tent flap just before ducking to go out and shot an angry glare – or at least it would have been if Tai’gee hadn’t ruined her moment by completely dissolving into giggles. “Oh Ep, you know it’s true,” she laughed. “Just look at you!”

Finally her good friend smiled – an endearing, self deprecating grin. With a sheepish shrug she flopped back down into her chair. “Ah Taig’, I’m just so bored. I know our sisters are out there suffering, but it’s just criminal to keep an Amazon indoors for this long. How can you stand it?”

“I’m pregnant – I don’t want to move.”

“It’s getting close to time for that to change, huh?”

Tai’gee bit her lip. She could feel her babies shifting, moving, coming more alive. She jumped to imagine them born, skipping the inevitable and necessary process that would bring them to be. The Northern Amazons had a birth-maid and the Greeks had five or six mothers in their own tribe, but Tai’gee’s mind wasn’t really eased much by those facts. There was no guarantee she or her children or any combination thereof would make it through the labor alive.

“I’m tired of being pregnant...” she tendered but left the rest unsaid. Even warm and safe inside her tent with her best friend, voicing her concerns felt like it would invite in some cold wind or beast or jinx.

There was a knock at the entrance. “It’s Cyanne,” the Northern Queen called and entered when beckoned.

“Your people don’t look good,” she said without preamble. The blonde woman was almost as tall as any of the Greeks, but with the armor draped over her heavy clothing she also bore the hulk of a man. Her face was thin and narrow and long – Tai’gee wondered if she was meant to be as tall as she was or if she’d been pulled into shape. An image of a starving hawk came to mind, though her blue eyes weren’t those of any bird Tai’gee’d ever seen. The Greek Queen offered her some food and drink but she politely declined.

“And what do you propose we do about it Cyanne,” Eponin sniped. “We’ve done everything we’ve thought to do.”

The edges of Cyanne’s almond shaped eyes narrowed and she seemed to be reconsidering why she came. She turned her head towards the badgering warrior but kept her eyes on the Queen. “There maybe something we can try – the trances sometimes show us ways we didn’t know – or if the illness is actually some evil or curse we must work against.”

Ep’s hackles rose immediately. “Do you think we’ve brought a curse with us? That we’re evil?” Eponin wasn’t usually so aggressive, but her restless confinement had her spoiling for a fight.

“Eponin, calm down. I’m sure the Queen doesn’t mean anything like that.”

“No, of course not. It’s just that sometimes we go in search of answers and find people have been possessed – but at least we know what we’re working against; we know if it’s a biological battle or perhaps a spiritual one.”

Tai’gee nodded and rubbed her belly in thought. “These trances, what do they entail?”

Fair, blonde hair glimmered in the firelight as the woman shifted to sit. She and Tai’gee were equals in position, both being Queens of the Nation, and it appeared Cyanne had just remembered that. Artemis had separated each tribe to stand as its own rather than have a High Queen at the center of all the tribes, and government focused at the Capitol, from where the Greeks had come. Cyanne stood in deference to that old relationship, and Tai’gee had to say that while her reign was never as High Queen, it was a taste of that power and rank – it was awesome and intimidating. But if that hierarchy were still in place that would have made every position clearer, made all of the uncomfortable Amazons’ ranks and appointments more organized. Tai’gee thought – she *knew* there was tension between herself and the Queen Cyanne because they didn’t know how to treat each other: was Tai’gee beneath her, a citizen while on her land, or did she remain a Queen in her own right, with the Greek refugees an entourage, passing through? Cyanne seemed to want that answer but Tai’gee didn’t know if she could provide it. She wasn’t

sure herself. At the moment, she saw herself and her citizens as Capitol Amazons, travelers, not seeking to settle here – separate entities, separate queendoms.

“The trances are journeys of the spirit – we move through time, past, future, or stay in this present and travel to other lands, maybe even other realms.”

“Who controls where you go? And how you get back? How safe is this,” Eponin interjected. Spirit talks made her nervous and suspicious – the promise of answers alone would not be enough to sway her recalcitrance. Her dark eyes became like sparkling coals, eager for the smallest flame to send her into an incendiary rejection.

“It’s not really a matter of control,” Cyanne explained, her deep voice rich with patience. Tai’gee gathered that to be leader of the Northern tribe was to be the appointed expert on their spiritual endeavors. Talking of soul journeys was probably a much more comfortable place of conversation for Cyanne because that was the realm she made it her business to know. She seemed much more at ease to extend herself into Eponin’s insecurities on the subject. “It’s a matter of opening one’s self to experiences beyond this physical present.”

Eponin frowned as she pointed out that that didn’t explain how the thing worked. Tai’gee lifted an eyebrow in agreement, and added that she wasn’t particularly sold on the idea either. “Xena and Gabrielle told me some stories of the Shamaness Alti – her trespasses don’t make me all that eager to bare my soul, as it were. Not to mention that I’ve made my own journeys into mindscapes – they aren’t playgrounds.” Thinking back to Byzantium, and to being crushed in Kaija’s mind while Selah anchored her made Tai’gee wince.

“Alti’s gone, I assure you. Xena destroyed her herself. And I wouldn’t really suggest you partake in the trances in your condition, Queen Tai’gee... you seem to understand the unpredictability of the situation.” Her knowing gaze was solemn. “It would really be more for those who are sick. Their battle.”

“I wouldn’t dare send my citizens into that sort of thing alone.” Worry and indignation made Tai’gee’s heart race. She struggled to push herself up to a sitting position, just managing to right herself before Ep was able to hobble over and assist. A regal hand waved her off. “That is a serious effort and they are ill.”

“And they are Amazons who would love the chance to fight for themselves.” The Queen Cyanne wasn’t angry or belittling with that addendum, just point of fact. And right. Tai’gee sighed and looked away.

Heavy rugs and tapestries hung liberally all around the Queen’s newly erected tent. Beyond the insulation the tapestries provided, beyond decoration, they were woven historical scrolls. In vivid, colorful pictures and detailed symbolism stories, legends, histories were retold of great warriors, Queens, the roles of the Gods in Amazon life, some superb mistakes, but above all the very nature of who the Amazons were was threaded through each one with care and clarity. After taking in these testaments of culture, Tai’gee’s eyes fell back on Eponin who knelt in front of her while she thought. Tai’gee found confirmation in Eponin’s expression. “Locking an

Amazon up is criminal; not giving her the chance to fight is unforgivable,” that dark haired Queen said quietly, looking at the warrior. Eponin’s lips tightened, she bowed her head and nodded.

Cyanne stood up, her fur-lined clothing swinging heavily as she moved. She didn’t disturb the peace between Queen and warrior as she left the confines of the tent. Ep continued to kneel and Tai’gee continued to stare at her dark head. Two-hundred and thirty some odd sick souls were in her hands to protect – her decision felt as grave as choosing to go to war; more serious than voting to leave Greece.

“This is the last of us, Ep,” she whispered, and could hear the fear in her own voice. “If I’m wrong – if the trances overtake them somehow... I could destroy us.” Dark eyes pricked with the coming tears.

Eponin finally raised her head and, seeing the Queen’s glassy eyes, scooted over on her knees to hug her around her swollen middle, laying her ear against the bulging stomach. It was an intimate position, and Tai’gee’s hand immediately went to caress Eponin’s head as it pressed against her belly. “Then we’ll go down fighting,” she said. “She’s right, if this were anything else, we’d vote to do something about it, whatever we could do.” Ep paused a moment; Tai’gee could feel her eyelid blink as it moved against her clothes. “I’ll go with them.”

Reflexively Tai’gee tightened her hold in something much akin to wild panic. “Ep, no!”

“I have to go,” she insisted. “I’m the only one who can.”

“But I need you! There’s no telling how long the trances will last... You... I – there’s...”

“...no one else who can go,” she repeated firmly and looked up with solid resolve set in all the lines of her face. “We cannot send them all to this thing with no leadership. If you weren’t pregnant you know you would be here insisting *you* go.”

“But I am pregnant, and you’re the only one I wa-” Tai’gee bit herself, hard; she could taste the blood on her tongue. Eponin was her closest, most trusted friend; Tai’gee looked to her for support, she confided in her, and generally felt safe to let her know when she was afraid and what scared her. But with this, suddenly Tai’gee didn’t want Eponin to know just how afraid she was. But Eponin was a smart old girl, and filled in the blanks all on her own. She leaned over farther, and gave the young Queen a significant hug.

“I will come back,” she said softly, “and I will be here to help you with the babies.” She offered a crooked grin. “With diapers and teething and even housebreaking.”

Tai’gee sniffed a laugh. “Housebreaking? They aren’t dogs Ep!”

“No? Well, all the better then – I won’t have to change any waste boxes.” She sobered a little, her brown eyes flexing to a seriousness they rarely expressed. “*I will* come back.”

There was a quick knock at the door and the dreamy, squeaky Northern girl poked her head into the tent before she was answered.

“Is the Consort joining us for the ritual?”

Tai’gee looked at the girl blankly at first, then her heart pounded a hard beat of hope before sinking, realizing the waif wasn’t implying Kaija had finally returned. She could feel her throat working to swallow the sad sob that wanted so desperately to be freed. When she looked to Eponin, the guard’s first expression was startled, then a frozen hardness. “I’m not the Consort,” she said without breaking their eye contact. “Leave us.” From the corner of her eye Tai’gee saw the girl’s head disappear.

“You miss her,” Ep said with concern. It was too much, it was more than she could take and Tai’gee’s defenses crumbled before her like the inadequate sand castles they were. Ep knelt back on her heels, leaving her to her grief.

“I miss her so much,” she sobbed into her hands. “Oh Ep, if I could just talk to her for five minutes, just one – if I could just see her face –” *Our familiar posture of leaning our foreheads together sprang to my mind and a new wailing overtook me. I’d never known such longing – and it was for such simple things, small intimacies we shared, unbeknownst to anyone else – that would have gone unnoticed and meant entirely nothing if given to anyone else. But her smell, the soft fuzz on her cheeks, the way she nuzzled me with the ridge of bone just over her right temple and purred when I massaged the curve of bone behind her left ear, the purr in her voice as she greeted me with “Hello wife,” the studious way she gazed at small things that caught her attention: all were elements that made the substance of my world. Without Kaija in my life I felt as if I was decomposing, not rotting necessarily, but breaking down as an iron thing would rust, becoming hard and stiff in some places, fragile and brittle in others, eroding, my chemical bonds weakening as my elements slowly bled out into the universe. Knowing she loved me was no longer enough, just as knowing the fountain existed no longer sated the one who’d drunk of its waters – I needed to experience her love, in whatever form that water might take: I’d sit naked in a frost mist if each molecule tingling against my skin were her touch.*

As Tai’gee noisily wiped her face and looked at Ep, who remained kneeling before her, the young Queen was grateful the warrior hadn’t moved to touch or hold her – the contrast between the two of their embraces would have been a profanity. Ep was a good woman, tender and caring, but somehow she knew when not to let that tenderness and caring reach into the soft places that belonged to Kaija. Eponin just waited – and when Tai’gee’s energy said to her she could proceed, Ep pushed herself to stand, placed a war-calloused hand on Tai’gee’s cheek and softly kissed the top of her head. She didn’t look up as she gathered what she needed to go to whatever ritual the Northern women had prepared. Tai’gee didn’t wish her goodbye or good luck. She made no move to acknowledge Eponin was leaving. She was simply too tired; crying like that was exhausting, and she didn’t even have the energy to lay herself down. Sometime after she’d fallen asleep sitting up, Tai’gee felt her body pitch to the side, landing heavily amongst her bed clothes, and she quickly returned to unconsciousness.

“Baobab.”

“Baobab.”

“Zebra.”

“Zebra.”

“Good.”

“They look like horses, but sound more like donkeys – well, maybe hoarse donkeys.”

“Horse donkeys? Is that not a mule?”

“No – I mean, well yes a horse mated with a donkey will make a mule, but I mean hoarse as in how your voice will sound if you’ve strained your throat.” I listened again to the strange striped beast. “Maybe if you could cross a horse’s whinny with a donkey’s bray that might sound like that... zebra.”

Selah was right; the further we traveled the more inviting the land became. But it was strange to me that something as common as grass could still look so foreign. The soil beneath me was no color I had ever seen. Even things as mundane as rocks were exotic. Given those simplicities, it’s a wonder my brain hadn’t exploded when I saw much more complex things, like the giant, silent giraffe that stepped from behind a scrawny but equally tall acacia tree. When we traveled along some stretches of forestry we came across ants carrying cuts of leaves – they looked like miniscule sailing ships following the river ways of branches. Great monkeys screamed at us with more violence than I’d heard even during our wars – but they ruined the effect by turning their bright red butts to us – really, how could one remain intimidated by a thing that looked like it had already gotten its ass kicked?

“Make no mistake,” Selah warned, “the mandrill is a fierce and deadly thing. He has teeth not unlike the hippo, surprisingly long, surprisingly sharp. They rip things apart with little finesse.”

The snakes were more deadly here, the spiders more deadly, the flowers more deadly – absolutely everything, it seemed, could kill us, directly or indirectly. ‘And our guide loves it here? She thinks it’s beautiful?’ I was baffled – why anyone would want to return to a land and environment that regarded humans as inadequate, insignificant, and disposable was beyond me. Humans had no control here – no dominance. Why would Selah want to live in a place where everything was against her? Because that was exactly what she wanted, weight was added to her lunacy in my mind. My teachers said there wasn’t much of a line separating bravery from foolishness – I begged to differ. When I looked at Selah striding confidently across this man-eating hell and then to Kaija doing the same, I thought there was a very distinct line between them.

“Ah!” Selah pulled up short, literally leaving her foot stranded in mid-air. I would have assumed she’d finally stepped on something sharp, which wouldn’t have surprised me given she refused to wear boots: just an invitation to such a wound. But she was smiling, and waved us over to see whatever was under her step. I swore if it was another maggot and beetle riddled pile of dung I would choke her.

It wasn’t even close to dung. It was a massive, black, wiggling trail; something was tramping across the land in such amounts it was carving a groove into the dirt. I bent closer to see and came face to face with the largest pair of jaw-claws I’d ever seen on a thing. “They’re ants!” I exclaimed once I realized what I was looking at. Huge ants, actually.

“They are moving their colony. They do this once a moon.” The dark woman turned dark eyes to me. “They eat meat. They’ll kill a thing,” she said darkly. “We must be careful when we sleep tonight.”

‘Great, even the ants are deadly.’ “We have to be careful when we sleep every night,” I replied pointedly. “I would like a night of peace for a change.”

Selah drew her lips together in a sad smile. “This is not a land of peace.”

“No,” I said looking back at the massive pinchers poised protectively over the roadway of streaming insects. “I can see that.”

As we started traveling again, I began sneaking looks at Selah. She really was a stunning woman – as the sun lit Kaija’s bronze skin with a golden glow, hers it caressed with a blue sheen. Her long and limber body easily led eyes from one limb to another along intriguing, sinuous muscle. She was like a greyhound stretched to human proportions, and I wondered if that much body could move as fast. She certainly had no lack of stamina, though I often wondered if that wasn’t just because her impossibly long gait meant she had to do only half the work. That seemed wholly unfair to me, considering we were there for her benefit.

“Not to be a whiney kid or anything, but are we anywhere near wherever it is we’re going yet?”

The slowly descending sun was coming to blaze as a monstrous ball of magma in the late afternoon, and the horizon seemed more river than earth and sky as it shimmered and shifted just underneath it. Once again we’d be stopping for the night in the absolute middle of absolutely nowhere, nothing for food, fire or shelter as far as I could see. During our weeks of seemingly aimless trekking we had yet to come across a single other human being – or even a hint that humanity existed on this continent, other than ourselves of course. My greatest fear at this point was to ‘arrive’ at whatever destination Selah had chosen, pronounce us “there!,” and look around confusedly wondering where everyone was, leaving us to find out we’d really only been tailing after her grand delusion. Now, while I had every doubt about the reality of this woman’s claims, I had absolutely no doubt as to what we’d seen, passed, and mercifully been left alone by as we moved across this land. If I used all my luck surviving so far only to come to exposing a lie, I was going to be an extremely angry Amazon.

“Unfortunately no,” Selah replied without looking at me. “We have a long way to go still.”

“It would have been so much faster if we could have ridden,” I moaned.

Selah just shrugged. I knew it was impractical: most nights we were hard pressed to find water for ourselves and had to drink from our skins. We were constantly surrounded by some predatory beast, and there wasn't substantial amounts of anything horses could have eaten. But reason didn't change the fact that I was tired of walking, bored out of my mind and, quite frankly, lonely.

Selah and I didn't talk much. Her 'Plants and Animals of Afrika' lesson was probably the most conversation we had exchanged on the entire journey. Mostly we walked in silence. I admit I spent a lot of time watching my feet move over the earth, not really caring to watch the scenery go by. Had I been home I would have caught Tartarus for not being alert and aware of my surroundings, and I should have been ashamed when Selah would interrupt my reveries to direct my attention to one thing or other. But it appeared that apathy and I made comfortable traveling companions.

In the beginning of our travels Kaija and I spent some time learning the new tracks of the new animals, and getting excited about finding tracks from familiar animals. We worked together and I will say that was probably the most fun I had during this mission. I enjoyed making friends with Kaija – and I say making friends to mean that we seemed to be moving out of the restricted teacher-student relationship we'd always had before. One night as we peeked through some thin branches Kaija surprised me by asking, in a low whisper, what I wanted to do once we got back to our people.

“What do you mean? What caste do I want to join?” I whispered back. At her nod I bit my lip then said I didn't know. “I wouldn't have finished my school lessons for another year if the Capitol hadn't collapsed. I haven't really thought about it. I never really liked the idea of joining the military. I always thought it was really exciting when a Trader would come to the mainstay. Maybe that...”

“You are a good scout.”

I looked at her with surprise; she'd never given me a compliment before. Then I considered her suggestion. I did really enjoy learning from Kaija, but I didn't necessarily like scouting itself. It was more a useful skill, not something I wanted to make a life's purpose out of; and being a vested scout would require I stay in our new village. Perhaps I would have liked that if my sister was still alive, but without her I felt rootless. Truth be told, besides the sailing, I rather liked moving about in the world – there's so much outside of Greece, so much to explore and witness and investigate; the idea of village life chaffed me. But I wouldn't have to consider any of that seriously for a long time, given how long it had taken us to get this far – perhaps I would have my fill of travels once all of this was over. I smiled. “Well, if I'm such a good scout, why are we sitting here chattering like nightbirds? Aren't we supposed to be waiting patiently in silence?”

“Yes. But there is nothing here for us to hunt, so we have nothing to do but talk,” she whispered back.

That got a slow look from me and then a loud laugh. We’d been crouched in that thicket for at least an hour!

When Selah called a halt for our most current day, I immediately dropped my gear and looked around for Kaija. She didn’t really stay near us as we traveled. She walked around alone, on the periphery of the circle that would have made her ‘with us.’ She didn’t talk at all. I was disappointed in her isolation – she was my only connection to my civilization, and we basically had no connection. Every now and then she would bring us some prey she’d caught, leave it to us to prepare, but she would even take her share away to eat. She slept in the same manner, away from us, and nothing at all felt good about that. I wouldn’t consider myself a very chatty or needy person, but I wasn’t an emotional and intellectual hermit either.

I tried to remind myself that Selah had many, many things she could teach me – I didn’t have to be an intellectual hermit if I would just pay attention to what she was doing. At that very moment she was managing to find kindling where I assumed there was nothing around to use in making a campfire. But I couldn’t focus that much of my interest in her, because I didn’t trust her enough. Rylah, Eponin, the Queen all had warned me against Selah and because I didn’t know how close was too close I had to keep my curiosity at a distance. So, I went to try to engage Kaija.

There was only a slim slice of moon that night, and it had already spent most of its journey during the day. It lay lazily on its back as it sat at its peak in the early evening sky. Kaija sat immersed in the faint moonlight, the light from our campfire barely touching her. She had returned to wearing what I frequently saw her wear in our home village: tight, light hide pants and a tight halter top of the same material. Her massive bronze arms glowed white in the moonlight, its soft hue following every curve and crevice of muscle. The Circlet of the Queen ringed her forehead securely and the glint of starlight and moonlight off its silver etchings made it look bejeweled. She sat kind of hunched, and the closer I got to her the more I could feel an energy radiating from her, like a smoldering fire.

“Are your knives sharp young Noki?” she asked me flatly.

‘Young?’ “Honorable Consort, you can hardly be much older than me, and yes, they’re sharp.” I waited a moment, watched her while she stared at the expanse before us. There was a melancholia in her energy that was easily transferred to my own heart. I could feel myself frowning as I tried to think of what I could say next. ‘Young Noki,’ – she made me feel young – adolescent, tongue-tied, awkward. “Have we offended you Lioness? Why don’t you walk with us or...” ‘talk to me anymore’?

“No,” was all she said, never moving or turning to face me.

“Then why do you stay away from us?”

She didn't answer. I could see her ears twitching as she noticed various sounds from the savannah. I was standing close enough to see darkness under her eyes, and it registered that she was probably getting very little sleep. "Are you staying up all night to watch us?"

She was long in her reply, low and without energy. "There is much going on in this world that needs to be noticed, even if it cannot be engaged."

'What in Tartarus did *that* mean?' I decided to leave that one alone for the moment and pushed it to the back of my mind for my subconscious to mull over. I figured if I was going to get any sort of conversation out of her I'd have to be very simple in my statements and questions – although my previous question seemed pretty simple to me. "Are you feeling alright Kaija?"

"Have you been practicing the lessons Rylah taught you?"

Again I was left flatfooted – her questions came from nowhere, and the lack of acknowledgment to anything I was asking was making me angry. Really, is it too much to ask for a simple yes or no? I wondered if she spoke to the Queen this way. Of course, the fact that I hadn't been practicing didn't help my irritation any either, and apparently my hesitation was long enough to answer her.

"You need to practice. We should be coming to challenge soon."

"But – but Selah just said we're nowhere near her village."

"Perhaps not – but that does not mean we will not meet trouble beforehand. You need to be prepared."

Scolded, I dropped my eyes. Her mechanical detachment left me feeling very raw and unwanted. When I looked at her that night I didn't see the friend I thought I was making, but rather the Lioness all over again, regal and remote. I felt very defeated and returned to my place by the fire without any further comment.

Selah was still up as well, and I didn't appreciate her bemused expression. "Something funny?" I snapped.

Her dark eyes twinkled at me across our fire. "I don't think you would appreciate my insight."

"If you're not going to share the joke, then don't laugh," I growled testily.

"It's not a joke. Just an observation."

"And what's that?"

"I think she may be looking for her kin."

It wasn't what she wanted to say, I just knew it, and she could see that I knew it. There was something else but she wasn't going to give it to me. That was fine, we could chase this line of discussion for a while. "What do you mean?"

"Her kin – the simbas. We are roaming their world now."

"She's not the kin of lions," I defended. "Her father was a sphinx."

"Primarily a simba with the head of a human, is that not right?" she proposed with arrogance.

"A creature of Athena, not of this world," I countered. "She didn't take a lion from Afrika and create the sphinxes." I was getting hot in my irritation. Selah had that distinct skill to make my temper very short. Although, given the dismissal Kaija had just given me, I don't know why I was so insistent on refuting whatever the blue woman had to say. "She created the sphinx with a giant cat's body, the head of a human and the wings of... well, she gave them wings; I don't think they were like any other thing in this world."

"Made it your business to know the work of the gods, have you?" There was certain taunting in her voice, and my blood pressure shot up at the tone.

"I make it my business to know what I'm talking about before I speak. You obviously just like to hear whatever comes out of your mouth."

She gave me a half smile. "I think you like to know about things that interest you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" My demand made my voice rise to just under a yell.

"Do you not find the Simba interesting," she asked me calmly.

"You know what – shut up. You talk too damn much."

I could feel my face creasing in my crossness. I jerked my knives from their sheaths and twirled them around my fingers to give myself something to concentrate on while I calmed down. 'Calm down? Why am I even upset?' I ground my teeth. I drove one of my knives into the ground, intending to use the other to whittle down a piece of wood and I winced, feeling the blade strike a rock as it slid into the earth. 'Now I'll have to sharpen them all over again.' I gave Selah a petulantly dirty look, and found she still had that irritating half smile and a forced knowing expression in her eyes. All over again I felt a hot streak of dislike shoot out to my fingers – and I was glad I'd let the other dagger go because I'm sure I would have flicked the blade as the feeling commanded. And we had been doing so well in our civility these last few weeks. She hadn't pushed me to make the statement I made on the ship again. I wondered if this was her own restlessness showing. But I quickly dismissed that consideration – we were in her country, on her mission, she had no right to be restless.

Looking back to where I'd left Kaija, I blew a hard breath. She was gone and my annoyance doubled. 'You know – maybe I'll just go for a walk too, damnit. There's nothing saying I have

to hang around her like she's my babysitter.' Grabbing my daggers, I stalked off into the night, Selah's calls to return following me as I left. 'When I damn well please,' I shot back at her mentally.

The world spread out before me in a massive black flat. We'd walked across this savannah for days – weeks actually now. Phenomenal herds of animals roamed this grassland: antelope, – which looked the most familiar to me – gazelle, zebra, some huge brown cow-looking animal Selah called wildebeest. "They will circle around their young when threatened but that's not the biggest danger they pose. Stampede. We'll know if it's coming because the ground would shake us to our knees, but once there we'd be at the mercy of their hooves. Any of them, springbok, elephant..." I had yet to see an elephant – the blue woman had tried to act out some lumbering giant, swinging her arm in front of her nose and I'd laughed so hard I'd nearly wet myself. Off in the distance we saw a group of something two-legged, large, round, brown. "Ostrich. Very crabby bird. Very fast. Can't fly but if they kick you, you will. Good meat."

I shook my head. So far we hadn't killed anything to eat more grand than a common deer, and that had been weeks before when there was foliage about. We pretty much relied on Kaija for that part of our diet, and frankly I think she had no inclination to try to take down any one of these giant creatures. Everything we'd seen so far seemed, at the smallest, to be as large as her father would have been – the Lioness was strong but when I considered her compact frame standing in front of one of those wildebeests I shivered. When I asked how Selah and her people went about hunting, she gave me a toothy grin and said, "now maybe you see why we need our men."

'Men'... I'd only ever known one good man and that was Hercules – not that I'd ever met him, but his legend was as much a part of my education as Xena's. Any other men I'd actually experienced were easily classified as scum, and, if not for their seed, expendable. I smiled to myself – 'perhaps that's why they're the ones chasing after these monsters while the women stay well away from the danger.'

'Danger. Shit.' My senses tingled up and down my body. Our campfire was a far off bright orange spot and I was surrounded by barely lit prairie. Something other than me had rustled the knee-high grass and I *knew* I was being watched. Another tingle and I corrected myself as pinpricks of cold sweat spiked across my forehead – *stalked*.

I gripped my knives so hard I could feel my fingers going numb around them. My ears began to ring in an oversensitized strain to hear something else – *anything* else. My heart hammered, and I'm sure I gave away everything about myself considering how hard and fast I was breathing. 'Ah Tartarus Noki – you're so stupid. Gods – I don't even know where *it* is.' My mouth went suddenly dry and my stomach turned in the instant I decided to make a run for it. And in the same instant I was knocked from my feet with such force the solidity of the impact probably made me look like a flung rag doll. My arms, legs and head all stayed in the place where I'd been standing while something heavy pushed my body mercilessly to the ground. Of course I screamed bloody murder and immediately began struggling and stabbing for my very life. Somewhere in my own ruckus I heard my name yelled and I screamed again. "Kaija! Kaija help me!"

Then everything caught up to my hyperactive brain like the sound from a far away crash.

“Noki! Duck!”

The impact.

Something tall rising behind me.

Something smaller and roaring jumping at me.

“Kaija! Kaija help me!”

“Stop!”

“Stop it girl, you’re killing her!”

‘Oh gods... what have I done?’

V

Tai’gee decided she would never understand why the gods felt the need to crowd particular moments of mortals’ lives with several soul-stretching events at one time. Mortals have decades to endure strife and surely the gods could get as much, if not more, pleasure in the long term if they let humans suffer one thing at a time rather than pounding them all at once.

When Eponin left to join the trances it began snowing in earnest. The flakes were thick and fat, and had she not been dealing with the world’s worry, Tai’gee may have really enjoyed her first real experience of the stuff. Certainly her Amazons would have too had they been healthy. Well, maybe not Turtle. But the plump, lazy flakes were only serene and inspiring for the first hour or so before the wind picked up – and once that happened it was like listening to Cerberus cry for its dinner; a deep, moaning and vicious howl that left the body and soul exposed and numb. Looking up through the vent hole she could see the sky was a dark, morose thing, the fat flakes falling in darker gray spots looked like little demon fairies floating down at first – they didn’t look like snow until they’d almost hit the ground. Once the wind picked up there wasn’t much of anything she could see, the grays blurred together into one ominous slur. Tai’gee grew skeptical her tent would remain in tact; she might be laid open wide to the winter demons for their will and sport.

A very furry head poked in suddenly and outright scared her. While they had no bears on Greek Amazon land, they had certainly traveled to a land that did. Tai’gee had nothing at hand to defend herself and so resolved to stare at the thing and scream till it left or ate her. Or at least she was planning to scream, until a solid slab of skin was tugged off to reveal pink lips. This was unexpected. So she continued staring.

“Noble Queen?”

‘It speaks... like a human... huh... Could be Artemis, she often comes as a bear. If I wasn’t so fat I’d bow...’

The bear took a step forward, head tilting to the side. “Noble Queen?”

‘I could be hallucinating... dreaming... crazy...’

“Queen Tai’gee, are you alright?”

Finally the fur-laden beast was close enough for Tai’gee to register a very human posture, eyes, shape of face, and the unfamiliar accent of one of the Northern Amazons. “Oh! Yes, yes, I’m fine.”

Past all the mufflers and hats and scarves Tai’gee could see the bear wasn’t quite sure about her profession of okayness. “I’m fine,” she said more firmly. “And what’s with all the unannounced entries?”

The bundle’s head dipped and something suspiciously apologetic got mumbled about in the furs. “But I didn’t think you’d hear me above the wind,” she said louder. Tai’gee waved her off and she continued. “Cyanne would like you to move into one of our buildings. We have some spares – she doesn’t think the tents are safe in this weather.”

Tai’gee gave the rattling and waving walls of her mobile home a dubious glance. She believed Cyanne’s fears were quite just, and would agree, but she didn’t want to offend her tent by making that agreement out loud; it may well take it as a dare and collapse just out of spite. The bear attendant indicated there were others waiting outside who would help move as much of her belongings as possible.

“But what about the others? We’re all in tents,” the Greek Queen pointed out.

“Everyone else is in the community lodge for the trance. They’ve all been moved and everything’s underway. We should hurry,” she finished in a rush. Unceremoniously she yanked back the tent flap and waved in snow and helpers, who began grabbing just about everything. Tai’gee grabbed several personal items herself before overeager hands made the attempt: her saddle bags, her marriage blanket, and Kaija’s circlet.

“Sipi can lead you to your lodge, Queen Tai’gee,” the first bear grunted, as she hefted up on a small chest full of clothes and robes. Another girl stepped over, holding out a thickly gloved arm. Amid all the bustle, Tai’gee looked around again, a quick wave of sadness washing over her.

“Please, bring as much as you can but do not endanger yourselves,” she said to them. “Things are... we need people more.” They all paused from their – for lack of a better word – ransacking. They hadn’t seemed to consider the sacrifices the Greeks had made in fleeing their southern homes: a lot of them hadn’t had a chance to make one last run through to grab precious

keepsakes or favorite furniture, heirlooms and gifts and every other amenity had been left behind in order to save their own lives – because that was what was more important, Amazon life. When the Northerners started their collection again, they were a little more considerate, more careful, more deliberate.

Outside it was nearly impossible to see even whether it was day or night or if something stood boldly in front of them no more than two feet away. Tai'gee yelled through her own coat and scarves into her guide's covered ear that perhaps they should stay in the tent until the storm died down. The new bear shook her head no, but Tai'gee couldn't see it – she only felt the muscles moving along her back that would control such a vigorous motion.

“Come!” Sipi shouted and tucked Tai'gee's whole arm under hers and pulled them into the blizzard.

The total obscurity and dislocation this storm encircled them in reminded her of Gabrielle's story of the time Artemis had swept her to some field near Olympus: no up or down, no left or right, no way to be sure if she was standing, floating, alive or dead. The difference between that directionlessness and this one however was that in this place, Tai'gee was being lashed mercilessly with ice, scalded by freezing wind, robbed of breath and encased with real fear, while Gabrielle described a gentle, indefinable nothingness. Tai'gee thought being thrust into any form of anonymity unsettling, though, whether by god or human.

Tai'gee was sure she would have lost them along that fairly short trip, lost and killed them, perhaps never to be found. Sipi, however, was very clever in her leading – she had tied a rope to her destination and led it to her tent. As they moved along its length Tai'gee could feel the remainder slide, discarded, past her leg. The Greek Queen could feel a smile within herself at the ingenuity. That also explained the off looks from those cleaning out her former abode – they were probably content to let her think them heroes, forcing themselves blindly though mounting snow and driving wind in effort to save her paltry belongings. ‘Well, they'd still be heroes; I won't begrudge them their smart strategy.’

When the toe of her boot struck a wooden doorjamb, her entire body flooded with desperate relief. Her next step brought her foot firmly onto solid wood flooring, and her final push brought an instant clearing of vision, followed by an equally immediate watering of eyes. A large hearth blazed merrily in the middle of the room, warm, bright. The wind behind them made an odd contrast as it continued to try to freeze and petrify their backsides while the fire worked to thaw and soften their fronts. Tai'gee moved in more fully, happily, eager to be free of the winter terror outside.

This lodge was rather large – actually quite large – and round, a yurt, the Northern Amazons called it. The conical structure seemed odd to her at first, but again, the clever strategy made her smile – no flat surfaces for the wind to purchase against, no matter from which direction it chose to attack. The space was spare, a large pile of dry logs the only supply in the whole room. The hearth was also a circle in the room, rounded rocks laid up to knee height in a neat ring, hooks worked into the crevices to hold pots, pans and utensils.

“It’ll look much better once all of your things are here,” Sipi offered tentatively, mistaking Tai’gee’s elongated observation for disappointment, disapproval perhaps.

“It’s wonderful Sipi – thank you.” The Queen’s smile was large and genuine and the guide’s face relaxed.

“We were using this one for storage,” she said with an awkward attempt to make conversation. “Usually storms like this don’t happen so soon. It’s pretty big – we thought you know... that you’d need the space.”

Tai’gee smiled again and rubbed her large belly in acknowledgement. “Where... in the village, where are we?”

“Oh! Well, we’re nearest the end where you all came in, in the woods next to where your tents are. The community lodge is directly in front of us. That’s where the rest of you are. Except for your young healer and that other woman – the ones that aren’t sick.”

“I doubt you have enough solid space for all of us...”

Sipi bit a corner of her lip. “No... but it won’t matter really until everyone comes out of the trances and gets well. By that time I’m sure Cyanne will have figured something out.”

As she talked, Sipi removed clothing and furs – the heat becoming too uncomfortable to stay so heavily wrapped. The first thing she removed was a thick, round fur hat, and a wave of bright red hair tumbled from under its enclosure. The removal of her scarf revealed an absurdly liberal spray of red freckles, and the combination made her green eyes stand out like emeralds – or at least what Tai’gee imagined emeralds would look like; she’d never actually seen one. She’d also never seen truly red hair before.

“How is it your hair is the color it is? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Sipi blushed and raised a hand to twirl a burnished lock. Lifting a shoulder shyly she said she didn’t know. “My sister’s is brown. Just happened that way.”

She didn’t get to say more as one after another of the moving crew came trudging into the house, hauling absolutely everything. “Where do you want things?” the first bear asked.

“Yeah, we can help you get set up if you’d like,” the waif added excitedly.

‘Well, I guess they see waiting on a Queen as an honor too...’

“We don’t have anything else to do.”

‘Or not...’

With tapestries newly hung, bed reassembled and blanketed, floor brightened and cushioned with rugs, Tai'gee had to say she was truly pleased with the yurt. The shape and structure was nothing like her old home in the Capitol, and it wasn't decorated in the same way at home, but it was solid and friendly. There was plenty of space for a crib, which another bear brought in during all the moving.

"Where on earth did that come from?" she asked as two more helpers wrestled it into place.

"Xena and Gabrielle left it here when they last left," one grunted with a final shove to settle it. Though she wasn't sweating, she wiped at her brow. "We were gonna set you up at their place but it's much farther away. Besides, it'd probably work better to house a bunch of people."

"Like a barrack. Good idea," Tai'gee complimented.

"Yeah... Cyanne's full of ideas," the girl added stiffly. "She's a good Queen."

The others made sounds of agreement and Tai'gee felt a surge of protective rejection pound at her for several long moments. She rubbed her belly in discomfort. What was this undercurrent? What was really being said here? Maybe they were worried her moving to this more permanent structure would be followed by her trying to take over here as well.

"It's good that you're so pleased with your leadership," she offered tentatively. "I hope my own citizens feel the same about me."

That seemed to smooth the waves a little. The waif stepped up again. "Now that you're all moved in, are you going to participate more in our ceremonies? Cyanne's big into our Traditions Revival."

"Traditions Revival?" A dark eyebrow raised cautiously.

"Yeah," Sipi jumped in. "Gabrielle said we should make an effort to make a strong connection with our history and regain our traditions. Cyanne's done a lot of work researching everything."

The Greek smiled. "Gabrielle did always like ceremonies, especially the dancing ones."

Someone snorted, then some choking giggles.

"What?"

"Nothing," Sipi said.

Alright... Tai'gee let them have their inside joke. "Could we go to the trances? I'd like to check on my sisters."

"I don't think that would be wise," said a dour voice from the doorway. Cyanne stepped in. "They are still sick and feverish – the risk of transmission to you is still very high. I came to let

you know everything's underway and going well." She looked around the newly arranged living space. "Looks like things are well here, too."

"Yes," agreed Tai'gee with a tight nod. "Your sisters were very helpful, very efficient. Your sisters were just –"

"– saying we should go," one of them cut in. They all hurriedly bumped and bumped their way out of the truncated door, ducking into the blizzard without a moment's hesitation or look back.

The Queens watched them go in silence, then turned to face each other. Tension grew between them and as Tai'gee studied the blonde... well, she was hardly a woman yet – though the lines borne of worry and the weight of leadership etched her face, they were etched on a face still holding the essence of childhood. Her expressions were premature, too old for her body and made her look sour more than serious, bitter more than stately. Still... they needed to talk and it looked like Tai'gee was going to have to get it started. She lifted her hand towards the door. "I think they're a little worried about me moving in."

Suspicious hazel eyes narrowed, but the guest remained quiet. She wasn't going to make this an easy talk, which just stunk frankly. There was nothing more Tai'gee wanted at the moment than to lay down with a nice warm tea and go over her list of baby names again. So, to get to that end she decided to cut to the chase.

"You must know Cyanne, I'm not here to usurp your queendom."

She lifted a shoulder. "S'happened before, there's no reason for it not to happen again."

"I find that hard to imagine. Your people seem quite loyal to you. They were just telling me how they like your ideas and leadership."

"I heard what they said," she answered point-of-fact. "And I heard how they said it. They don't think I'm a good Queen, or at least not as good as you and Gabrielle would be."

"What are you trying to say – that Gabrielle took your throne? She wouldn't do that." Tai'gee folded her arms, which in her thinner state would have bared her shoulders more and made her look commanding – or so she always thought. In her current state, however, it only looked like she was looking for a convenient place to rest them – 'oh look, how about here? Isn't that comfy?'

"She didn't take it before they voted her in. We had to initiate her into our tribe so she could pass her rite of caste on to Eve. After that –" her lip twisted with disdain "–they were all so taken with having Xena and Gabrielle here they jumped at the idea of making her Queen. She wasn't exactly opposed to the idea either." She gave the Greek a solid look of disapproval as well. "You're the High Queen and have natural lordship over me – don't think I don't see the farce of letting me keep my position."

Ambition was still a new motivation for Tai'gee. It wasn't something she saw in herself or much in her sisters, and is really one of those drives most easily recognized in someone outside of one's immediate circles. She wasn't motivated to seek the caste of Queen, nor to secure it for her daughter or daughters, nor to expand her rule over wide and vast lands by force or fame. But there were of course people in the world who were interested in those very proposals – who relished power, who desired authority, control and command. Before Tai'gee was one such young woman, ready for the reins of royalty, at least in her own mind, and most eager to get a firm hold on those reins because, as yet, there was none in her tribe otherwise suited for the position. Tai'gee was Queen over a much larger, diverse and powerful region, and frankly, much more qualified and capable – the threat from the big Greek must waft to the Northerner's nose like rotting eggs, sour, repugnant and undeniable.

“I am not High Queen. Artemis broke the regions into separate queendoms years ago at the last Gathering of the Nation. Did She not let you know that? You and I are Queens in our own rights, and I do not seek to depose you.”

Cyanne's look was ill and frank and petulant... another indication of her youth and immaturity. Tai'gee was getting tired of it – it made me feel even older. “But you and your tribe are moving in – you outnumber us ten to one. You don't really think we will both keep rule over this place do you?”

She had a point. Maintaining a dichotomy of the two regions in such close space would be... well, ludicrous if not impossible, and would be a ripe breeding ground for prejudice and contention. Beckries had already intimated her distaste for their constant ceremonies and rituals, and Tai'gee'd heard many commentaries on how “short, small and unimpressive this tribe was.” In truth, they did come off as a wholly unorganized, wild band of teenagers – youth making its stab at adulthood with no real seat of elder knowledge or guidance. One had to give them their dues for dedication and ferocity, but Tai'gee saw nothing remarkable in them as a society – and she wasn't about to bow out of her rite of caste in deference to a half-wild, ambitious youngster with issues of authority.

“We'll have to see what we can work out. We're collaborators, not enemies,” Tai'gee said carefully. She didn't want to commit to anything right now – not without Eponin, at least, to consult. And Kaija – although she could well imagine what Kaija would say. The half-sphinx had no patience for weakness, and honestly she would have taken one look at this conglomeration, taken one look at Cyanne, and razored the government of the two tribes into place with one Queen – being Tai'gee – and everyone else falling into line accordingly. Cyanne's role she would leave to Tai'gee to decide, but Kaija would most likely be on constant watch for some treachery or dissent from Cyanne if she were given a role in council.

The fact that Tai'gee could well guess her wife's input gave her some comfort with the situation and her position, and she straightened her pregnant self, giving her an even larger advantage of height over Cyanne. The blonde was cowed, and she knew it – what's more is she knew *Tai'gee* knew it, and she turned sharply to leave Tai'gee's new home, closing the door solidly after her.

Alone now in her much larger space, Tai'gee had peace of mind to think over what she liked. She preferred not to think of anything really – she was tired of thinking. She was worried about Eponin – she was worried about how the warrior was faring in the world of spirit and mindscapes, but more importantly about her being cloistered in a room of two hundred other sick people. The elder warrior wasn't ill before she went in and Tai'gee would really hate for her to fall ill during that whole thing. Neat teeth gleamed in a fire-lit smile despite the worry – the smaller warrior was a pain to endure with cabin fever, Tai'gee didn't want to deal with the monstrosity she would become while actually being sick!

Leaning over to pick some tinder from her neatly stacked woodpile, Tai'gee added a few rough logs to her currently small fire. The stone ring around her hearth was warm and felt nice to sit on. She brought up a kettle with snow melt to heat for her tea and began staring at the flames while she waited.

This was comfortable; the most comfortable Tai'gee had been in moons. She could only be happier with her wife with her, doing whatever in this new space. It was strange to her though that Tai'gee couldn't really picture Kaija in here. She could imagine Kaija sitting on the bed off to her side, but it didn't feel to her a right fitting. Neither did pretending Kaija was finishing rearranging their belongings, sharpening her weapons, tending to their home here.

In this region, for many moons, Kaija would be housebound – and one thing Kaija was not, above *all* else, was domestic. Even while she recovered from a month long coma and illness she practically ransacked her sanctuary for boredom and expenditure of repressed energy. Kaija was not a being to be confined or restricted, even for her own safety or convenience. She liked the option of coming indoors, but fully resented a requirement. This winter weather would be just such a requirement. Greek winters were certainly cooler than the summers, but included rain, not snow, and really only those of weak constitutions would have sincerely suffered through them. Kaija was hardly that. But sleeping outside in a mildly cold rain was one thing – she wouldn't be able to do that in the snow.

All over again Tai'gee became sad in missing her, not being able to discuss these things with her. Tai'gee could make herself sick wondering what Kaija was doing now, how she was and where, but she had long resolved not to allow herself to dissolve into that torment. She only had the trust and hope and faith that Kaija would make it back here, and they could then deal with winter and snow and the trials of the indoors and qualms of leadership. Till then, there was hot tea.

~

It appeared that I hadn't done as much damage as I thought. None of it all really makes sense, but the result of my tantrum induced drama was that our camp was packed and we were all moving across the night-darkened savannah at top speed.

“We cannot stay here,” Kaija said breathily as she pulled herself off of my terror-frozen body.
“Selah –”

“It is dead. The smell of blood will bring many.”

And with that Kaija limped off towards our camp, Selah hauled me to my feet, we packed, and we departed.

Watching Kaija move in the daylight gave no indication of what she'd endured overnight. I could see the holes in her tunic where my daggers had stabbed through, there were trails of blood dripping down her back like embroidery. Yet she moved as though there was never an injury inflicted – not so much as a scratch or splinter or a fine hair yanked from its pore. As the morning sun began to rise, so did my courage to overstep my embarrassment and shame and fear. Kaija walked fairly far ahead of Selah and me, and, in our relative privacy, I whispered “what happened?”

“You will find that in this world – while much is dangerous, it is what you cannot see that is deadly.”

“Yeah, I know that. I'm not looking for cryptic – I just want to know what happened.”

Selah didn't look at me. She kept all of her attention focused on Kaija's back, a very curious expression on her face I wouldn't come to recognize for some time. “The simba followed you when you left, and I would not be left alone. She saw the jaguar leave the tree after you and told me to be ready to spear it once she knocked you out of the way.”

“Jaguar?”

“Not nearly as big as the simba or tiger, not as tall as the cheetah, but much more dangerous than all three. You have *one* chance to kill the jaguar. And you can step right onto him and be dead before you ever know he was there. They are smart and strong and patient. You would have fed him for several days or so.”

There was a sobering thought. We'd watched a group of larger baboons and a pride of lions go after some young gazelles one afternoon. They were all fierce and brutal killers, and both started their feeding before their prey was actually dead. I nearly vomited imagining myself limbless and bleeding waiting to be dead before another piece of me was ripped off. I would not be throwing any more tantrums.

We stopped only briefly for water at midmorning, found a non-predator inhabited baobab to sleep in till mid-afternoon and were moving again until dusk. There were no lessons from Selah, no words of encouragement or discipline from Kaija, and not so much as a crossways breath from me. I was miserable, but as far as I was concerned I had absolutely no room for complaint after my jaunt of idiocy. When we finally stopped for the night I set my pack down gingerly, really wanting most to disappear rather than endure stationary solitude. ‘Some protection,’ I groused to myself, and my shame doubled, making my chest even heavier. Feeling every bit the liability to the Lioness as a bloody, tender steak, I sat in a tight ball of seclusion, not even offering to gather wood for our night fire.

“Here.”

A wrinkly piece of jerked meat invaded my peripheral vision, and I looked back over my shoulder at the cord of muscle that was Kaija's forearm. "Here," she said again.

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

"You should eat. This will hold you until I find something."

I just shook my head. She saved me from my own stupidity, she should not be kindly offering me appetizers. Tears of embarrassment stung my eyes enough to turn them insultingly red but not enough to actually fall.

The jerky withdrew, but the Lioness did not. Behind me I could sense and hear that she squatted down. "Why are you sad?" she asked with quiet frankness.

It's really amazing how quickly shame and embarrassment can change to offended defensiveness. "I'm not sad."

And it's just as amazing how little effect that had on Kaija. "Why are you unhappy?"

"Because!" I blurted and wheeled on my knees to face her. "Because I feel useless and like I'm wandering over the world with no direction, no purpose. There's no meaning in anything I do all day, everyday – and then I put you in danger, get you hurt –"

"I am not hurt."

"– an– you were! I stabbed you."

"I am not hurt," she repeated easily. Her golden eyes were sincere and shone something like ... mirth?

"Are you laughing at me?"

"No. But I will when you realize your knee is in a pile of dung."

"What?" And it was even complete with the requisite insects trying to scavenge what they could from their smashed pile and my knee. Of course I exploded from my position, slapped my knee to get every parasitic thing off me before realizing I now had my hands covered in shit too. Selah passed behind me, arms full of dry wood and paused long enough to add a sad grunt. "Baboons. Too bad. Very stinky."

I broke into tears – what else was there to do? I was covered in everything that described exactly how I felt. I wheeled to take some retaliation on the blue woman emitting instigating chuckles as she walked away, but my energy for it bled out quickly when I recoiled from touching my knives with my soiled hands. I was so frustrated, so exasperated and all I could do was clench my fists in silent fury and a graceless yell erupted from me like I'd never made. When I looked again at

Kaija she was standing, patiently, quietly behind me. “Come,” she beckoned and walked by me, by Selah, out from our tree towards a small copse of scraggly brush.

I debated following her for a long moment but soon realized the space between us was just getting bigger, which, my experience taught me above all else, just created greater opportunity for something to get me the longer I dallied.

The brush picked and pulled at me, scratched my arms, and surrounded a small brackish pool – well puddle was more apt. Frogs were loud amongst the thickets and mud. If they cared there were other animals around their swamp opera it must have shown in some other way than disturbance in their singing.

Kaija perched on a sizeable flat of rock that smoothed into the junky water. Thick algae covered the base, completely shielding any view into the water. If there was something in it besides frogs we’d never know till it made an appearance. So of course my heart leapt when Kaija casually stuck her hand through the algae and swept it aside. Two light swings sent the green mass swirling away from her, and clear water shown underneath. She held out her hand to me. “Take off your clothes.”

There was nothing romantic in the command, but I was horrified that my body responded immediately as if she’d called to Odysseus as a siren. In all honesty, one could easily ignore how Kaija said what she said given the nature of our situation – how could I not react in the presence of this primely exotic woman who beckoned to me from beside a secluded pool in the night. A spell had been woven around and within me and I felt my mouth slip open. My state of arousal was none helped when Kaija responded to my paralysis by pulling me onto the rock with her and proceeding to do the job I had failed to do.

Being an Amazon, I had no shame standing in my grace before others. While the women of our surrounding societies sought protection from comparison and objectification in clothes and robes, we reveled in exposure. We would be free women, choosing to wear anything or not at all. My nakedness didn’t bother me at all, but my wonder whether Kaija noticed me and if she liked what she saw bothered me quite a bit. A waft of the dung that soiled me broke across my awareness as she turned from me with my dirty clothes and proceeded to wash them.

“You may find,” Kaija began casually, “that if you practice Rylah’s lessons your idle time will be filled. You will not be so uncomfortable.”

A wash of disappointment swept over me – if Kaija noticed anything at all about me she wasn’t going to let me know it. My arousal and attraction were my own problems and I’d find no help from her in dealing with them. I closed my eyes and tried to build a wall around them.

Taking some pebbles with me to the water’s edge, I knelt and began washing my hands. The water had a strong scent of wet earth, not so much clean water, and probably smelled much better right now than it would in the daytime. Being this close to a pool of water made me miss my bathing tub, made me miss bathing all together. I loved being clean, loved the scent of rose oil on my skin, lavender oil in my hair making it shine and slide through my fingers.

I chanced a glance at Kaija. She was purposefully scrubbing the fabric of my pants together. She must have felt me looking at her because she cut her eyes at me and gave a small shrug. “They will not be perfectly clean,” she offered as an apology.

“I wish I could be clean. I miss having baths.”

“Take one.”

“What? Here? In this?!”

She shrugged again.

“What if there’s something in it? Or – I mean, look at it! It can’t be sanitary...”

In fact, the algae seemed to have a life of its own and insisted on moving back into the clear space Kaija had made.

“There is nothing here to worry about.”

I eyed the moonlit puddle again. Just thinking about submerging myself in its thick stagnancy made me queasy. “I will if you will.” ‘Where in Tartarus did that come from?’

Both of Kaija’s eyebrows rose at me. I know I blushed wildly, and even under the color sapping moonlight I must have glowed pink. But it was too late to take it back; all I could do was hold my ground as heroically as I could manage.

Without another word though, Kaija removed her big knife from her back, untied its strappings, swept off her shirt and pants in one motion it seemed, and moved into the middle of the puddle. The water only came up to just above her knees. Then she turned to look at me with a self-satisfied and cocky smirk, turning my dare back on me. ‘Well... in for a dinar...’

It was disgusting. The floor of the puddle squished between my toes in a slimy, gelatinous ooze. The algae clung to my calves. Everything about the water between those two surfaces may well have been pristine, but it didn’t matter in the least to me. I felt filthier than before I’d gotten in.

“See. Not so bad.”

I made some noise, gurgled and moaned at the same time before pulling my eyes from the murky wetness I moved through to look at my tormentor. I shouldn’t have; I should have kept them down, concentrated on each squishy step, but – again – it was too late.

Muscle rippled before me. Mar-less muscle and athleticism, strength streamed from ground out to the ends of her hair. I was blushing before but now I was a standing human flush. “You’re beautiful.” ‘Oh Goddess, I can’t have said that out loud; please don’t let me have said that out loud.’

“Tai’gee tells me this.”

My stomach dropped. I think I could have crapped my pants and thrown up at the same time. I was embarrassed and horrified, and everything seemed to freeze, time felt slow to the point of standing still, in a cruel joke to stretch this moment out as long as possible. Kaija was no help.

“I miss my Tai’gee,” she said, just as clearly and softly as if she were explaining some nuance of tracking to me. “You look like her sometimes.”

What could I say? What could I possibly have said to that? Of course my libido had an answer – something in the way of ‘Well, pretend I am and let’s see if I can’t be just as satisfying.’ I thanked my mouth for clamping down – finally! – on my unruly trains of thought. I just stood naked in all regards, toes squishing in the slime and mud, and couldn’t be more relieved when Selah let off a pealing scream for help.

VI

“They aren’t even Amazons!”

Tai’gee massaged her temples. “Eponin, please, calm down.” She had been feeling crummy all day and her friend’s rant wasn’t helping improve upon the feeling one bit.

“I won’t calm down – we’ve been lied to. They – aren’t – Amazons!”

“What are you talking about?”

Eponin turned hard from her irate pacing. Tai’gee was sitting on her bed, in her previously serene new house. “We all saw it – that trance or whatever it was – it was how they came to be.”

“You saw the history of these women?”

Eponin nodded, her dark eyes rounded slightly as she thought back over her vision. “It was weird, so strange... We were all there,” she made a motion to indicate all of those from Greece, “watching but right in the middle of it too. No one could see us or hear us. It was like standing in the middle of a play and all the actors went on like we weren’t there at all.”

Tai’gee nodded. That hadn’t been her particular experience in her travels to mindscapes, but she wasn’t surprised at Eponin’s description. Tai’gee was open minded enough to know that spirit travel could take many forms. “So what happened?”

Eponin’s face went stormy again and she punctuated her story with irritated and angry pokes, hits and stomps with her crutch as she paced. She explained the Northern Amazon’s ceremony to bring a warrior from the future to guide and protect them, to help them defeat the wild man clan living nearby. “You could see it, how weak and insignificant they were. Tai’gee – she had to teach them what horses are for!” The irate warrior continued, making the floor echo with her

crutchy punctuations on the inferiority of their ‘savior.’ – “She screamed constantly, like a wailing baby” – the lack of law and leadership amongst the tribe – “and *she* named them – not Artemis. *She* named them Amazons. The Goddess has never been here, they never even knew Her! They – aren’t – Amazons!” The crutch finally snapped. Eponin pitched wildly at the unexpected collapse of her support, and threw out her hands just before she crashed into the firepit.

“Will you sit down or something, please, before you hurt yourself?” Tai’gee rubbed her irritated stomach and tried to remember what she’d eaten last. She felt nauseous and a dull but persistent headache had plagued her most of the day. ‘But everything I’ve eaten has been fine – no pollution on it.’ Still, she was uncomfortable for a reason; one’s stomach doesn’t pitch with upset unless something bad’s been introduced to it. She swallowed thickly.

Eponin shuffled over to a chair at the simple table placed neatly by the bed. Her crippled leg ached from her having lain so long in the one flat position, and the rest of her was soundly unsettled. She rubbed her hand roughly over her face as she remembered the visions of headstrong, ignorant young women waging wars for the sake of fighting, dying for the sake of... nothing. They looked as ridiculous as a group of children on a scavenger hunt, with no idea what they were looking for, in the pitch black and lacking any sense of direction even to guess where they could go despite having a goalless search. “The First Order wasn’t so disorganized, and they were the very beginning. They all knew what they wanted at least – they just fought over how to get it.”

“What are you mumbling?”

Eponin left her hand covering her face. “I’m just wondering what we’ve come to in this place of women prancing in a false life and title. We came to them and they aren’t our sisters.”

Tai’gee sighed. “Who else have you talked with about this? Anyone?”

“No.” The thick, dark ponytail swayed as she shook her head. “I came straight here. Everyone else was just sort of waking up. Didn’t seem to have too much strength just yet.”

“You didn’t check them before you came over? See if their fevers had broken?”

“I was a little preoccupied...” The guard paused with a very sheepish expression.

Tai’gee had a moment of panic. Cyanne had been coming daily to give the Greek Queen updates on her ill citizens. “I assure you they’re fine.” She explained her thought that those who were sick needed a distraction – occupation for the mind so that their bodies could focus on fighting whatever was plaguing them. “They seem to be watching something in their trances, not battling anything. That’s a good sign.” But now Tai’gee wondered if Cyanne hadn’t brought traces of the illness with her, into Tai’gee’s quarantine. What would an illness like that do to her babies?

“Tai’gee, are you alright?” Eponin pushed herself from her chair and stomp-limped closer to her friend. “You don’t look well.”

“I don’t feel well. I’m sitting here wondering if I caught what everyone else has.”

Eponin moved closer in her awkward shuffle. She raised a hand to Tai’gee’s forehead, pressing firmly to check for a fever. “You don’t feel warm. The others all had a temperature.”

“Mostly it’s just my stomach. Maybe some mint tea will help settle it.”

Eponin shuffled again, after making sure where Tai’gee kept her dried mint and tea leaves. She added a couple slivers of willow bark too, assuming Tai’gee’s squint meant her head hurt as well.

“Tell me more about this vision of yours,” Tai’gee requested. Having something to focus on helped.

“There’s not much else.” Eponin set a small pot to warm just by the fire. “They would eat the horses. They fought a man tribe – almost every day was dedicated to warring with them. Everything was based on revenge for one of their deaths, and since one of them died everyday, regardless of whether the tribe won the larger outcome, everyday they’d go back out and fight again. But the lunatic *savior* fell in love with one of them – the wild men – and she tried to get them all to stop fighting.”

“Could she do it?”

“Yeah, she did eventually. She had some egos to cut across to do it but she did. That’s when she named them Amazons. Things sped up after that – I just saw bits and pieces of the history between then and now – Artemis never appeared; not once.”

Tai’gee frowned. She could well imagine the reaction from the rest of the Greek Amazons would be very similar to Eponin’s as they recovered from their illness. This was a mess. Still, it explained some things for Tai’gee, like the fact that there were no holy buildings dedicated to the Goddess, no totems, no mention of Her in the ceremonies they’d witnessed. It explained why Artemis hadn’t appeared to them to explain the division of the Nation. She wondered if it explained Cyanne’s undercurrent of hostility – maybe Cyanne knew already this gaping discrepancy between the two queendoms and would know she’d have no authority over the Greek society.

“We saw Xena and Gabrielle,” Eponin added lately. She watched a tenuous stream of steam begin to rise from the teapot. “We saw the ‘other’ Xena. She killed all of their elders. We saw Gabrielle here... with a baby.”

Tai’gee merely blinked at her friend. In that moment she would’ve liked to have seen them, even in the past. She didn’t want their connection to fade. She hated they were dead; the world felt all the more dangerous knowing they were gone.

“These women banned Xena from becoming an Amazon – but *they* aren’t Amazons themselves. We’ve been robbed of her,” Eponin said. Her face became even angrier and she balled a threatening fist on the table.

“We don’t know that Ep. She mayn’t have become who she had with us or anyone else if she hadn’t been forbidden that. The guilt of that may well have been what made her so good to us.”

It wasn’t something Eponin wanted to hear. She preferred to continue her grumblings of injustice, hoping one of them would bring Tai’gee out to side with her. “Gabrielle thought she had to be initiated into their group – a bunch of liars and frauds *initiated* our Queen. How dare they!”

Tai’gee pushed her heavy body from her thickly piled bed. It wasn’t easy – she felt tripled in size and all the weight focused in one place made every movement a commitment of tenacity. She went to the firepit to steep her own tea, wanting to place some space between Eponin’s angry energy and her own ill feelings that seemed to be feeding off of it.

“It’s not like any of them knew – they probably don’t know now...”

“Well they didn’t bother to find out either, did they? They’ve never sent a single envoy or messenger or student or trader or anything to the Capitol – not once. They knew about us – we made contact with them!”

Tai’gee’s long-fingered hand raised in a motion of placation, but Eponin wouldn’t be placated. She raged on. “Where’s your outrage? This is like me trying to claim to be a Spartan, claim all of their traits and glories as my own, while knowing nothing about them. They’ve made everything up! We’re here because of their lies!”

“We’re here because we had to leave Greece; because we had to get away from Rome’s reach.”

A demanding fist pounded the unimpressive table in answer to the Queen’s calm rebuttal. “We could’ve gone elsewhere! We could have spared ourselves this freezing and sickness!”

Dark, silky hair shifted sideways at the slant of Tai’gee’s head. Eponin was absolutely furious. Tai’gee wondered why she wasn’t as well. ‘Should I be? I don’t feel good – that’s probably why I don’t care so much right now.’ But if Eponin was this angry, Tai’gee was sure she’d have to deal with an equally outraged Beckries who seemed to mirror Eponin’s judgments on most things. And if Beckries was bothered, Cheelopi would be as well, sensitive as she was to Amazon honor. ‘Tartarus, they’ll all be angry, that’s just the simple end of it. And what can I do?’ Nausea swept over her as she brought her tea up to sip. She must have gone quite green because Ep was out of her chair and by Tai’gee’s side in moments.

“Sit down Taig’. What’s wrong? I should get Zupé.”

“Don’t fuss Ep. My stomach’s just uneasy. It’s probably got as much cabin fever as I do.” But the Queen let her warrior carry her tea for her as she gingerly returned to bed. “I’m tired of being fat and slow and inside.”

Eponin hummed.

“Amazons have to be the most athletic women in the world,” Tai’gee continued. “We should get different rules for procreation – it’s biologically criminal to hinder us like this.” She groaned as she slowly laid back amongst her pillows and blankets. “I want to lay on my side again. With Kaija.”

Eponin hummed again, but this time her lips turned down. She set the small cup on the table she’d just been abusing and reached to pull one of the heavier blankets up over the extended belly. But something caught her eye on Tai’gee’s tunic – darker spots on the light colored fabric around her breast. “Uh... Taig’...”

“Hmm?” she sniffed, uncomfortable, looking for relief for her unhappy body. The rest of her was starting to ache as well, especially her lower back and her stomach began to churn. “I think I need to go to the box.”

Eponin shook her head and her eyes went quite round. “No – I don’t think you do. I think you’re in labor.”

Tai’gee’s heart froze for a moment then raced off wildly, redoubling the discomfort on her body. “No – I can’t be. It’s early Ep! It’s too soon!”

Eponin didn’t know what to say; she only shook her head while her face expressed surety that was exactly what was happening. “How soon?”

“A month easily.” Dark eyes grew shiny in the firelit room and fat tears weren’t long in following. “It’s too soon. I wanted – I wanted Kaija to be here.”

“Aw don’t cry Taig’.” Eponin shifted uncomfortably. “It’s supposed to be a happy time – a happy thing – you’re getting your wish...”

“No,” said Tai’gee with a stubborn shake of her head. “I wish for Kaija. I want my wife. I don’t want to do this without her.”

Eponin knew of course that Tai’gee was naturally more reasonable than her current pouting would suggest. She wished she knew what she could say to help. The only thing that came to mind was she “should go get Zupé.”

“No.” The rejection was immediate.

“But I’ll be right back –”

“She’s just a child; she’s never been anything like a midwife; probably never even held a baby.”

“But... there’s no one else. Everyone else is still sick.”

“I don’t care. I’m not going to have them yet. I’m going to wait for Kaija.”

“Aw Taig’... don’t do this.”

Tear filled eyes flashed in anger. “No dammit! These babies got to choose everything else – their existence – this is *my* body – I’ll have them when I choose!”

Eponin winced. She finished bringing up the blanket she was arranging earlier then backed away. “I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll be right back. Right back,” and she hurried out as well as she could without her crutch, her Queen calling after her the whole time.

The blizzard that had driven them all from their tents had long since subsided. The foot worth of snow it left behind had melted down to closer to a half, but it was still enough to muffle even the loudest noises. The eerie quiet unnerved Eponin as she hobbled through the frozen insulation – this stuff made her feel like she’d never known a quiet day in all her life; not ever known what ‘silent’ meant. She shook her shoulders to knock the disquiet from them and shuffled on to the main hall. Sick or not, she was going to bring the tribe mothers back with her to tend their Queen.

“Are you sure?”

Eponin nodded at Dotra. “She’s lactating. She’s complaining of stomach cramps.”

“And no sign of the Lioness. That poor girl.”

Eponin’s dark eyes studied the middle-aged mom. “Please don’t bring Kaija up – she’s already upset about her not being here. Says she’s going to hold the babies in and everything.”

Drexa snorted. “Yeah, good luck with that.” She rolled weakly to her side then pushed herself upright. “When they want out, they’ll come out – it’s in your best interest just to cooperate.”

“Do you think you can come? Are you well enough?”

All of them looked at Shiekel. “I feel better but I don’t want to leave Ghiran here alone.”

“Fine, fine – we two should be alright anyway – right?”

The others nodded and they set off for the Queen's hut as briskly as all of their handicapped bodies could.

"I saw you all in my dreams..." Drexia said tentatively.

Eponin quickly cut her off. "Yeah – I told Tai'gee all about it."

"So it's true then?..."

"Seems like it."

They were quiet as they trudged through Eponin's original trail. "Lot to talk about," Drexia offered finally, to which the others agreed in silence.

Eponin filled them in on the little she'd found out after her short time with Tai'gee when she'd stormed back from the trances. "She says they're a month early. Says she doesn't feel good, stomach's upset, she's walking like her back hurts."

"Mine were early too," Dotra supplied. She looked at Drexia as if in apology her pregnancy had gone full term, and then some. "I think when there's more than one, there's just not room enough."

Drexia gave a small laugh. "You may well be right about that. All three of mine were late; I figure they were so warm and cozy they didn't see a reason to come out."

"What are you three doing out?"

All three Amazons shot sharp looks at the pelt clad Cyanne, who was marching purposefully towards them. Wild blonde hair flared from her head like the horns of the deer head she insisted on wearing whenever in public.

"Excuse me?"

Clear, blue eyes focused on Eponin. They hardened slightly at the stony gaze she was receiving and Cyanne realized in a moment of psychological clairvoyance that she and Eponin would never get along. She thought the lame warrior was too haughty for her station, given her disability especially, but moreso that the warrior presented herself as better than she who was a Queen. 'She doesn't have grace enough to recognize someone for her position, therefore she doesn't deserve my respect.' "Why are you all out of quarantine?"

None of them had stopped walking – they made Cyanne meet them as they continued to Tai'gee's hut.

"*Our* Queen needs us. And we aren't prisoners."

“I didn’t mean to imply you were,” Cyanne replied warily. She felt something coming off the three older women that she hadn’t felt before ~ she wasn’t quite sure what it was, but all of a sudden she felt like the odd one out of a clique she very much wanted to be a part of. “I only meant that you may not be well enough to be outside like this – and going to see Tai’gee –”

“Queen Tai’gee,” Eponin corrected harshly.

Cyanne’s brow furrowed. “Of course. I’m just concerned you might contaminate –”

“Hold your concern. We’re more than capable of handling our business.” Eponin continued to shuffle through the dense snow, only feet now from the door of Tai’gee’s yurt. The others slowed slightly, a little uncomfortable with the tone of the interaction between her and the Northern Queen. Dotra, being more sensitive to others and their perceptions decided to speak on it.

“Eponin’s just a bit uptight right now – the Queen’s in labor. We’re going to help her.”

Cyanne didn’t like how they continuously used Tai’gee’s title but not her own. The way the other big Amazon hung back by Dotra’s elbow and cut mistrustful glances at her made the young blonde even less sure of herself. She decided something definitely had changed and she suspected the trances had altered something in how she and her citizens were being viewed.

“That’s exciting news,” she said with measured enthusiasm. “I’m sure we could –”

“We’ve had children before,” Drexia inserted. “No need to trouble yourself.”

Thin lips pressed more firmly together. “Would you like me to get your healer for you at least, since you don’t seem to care for anything else from us?”

Drexia let Dotra know that was probably ok by a slight shift in posture. When the gentler warrior accepted, Cyanne turned hard and trudged off to find Zupé. The mothers looked at each other before going on to meet their Queen.

“Stop pushing Tai’gee.”

The moans of a straining woman filled the conical room. The pregnant Queen lay on her bed much as Eponin had left her, except now she’d thrust her elbows back to help herself bear down, despite her first guard’s pleas to do the contrary.

“My lady – it’s too soon to push,” said Dotra as she skipped quickly to the bedside. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

Stubbornness shook a head damp with sweat. “I will choose. They got to choose their existence,” neat teeth clenched with effort, “I will choose my time.”

“Tai’gee, please,” begged Eponin.

But she wouldn't be convinced. All else was out of her control – her wife was nowhere near for all she knew, she had no queendom, no understanding of the weather just beyond the walls next to her – she would be damned if she couldn't at least control when she did and did not push.

“Queen Tai'gee – if you insist on pushing now you will hurt yourself and your babies. You must stop.”

Drexa had given birth to three children, the only mother remaining with the tribe to have done so. No pregnancy was routine she knew, but she felt justifiably practiced in the matter and her serious and directive tone of voice conveyed her experience. It was an order, a motherly order which made it impossible to ignore.

Tai'gee stopped squeezing herself and subsided into the more minor discomforts of the first stages of labor. Tears stung her eyes. She felt so vulnerable, she *was* so vulnerable – and she had to endure the exposure of that vulnerability. It was almost as bad as being raped, the initial invasion that put her in this position, only now it was her own people watching, not anonymous heckling men.

Eponin recognized the expression – she alone in the room had seen it before, and just like the time in the wagon, it broke her heart to see Tai'gee suffer and try to hide it. She gently pushed the two mothers aside, tactfully insinuating she wanted a moment of privacy. As gently as she could with her awkward posture, she knelt by Tai'gee's bedside and reached under her blanket for one of her strong hands. She spoke quietly, just loud enough for Tai'gee to hear her and understand her tone of voice. “Taig' we're to help you; we don't want to hurt you or embarrass you. You are our Queen, and you are my friend.”

Tai'gee closed her eyes. Till then only Kaija had known exactly what Tai'gee was thinking in those sensitive times, and what to say to help build an armor around the sensitivity. When Eponin lifted a hand to her forehead, the warm curve of her palm pressing firmly against her head as though the medium of some blessing or sacred truth, Tai'gee felt a wash of love flow through her for the warrior she had yet to feel. “We'll get through this,” Eponin promised. “I'm here, just like I said I'd be.”

In that moment Tai'gee felt Eponin wanted her children, and Tai'gee would have them for her. Since she couldn't control anything else, she would have the children because Eponin asked it of her. No one said anything when, just before the first child made its appearance Tai'gee went from beating Eponin's already highly abused arm to pulling her in for a long and blatantly passionate kiss. The Queen drew blood, just as both her babies drew from her, but no one admonished any of them. Eponin moved off to the more discreet end of the bed, rubbing her swollen lips and bleeding tongue while Tai'gee recovered. She didn't even stop Zupé from playing herald and announcing to the entire gathered Greek Amazons, and those of the Northern tribe that had chosen to wait through the long cold night, that the Queen had given birth to a healthy daughter then a healthy son. And despite her innate enthusiasm for parties, Eponin never once considered joining the spontaneous celebration for the new princess. She sat quietly by the

recovering Royal and her slumbering babies, wondering, worrying, holding a hand she wasn't sure was hers to hold.

~

At this point, I was tired of my emotions thinking for me. Perhaps exhausted is a better word... or it could be the fumes of the burning oiled wood surrounding me that were making me sleepy. It was becoming hard to tell; everything was hard to tell since the exhaustion of fighting for my life took over. But I knew I was in trouble, the big kind that makes people very religious. I heaved my heavy head sideways and squinted through the foggy smoke to see Selah who was likewise tied to a stake and ringed with flames.

I wondered if she was cursed; I wondered if she cursed me, all of us – were my people cursed because of our acquaintance with her? She spoke so knowledgeably about everything, like there was nothing she didn't know, down to the insignificant details, and even when she was challenged on what she knew, she never ruffled or got upset or found reason to get angry that she had to defend what she said. 'No one can know everything,' I thought heavily, and surprised my foggy-minded self by thinking it in Rylah's voice.

Keep control of your passions...they can betray you.

'Ah Tartarus... she told me this would happen.'

The ropes holding me in place bit into me as I sagged with my realization. The smoke swirled all around me, made my eyes water and I squinted again to see the foreign figures standing just behind the hazy veil.

Charging naked into the night-before showed me nothing besides their strength and skill. I was disarmed and captured in a dishonorable matter of seconds. 'Artemis forgive me, but I am a shameful Amazon.' I tried to give myself some credit the next morning as I sat bound in more rope, I'm sure, than rigged the ship that brought me to this cursed land. I didn't run into the capturing of Selah with the intent to save her; I wasn't looking for a fight to the death; I was neither focused on defense nor heroism, nor technique, nor duty, nor anything other than escape from my insufferable embarrassment. And, I got what I wanted, in so far as I didn't remind myself once more that had I stayed, waited at least, in the thicket by the pond, I would never have been noticed by my present captors; thick, oily smoke wouldn't be rising up to choke the unnatural state of my womanhood out of my body.

Oh yes, Selah and her all-knowing self explained everything to me through the narrow spaces of the cage bars she'd been stuffed into. Apparently my charge in for her rescue was not only a surprise because of the unhealthy color of my pale skin, but also entirely outside of the expectations for the role of a woman.

"What?"

“Women don’t attack men, they don’t fight unless provoked – they don’t carry weapons outside of their communities. Not among this people. You are an abomination. They’ll want to purify you.”

“Are these your people then? Since you know so much about them?” But I didn’t think so – from what little I had seen of the people from the night before and sparsely throughout the day, Selah looked nothing like them. She was thin and lanky, and so dark above all. These people, the men especially, were ripped through with muscle, their skin not nearly the midnight of Selah – perhaps more if midnight could be mixed with milk, creamed perhaps, softened, that would be the tone of their skin.

“No. But we had heard of them. It seems they’ve gotten bigger in the time I’ve been away. I don’t remember them having a claim on this territory before.”

Selah was no further help. She couldn’t speak their language, didn’t have any idea about how to escape. I’d even told her to go into one of their minds.

“I have been forbidden.”

“I’m sure the present situation would provide suitable exception,” I said with venom. ‘Fine time for her to start being conscionable.’

“Even still, I am not a witch; I cannot control a mind. I do not have that power.”

“Isn’t that just perfect.” I would have kicked the dirt if I could have moved. I spent the rest of the day in a bitter silence. I thought over everything. It would be the rainy season back home; the training grounds would be a swamp. My sister loved the rain because it made everything different: “the earth changes, the lake changes, the colors change...”

“Everything changes after an earthquake too, but you don’t like those.”

She’d poked me hard for my slander, but she smiled while she did it. I suddenly missed my sister; I wondered how she was doing in the Land of the Dead. I hated she was gone.

I wondered where the rest of our tribe had gone, if they’d made it to the Northern Amazons, if my people survived at all – maybe they had ended up bound and desperate like me, looking at death in a foreign land by people who had no appreciation for who we were and without anyone to dance our souls to the Land of the Dead. I had hoped that at least I would see my sister again there... but my hopes for anything were insubstantial at that point. I took in a lungful of the thick smoke and hoped I could just go to sleep and die without knowing anything more.

I don’t know why it never occurred to me that Kaija would save us. I suppose I was so busy trying to forget that our interaction was what drove me to my current imprisonment that she became an unconsidered option. I don’t know exactly how it all happened; asphyxiation tends to make one very disoriented. But I could tell the people on the other side of the thick smoke got nervous, there was shouting and many of them left only to return with spears. In my haze I

thought whatever impurity I had was manifesting just before I died and they were going to perform some ritualistic ceremony to kill it. I wouldn't have complained if they'd just have killed me sooner – anything than to wait to burn to death. The shouting increased, and through my watering eyes I could make out long arms pointing to something through the flames behind me. Their anxiety easily permeated my flaming wall; I tried to see what was there, but I couldn't look far around. An unhappy growl also permeated my flaming wall and my heart beat in one painfully strong thump. 'I take it back – not *anything* rather than burn to death.' Selah's description of scavengers and the ferocious hyenas coming to rip me apart flooded my remaining senses, and, again to my shame, I felt my bladder give way to my fear.

I watched terrified as some of the big men launched spears through the space separating me from Selah. Then there was a big roar, a deep roar, a lion's roar and the knot of people standing in front of me backed off into the darkness. My eyes were watering too much to distinguish anything else but as I closed them against the burning smoke I saw the night-green of animal eyes staring at me through haze and sparks. I cried.

What I knew next was entirely from sound – the burning wood around me began shifting more than it should if it were just falling in on itself; several agitated pops shot out and I'm sure there was an accompanying spray of sparks and burning ash. A knife, a very sharp knife, cut through the ropes at my feet then the ones binding my shoulders to the pole; I heard the neat fray of the sever and thought it was a strange thing for a hyena to do. I was dizzy and weak and as soon as the ropes weren't there to support me anymore, I pitched over right away. I expected to go face first into the cinder but instead the middle of my body was grabbed roughly and I was thrown out of the flaming ring. The much cooler, hard-packed earth greeted me with no gentility. The cooler night air felt like daggers against my seared throat, but I had to breathe. Much farther away I heard another unimpressive thud and choking attempts at breathing and figured Selah was free now too. 'Free. Not eaten? Free...' "Kaija?"

Was that my voice? It sounded like someone was ripping out my vocal chords and they just happened to make Kaija's name on the way out.

"Right here. Do not speak." She sounded worried. But then she chuckled which significantly diminished my projection of her concern. "You are as black as them now. You make a nice Afrikan." There was a smile in her voice. It was nice to hear. I cried more.

"Do not cry. You are ok."

"Mola! Mola!" A deep man's voice bellowed from some place far from us. It was a very distinctive bass – what I imagined Zeus would sound like.

"He is talking to you Simba," said Selah weakly.

"I thought you couldn't speak their language!"

"I can't – he's speaking mine."

“Mola – Ume kasirika?”

“He wants to know if you’re angry,” she translated then began coughing uncontrollably from the smoke she’d inhaled. I wasn’t doing so great myself honestly. Kaija didn’t say or do anything to answer him right away, just sat with us for what felt like a long, long while. I could hear the fires still burning and feel the heat from them on my sensitive flesh. My skin felt raw, like the worst sunburn I’d ever gotten. I vaguely wondered if I was as seared as I felt, but then I didn’t care much – all the coughing was exhausting me.

And then I was lifted in the most secure hold I could have imagined – strong arms curled around my back and under my knees and picked me up with very little effort. My chest was so sore from the spasms of coughing as well as the polluting smoke, but in that embrace I felt cared for and supported. I breathed deeply of the scent of sweat and leather and of something wild. I could feel the fire’s warmth retreating, with every step the air around me got cooler and cooler. Behind us the same deep, intimidating voice called out – “Nitasaidia” and Selah attempting to translate through her coughing. The chest I was leaning against rumbled, “Shh. We will be fine.” I was sure we were being watched as we walked, I could feel many pairs of eyes peering at me intensely, like their own little fires. Then, quiet... the quiet of an interior... and humidity... “Breathe deeply. It will help.”

Kaija sat down on a stool or chair and held me like I was a small child. She smoothed my hair back from my face and held me against her chest with one arm while she ran something cool and moist over my skin. I was so soothed and weak that I just melted into her and didn’t care to think or feel anything else but safe.

“Are you sleeping?”

I jerked at the question. ‘Was I? Had I been?’ I suspected so, I was completely disoriented. I opened my eyes to a small hut, crowded with strange things hanging from the rafters, strange animal skins everywhere, a warm light suspended by a hazy fog hung in the air. My eyes roamed rapidly to get some visual bearing on my situation and found Selah stretched out on her back on a grass mat on the floor in front of me. Silence wrapped around us, peacefully, and I was still in Kaija’s lap.

“Did you call me Tai’gee? ‘My Tai’gee?’” I rolled my head back to look at the golden eyes I knew had been watching me while I rested. They stared back at me, shadowed and discolored by the firelight, and I could tell nothing of their expression.

“You are Noki. You were sleeping.”

Maybe I had dreamed it, but I didn’t think so. I was going to insist on what I thought I’d heard but as I took a breath to continue, my eyes caught a strange shape standing mutely back from the light. I tensed at the sudden surprise of seeing such a big, foreboding man and Kaija immediately shh’d me. “It is ok. He is help. Are you well? Can you stand?”

I didn't want to. I wanted to stay right where I was in whatever state of being would keep me in Kaija's arms while she cooed and cuddled me. But that was no manner of dignity for an Amazon and I pushed myself away from her and set my feet on the rough ground. "Ouch!" And immediately jerked them up again and replanted myself in her lap.

Kaija frowned before leaning over to look at the bottom of my feet, then frowned deeper. "They are blistered."

"Yeah well – that would explain it. Where are we?" My voice was very hoarse and raw, my lungs felt scraped and sore, as were my chest and ribs. My skin felt tight, kind of like a plumping sausage. "How bad am I burned?" My voice carried my worry.

"Not very badly. Mostly you just got too hot. This place will help – they keep it filled with steam. She is worse – her fire was meant to kill her."

'Damn' – "and it didn't?"

There was a quirk of lips. "Much to your desire to the contrary, no."

"Who is he," I whispered.

"He is help for us."

"Are you sure?" She gave a short nod. I'd have to take her word for it; he was the biggest man I'd ever seen and it wasn't like I was really in any condition to fight him if he turned out to be trouble. There was something resolute about him though, stoicism in his fearsome pose – he felt like he could be very dangerous indeed, but only towards something that is against right.

"Your feet need medicine so they will heal. Their healer can help." Kaija stood up then and set me gently back in her place. She motioned for the big man to come over. Once he was standing next to us I realized he was even bigger than I thought – he was probably at least two feet taller than me and I knew I was a tall woman. His powerful arms were the size of my thighs. 'A brown Hercules.'

Kaija placed my heel on her thigh to show him my wounds, after which he immediately turned and left. He was back in minutes, shoving a skinny, shaking man in front of him. He commanded something, and raised his hand like he was going to backhand the man when he replied. The skinny man cowered and his hands were shaking so badly when he lifted my foot to look at my soles I thought he would drop them. But he didn't, and when he finished his examination the big man pointed to the prostrate Selah as his next patient. Even though he was quite close to her, the skinny man took a wide berth around Kaija in order to study Selah from as far away from the Lioness as possible. He was terrified of her I realized, and I found that amusing... until I remembered how I'd gotten out of the fire. More than likely she'd just walked through the flames and stood in the coals while she severed my bindings and walked calmly back out – and again for Selah. If she were hurt at all she was probably completely healed now, and if I didn't know her or of her abilities, I may well be terrified of her, too.

In an attempt to relieve the poor man, Kaija moved to the shadows by a far wall, but he misread her motion and fell back on his butt while throwing his arms over his face to deflect whatever assault he expected from her. The big man commanded something else, and the skinny healer half crawled-half slunk out of the hut as fast as his shaking limbs could carry him.

I looked curiously at the big man. “But you’re not afraid?”

When he looked at me I saw that his expression – his eyes in particular – weren’t unkind, just strong, very, very strong. His gaze didn’t flinch or waver or shrink back from a returned stare and he didn’t exert an aggression or dominance – actually he reminded me exactly of a temple column: exalted, indestructible, solemn, dependable. Then I believed Kaija. “What’s your name?”

I didn’t think he’d be able to understand me, but I tried anyway; maybe if he’d noticed my previous suspicion of him then he’d see my attempts at a conversation as an apology or that I did trust him. His eyes cut sharply to the side then back at me, indicating he didn’t understand. So I put my hand against my chest and said “Noki,” pointed to Selah, “Selah,” and before I could tell him Kaija’s name he said my name loudly. When I looked back at him he was smiling. He pointed at me and said my name again, but when I nodded my head he broke into a hearty laugh like I’d just told him the best joke I knew.

“Fine then; what’s your name since you think mine’s so funny,” I snapped.

He laughed a little while longer before acknowledging my finger thrusting at him demanding his name. “Hadimu.”

“Yeah, like that’s any better,” I groused.

A thin arm stuck a wooden bowl through the slit of curtains at the doorway, to which Hadimu made a sound for the rest of the body to come in. It was the skinny healer again with a bowl full of paste. He smeared it mercilessly on my ticklish feet, practically ran out, and came back with twice as much about a half hour later to slather over Selah. Kaija was right, she was much worse off. I couldn’t believe she was really sleeping – her skin looked like it would hurt too much to let her sleep.

By the time the healer finished his ministrations to Selah, gray morning light was starting to peek through the various cracks in the building. With the chinks of light I saw the whole structure was just mud and grass, not even clay. Our out buildings suddenly seemed very refined by comparison. By midday I appreciated these peoples’ architectural strategies – while all the world baked around us, I slept in cool peace indoors, comfortable in my recovery.

VII

Windswept snow for miles greeted the tropical Amazons and they’d yet to feel so bleak about their situation. The plain and vacant hills that had at least shimmered slightly with the bowing of

drought dry grasses of the fall had been remade into even larger mounds – like the growing breasts of a young girl – smoothed with blinding, mind numbing snow. The only differences looking from the hills to the left and the hills to the right was a base, frigid blue, the color of snow hidden from sunlight where shadows lurked. To call the landscape uninspiring would have been a laughable injustice – it was defeating, it was brutal in its perfection of monotony, it demanded depression. The wind drove hard against what could have been placid softness otherwise left alone, and turned the dainty flakes into an icy crust, picked up snow dust to drive it into cold-sensitive skin and make it sting like hot, coarse sand. But without the wind, the Greeks feared they would go deaf from the silence – all could be so quiet they yearned to scream at each other even from only a foot’s distance, but spoke just above whispers instead because anything louder felt like taunting tragedy. Anything could be under the snow – who’s to say what wouldn’t or couldn’t be burrowing, lurking, hiding under the crusty top? The hills looked no different than the rolling sea where sharks lurked, the Leviathan burrowed, Poseidon hid with his mighty trident in wait for that carelessly whistling sailor. “Never whistle to the wind girls, because it already knows what you can and cannot hear.” Dotra tugged Seema’s new fox fur cap tight around her ears and studied them gravely. Tai’gee saw they were too cold even to give their customary “Yes Mama.”

“The snow won’t stay long.” Cyanne leaned against the doorframe of Tai’gee’s hut. She and her obnoxious antlers – she’d stopped wearing the wolf skull and was now wearing deer antlers as her primary headdress. Tai’gee guessed they were to make her look taller – but backlit by a thin sun they only accented the blonde’s thinness. ‘And the antlers were even more ridiculous,’ the Greek Queen mentally criticized. But Cyanne’s thinness wasn’t all just an optical illusion; Tai’gee could see them all losing pounds they could ill afford. Starvation was becoming as real as their depression, as detrimental, as deadly. The small Northern band to which they had fled had no stores for the two-hundred plus refugees who’d shown up just before winter. For the first time for many of the young Greeks, they were experiencing rationing; they were learning to chew what meals they got slowly and to savor what crossed their pallets no matter what it was.

“Mama, I don’t want to eat mice.”

“Me neither,” sassed the other twin.

Dotra, as everyone in her heart knew, was not a hard or heartless woman, but she was a woman who would not quarrel with necessity. Neither would she try to dress a situation to mask what had to be done. She held the fat field rat up by its tail, singed of its fur and gutted, letting it swing before the eyes of her repulsed daughters and the dog that had bonded with them. “Do you think your dog would hesitate a moment to eat this or go hungry because of what it is?”

“But Mama,” the first twin whined. Dotra wouldn’t hear it.

“I’ll give it to the dog, it’s your choice. You know what else we have left to eat.”

The patient animal sat still, staring hopefully at the swaying appetizer. The tip of a pink, watering tongue peaked out, but a good raising held the dog back from snapping the meat swinging from loose fingers.

“I’ll cut it up for you.”

The girls lowered their eyes sadly and nodded. They were hungry.

“What do you mean the snow won’t last?”

“You’ll see, the wind will blow it all out; what little that was able to melt and soak into the ground will make it freeze harder than stone.”

“You say that like you’re happy to see it come.” ‘She says it like she’s happy to see us suffer through it,’ Tai’gee corrected Eponin in thought. She could feel the tension between those two like a tight rope just at the edges of snapping. It was an inevitability as far as she was concerned, and, to be honest, she spent a lot of time wondering what the snap would look like – a screaming match?, a shoving match?, a fight?, a murder? She shivered, and Eponin automatically put an arm across her shoulder to warm her against what she assumed was a cold chill.

“You’ll be glad to see it come, too.” Cyanne spoke over her shoulder; her tone still tried to effect a supremacy she would not be able to attain with the Greeks. Tai’gee wondered if it would be generous of her to give the young hopeful points for trying or a cruel tease to encourage her. Then she thought again that Cyanne was no fool – maybe she knew exactly how she sounded and knew how hard it made Eponin grind her teeth...

“What’s so great about ground too solid to dig into? I’m starting to wonder about you people...” Eponin let her jibe trail off, making it more of a jibe.

“For one thing, we’ll be able to move around without leaving tracks. For another, we’ll be able to hunt, which is near impossible with this much snow hindering us.”

“You say that like you all know how to hunt.”

Tai’gee shifted her nursing daughter to the other breast and decided a shift in subject would be ideal as well. “Cyanne, you came to talk about looking for food elsewhere – what ideas did you have?” Eponin muttered something Tai’gee knew was unconstructive, but at least the warrior did it under the pretense of cooing at the baby.

“There is a man clan not far from here. We can start by raiding whatever stores they have then see where that leaves us.”

Tai’gee’s head shot up from watching her baby take her breast. The Greek Queen stared at Cyanne’s nonchalant back trying to deduce some credibility to what the forward facing mouth had just said so plainly. When the younger blonde finally made it clear in her lengthened silence that she wasn’t going to add anything more, Tai’gee asked her if she was making a serious suggestion.

“Of course,” she said and turned in the doorway with arms and legs crossed to resume her arrogant lean in the sunlight. “There’s nowhere else to get food – close anyway – we’d have to travel several days to the nearest village and then either be able to buy or trade for food.” Thin, fur-covered shoulders lifted in an equally thin shrug. “We can do neither – so we take it.”

“We won’t be part of any raid,” Tai’gee said with a singular firmness. The baby paused from her noisy suckling to study her mom as though she understood what was being said and was interested in what would come next.

Cyanne didn’t miss a beat. “Well that’s good actually, because I was wondering how I was going to feed all of my sisters and all of yours. That makes it easy and the more for us.”

Eponin’s arm around Tai’gee’s shoulder slipped slightly and the elder Queen suspected the warrior was restraining herself from a physical response. She couldn’t – and wouldn’t – deny she would have relished an opportunity to knock Cyanne’s condescending smirk straight to the girl’s toenails. She could feel her heart rate pick up with the tension. Tai’gee glanced down at her baby whose pause from suckling had now become noticeable, and met very placid dark eyes – a blue so dark it was like looking at glinting obsidian, and she wondered if her eyes had been the same as an infant. Her heart calmed considerably under her daughter’s scrutiny and she considered that for a moment. “What is missing from your life, Cyanne, that you crave so much contention? Why do you invite and seek so many battles and aggravation into your life?”

The blonde youth was plainly offended and made no effort to hide it. “The Sarmations aren’t starving right now, but if they were don’t think they’d hesitate a moment in raiding us.”

“We aren’t starving yet.”

“So you want to wait until we’re too weak to do anything for ourselves? Are you crazy?”

Eponin growled and started to push herself up but Tai’gee moved her knee to press against the irritated warrior’s thigh and keep her where she was. “No,” she answered to Cyanne and deposited her baby into Eponin’s lap so she could stand herself. “I am deliberate.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean do we have resources here still that we have not yet used? Dogs? Horses? Have we yet done any hunting? –”

“I just told you we can’t hunt with this much snow on the ground.”

“Fine. But have we gathered any monies or goods and made a cursory effort to see if we’d have anything to legitimately trade with in a nearby market? No. And until all other options have been exhausted then neither I nor any of my citizens are going to participate in sacking another community. Not until we have no other way to insure our survival. That is what I mean about being deliberate.”

Cyanne's return glare was stony. As much as she'd like to think herself a strong, powerful, authoritative woman, Tai'gee was in actuality three times the ruler of Cyanne. But the youth would not be backed down. "Are you sure about that? Quite a few of *your* citizens were pretty receptive to the idea. Eager actually."

There was indeed a snap and it was followed by a quick sish and a solid thump. Cyanne's head jerked to the right and she – like Eponin – thought she'd been struck, that it was her ear that had fallen to the floor. It took several moments for their bewildered, disbelieving minds to process that it was one of the antlers lying severed by the knife now pinned firmly into the doorframe. Cyanne looked in shock, her hand pressed to her ear, still not in full comprehension, at Tai'gee who stared back at her, a second knife held in a professionally loose grip.

"If you will dare to challenge my leadership, you will do so with me and you will do so to my face. Is that clear?"

Tai'gee watched Cyanne shrink – she may well have poked a hole in her given the way the belligerent youth deflated. She'd surprised her, that was obvious – if Cyanne expected anything she expected it from Eponin only. Perhaps Tai'gee shouldn't have been so deferring to Cyanne, had gone out of her way to make their predicament gentle, and now it seemed the Northern Amazon Queen had taken that to mean she had no bite. Well... misunderstanding cleared up.

As she turned to leave, Cyanne removed her antlered headdress and carried it meekly away with her. Ultimately, Cyanne may be left her rulership over her dwindling little band if these Greeks ever moved on, but that was all she would ever be, a little ruler of a very little people.

Eponin's wide brown eyes tracked over to her Queen without turning her head. "You don't really expect me not to tell people about this, do you? Where'd you have the knives?"

Tai'gee blew a hard breath and gave her head a shake. "I always have them," she said and moved to the crib where her baby boy lay sleeping. Apparently power struggles didn't hold the same amount of appeal as they did for her daughter. 'Interesting.'

"She's got nerve, that one," Eponin said lowly. "Probably better *you* did what you did instead of me – my knife would've accidentally landed in the middle of her forehead."

Tai'gee hummed but remained leaning on the rail of the crib watching her son twitch in his peaceful sleep. His hair and eyes were as dark as his sister's, but he was smaller, thinner, an obvious second twin. Awake, he was quiet for the most part, but the new mom thought he was a different sort of quiet than his twin sister. She was quiet in a studious sort of way, processing, thinking about what she was witnessing; his quiet seemed more reserved, just observing, maybe storing but definitely watching with no intent of participating. Tai'gee wondered what that would look like as he got older and felt a little uncomfortable about the image of a boy standing off to the side merely watching the goings on. It was a little creepy. "He's just a baby," she murmured to herself and lightly ran her knuckles along his baby-soft cheek.

“A very pretty baby. And so is his sister,” Ep complimented and raised the infant girl high into the air, then brought her down tenderly to cradle in her arms. “Have you picked names yet?”

“We’re just babies.”

“What?”

Tai’gee continued to study her baby boy. Yes, she’d named him, his sister too, no matter what traditions said about waiting six months. They were Amazons, both of them. She wasn’t going to give up her son to some unknown village or orphanage or people to raise as they saw fit. Nor was she going to kill him or let him be killed. He was a prince of the Nation and would have to be accepted as such until he could make decisions for himself and support himself. Not unlike the wild youngsters with whom they were now seeking refuge.

“I want you to organize a hunting party, a large one.”

“To hunt what?”

“This is flat prairie land, there’s got to be herds of something out there. Make sure to include as many Northerners as want to go.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. Are you serious?”

“Yes I am,” Tai’gee answered firmly and took her daughter from Eponin’s arms. “They’ve lived here longer, this is their land. We can learn from them or we can perish; which would you prefer?” Ep started to answer but Tai’gee cut her off. “Before you say anything, remember I have another knife.”

Ep held up her hands, deferring to the glinty irritation of her Queen. “I got it. A hunting party, all inclusive. Anything else?”

Tai’gee looked at her babies, one sleeping, one silent and studious. She had to do for them. “Yes. I want you to send Zupé to study with Cyanne. The mothers Dotra, Drexia and Shiekell, too. They all have vast and various knowledges and I want them to share with each other. We need a real healer, and Zupé’s our best choice right now.”

Eponin receded slightly in posture – something had shifted in Tai’gee, something had strengthened, solidified, something had woken up and it was ready to be Queen. Tai’gee wasn’t tossing out suggestions now, she was giving orders and a piece of Eponin that was always soldier-warrior bowed in gratitude of the leadership.

“Send me Beckries and Blue-wren when you find them as well.”

The warrior bowed out of the hut, turned and shuffled off to fulfill her duties with a gloriously rakish grin.

*

“So what did she have you two do all day – bet you were pissed you didn’t get to go hunting,” Emelia teased of Beckries.

They all sat that night ringed around a pompously large fire, celebrating the success of their hunting trip. The snow swept plains had yielded to them a bounty of tracks and scat to follow, right into herds of big horned sheep, elk, deer. Thick forests sprung up in various places, lush branches of pine and evergreen were stripped for their pinecones. There wasn’t much else they could forage for in the snow and cold, but the great woolly beasts they did find would last them quite a while. Beckries and Blue-wren Tai’gee’d held back to have look for a suitable place for the Greeks to actually build a village so they could get out of their tents. Their suggestion had pleased her immensely – “we could build into the trees in these woods. We could have ground huts and tree huts, that way we wouldn’t have to find so much space on the ground – we can build up.” Tai’gee had been very happy with their suggestion; it would bring her Amazons closer to her own hut which was in the woods, and they wouldn’t be stuck staring at the unending plains of snow all winter. She’d praised them both and sent them to join their returning sisters.

So now they all sat in a happy ring, congratulating themselves and expanding their hunting tales into glorious runs of heroism and unparalleled athleticism. “What do you call the giant deer again?” “Elk.” “Did you see how I downed that one? One arrow!” “You were on horseback, try doing it on foot! My spear snapped that thing was so strong.” “Maybe it snapped because you’ve forgotten how to use it.” Low ooo’s of instigation.

“What if it had been a Roman?” “If that had been a Roman then my ass is headed back to Greece because I’ll be damned if I get run out of my country by something that slow and stupid!” Cheers and thoughtful nods.

“Do you miss it? Greece?” “How can you miss it with everything we have up here?” “Everything? This is nothing. Greece can go from paradise to *gods’* paradise like that –” Snapping fingers. “Our ports welcome more people and goods than any in the world.” “Greece is the gods’ playground. We are bred among all things special and divine in the world.” More cheers. “Our artisans are unparalleled – you’ve not even a temple here, just these shacks – the Acropolis would paralyze you.”

“Is there anything you don’t miss?” “Earthquakes!” Chuckles and laughter. “They could be fun.” “Not with a pillar falling on you!” “You should move faster!” More laughter. “I miss the olives and the wine, and figs. I miss shellfish.” “Not me, I never liked the shellfish.” “You’re allergic to them.” “All the more reason to not like them!”

“I miss our land. I miss our queendom. I miss our home.” More thoughtful nods. “I miss my home – it was perfect.” “Your roof leaked! You complained about it every time it rained.” “You were supposed to fix it.” “I did fix it; you poked holes in every patch I made with your lance saying ‘mmhmm... this might do...’” “Shoddy patch then.” “Ox shit! You just liked to complain so I’d have a reason to come over and you could watch me work. My roof never

leaked.” “The way we do ours they can’t leak. We could show you how our tribe does it.” Glances of acceptance and murmurs of “Ok.”

“That’s what I don’t miss.” “What?” ““In my tribe!’ Ugh, that girl’s head was harder than Hephaestus’ own nuts!” “In my tribe; In my tribe,” sing-songed through the Greeks. “I was so glad Xena and Gabrielle took her – her departure was worthy of a party.” “We can party now!” Cheers all around. “Yeah, this is how we party in our tribe!” More cheers. “What was her name again?” “Amarice; I’ll never forget that hot shot punk. ‘In my tribe we disobey orders and do things our own way.’” Grumbles.

“Amarice was our tribe.” The gaiety shattered.

“She was one of you?” Beckries looked with standoffish inquisition at the Northern warrior Agheti, with whom she’d started to form a friendly bond. She was a big blonde, the most formidable stature of the Northern women. Her hazel eyes were grave as she nodded.

“She is one of our honored sisters. She died in combat against the Sarmations.”

“Figures she’d be one of you,” someone muttered amongst the crowd.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Silence. Tension thickened the air, made the smell of roasting meat swelter into a stench of carcass and contention. Prejudice turned the warm firelight into dark tendrils of jealous flame.

“It means you don’t follow orders either.”

“You expect us to take orders from you? You aren’t our Queen.”

“You aren’t even Amazons,” another unidentifiable voice challenged.

“We are so!”

“You’re just a group of girls dabbling in witchcraft and camping. You *aren’t* Amazons.”

“Yeah well our witchcraft and campsites saved your asses, didn’t it?”

“You don’t even have your own land anymore. You came to us.”

Feet shuffled, weapons clinked softly in whispered threats, sides were taken.

“What’s going on here?” The Greeks parted for their Queen.

Cyanne shouldered through her own crowd. “I think your warriors were getting ready to show us how grateful they are to us for showing them our hunting grounds.”

Tai'gee looked around at the polarization surrounding her. She couldn't deny she knew this was coming but she still didn't want to deal with it all yet. 'What to do?' Dark eyes roamed over hazel, blue, brown, black eyes all tinted and altered in the flickering firelight. The burning wood popped and hissed and was loud in the tension-heated silence. She could usurp them, she knew Cyanne expected a coup – she could just take over and tell them all how it was going to be. 'Which, at some point, would bring us right back here, with an even deeper and more bitter divide.' She took in a deep breath and felt her body tingle and relax within the blanket of contention.

"We came here looking for a new home with our sister Amazons, but that is not what we found," Tai'gee said with plain clarity. A pulsing surge of animosity greeted the statement, but she continued. "We are not Amazon sisters." Murmurs, shifting, resentment. "That does not mean we were received with less welcome, nor were we turned away, nor were we shunned and neglected as we got sick in body and sad in mind. You have taken us in as sisters, treated us as sisters, shared with us and protected us like sisters – there is much you have done for us for which an equivalent expression of gratitude would be hard to make; the feeling in my heart is nothing less than profoundly grateful."

Tai'gee motioned Beckries to her and took her under her arm while she moved subtly farther into the divide between Greeks and non-Greeks. Without the awareness of the younger warrior, they stopped moving next to the big, blonde Agheti. "Just because there's not this history that binds us, does not mean we can't make a family of ourselves." And here, Tai'gee reached slender fingers to the big Agheti and gently placed the two hands of the shy warriors together. Only she could see them blush in the fire stabbed darkness; everyone else saw only that the two disparates did not drop their hands when the Queen released them.

Before the silence got too awkward, some brave, good person started a drumbeat. A second and third drum followed quickly after and Tai'gee seized the moment to start a healing dance. She moved next to Beckries and Agheti, encouraging them to sway and dip even while they still stared shyly at their joined hands. Eponin shuffled up and began to move with the Queen to the music – her injured leg made her hips twist in an odd and interesting fashion, a move many others would try to copy themselves. It wasn't a party of joyous unity, a happy coming together of acceptance – it was tentative, slow, a mingling of consideration, a wondering if a friendship, if a family, could be built here.

~

It took months for Selah to heal to the point of being able to walk out of doors. At first she flinched at the most sedate and dawn-gentle finger of sunlight. She winced at the wink of a candle flame. Her skin healed back in strange pink patches making her exotic blue tint mottled and grotesque. I didn't like her, and I freely admit I wouldn't give her the benefit of a doubt in any situation, but I wouldn't have wished on her the injuries she suffered with now. She was changed, completely, and I worried that change was something about the old Selah that was making our journey possible.

As I look back over that last sentence, I realize it's not very clear what I mean. I had a friend once as a young girl. One day as we played together she fell and her head hit a rock. She was sick for several days and I worried about her. Even after she'd come home from the healing hut, she stayed inside for many more days. When she finally came out to play again, her heart-mother joined us, kept a protective eye on her. I asked her if she wanted to go to the fig tree just on the edge of the pavilion – our tree – we climbed it, hid in the wide crevices of its trunk, it was where we started any sessions of play. My friend said no; her heart-mother gently rubbed her head and explained that she didn't like figs anymore, they made her sick. It wasn't a huge change, but eventually our friendship fell apart – the fig tree and everything about and around it was a platform for who we were together and how we interacted – we lost that after her injury – it damaged us.

As I watched Selah trying to move her body, flinching and hissing as knots of scar tissue protested the stretching her muscles begged for, I worried over what changes this burning injury would bring to our journey. She wasn't the same woman – her eyes were dull, her movements staccato, her willfulness weak. Would she even want a throne and queendom now? Would she care to show herself to her people in her newly patched skin? Would she have the confidence to consider being a leader or would she prefer to be a wilted flower, content to hide in shadows and darkness and leave Kaija and me to whatever fate we struck for ourselves?

My feet didn't take long to heal, so I didn't stay confined to the hut more than a few days. I ventured out and took my worry with me. This tribe of brown people stood up and back and their children stared at me from dark doorways as though I were a shade from the underworld, mystifyingly visible during the day. I tried to watch them work, how they cooked, how they made weapons, listen to them sing or just talk amongst themselves, but all of that stopped whenever I passed by. I had nothing to divert my attention to other than try to be as obscure as possible – which was impossible.

Whatever I thought about their reaction to me, it was nothing compared to the reaction Kaija would receive when she came among the people. They ran from her. They hid. Some were brave enough to make an offering of food to her, but they shook from head to toe with fear and more often than not would drop the offering the moment Kaija reached out to take it. It could have been funny – honestly it would have been hilarious – but my laughter died one morning when I saw a child shriek at Kaija's approach and run away as if Hades' own pet was on her heels. Kaija watched the girl run, her bare feet pounding out dust clouds of retreat, her thin body streaking away like a whippet, and I saw that Kaija was truly hurt. I wondered if the villagers took a moment to see that, if they would still be so fearful of her.

“You don't owe these people anything,” I told Kaija as she pulled her eyes away from the retreating child. “There's no reason you should be hurt by them.” Her golden eyes studied me in the bright sunlight, and it was then that I became aware of just how drained the Lioness was getting. It was alarming. The circles and bags were deep and dark under her eyes, the lines of worry and work were deep on her face, the dark slits of pupil were darker still with exhaustion. I reached my hand out, put it into hers, entwined my fingers – “can you not at least rest here? Are we not safe for a little while?”

Kaija blinked slowly, her eyelids raised like anvils were tied to her eyelashes. “It is not need for sleep that makes me tired.”

“What then?” I was pleading. I wanted her to talk to me, I wished for it. It was plain she needed some kind of help and being fairly useless so far maybe I could at least offer an ear and get that right.

“When last we parted we spoke no words, and by no one else shall they be heard; but when we meet once again, I will voice those silent things to you then.”

“A riddle?” I let her hand go and felt longing and frustration burn through my body. “Why won’t you talk to me?” Everything around us was silent, and my complaint was amplified in it. Everything was so still any breath from one of the villagers would have been felt by the hairs on my forearm – if they dared to breathe while they hid. “I need you to...”

I was whining and when I realized it I became ashamed. My eyes dropped from hers, but as they fell, something odd caught my eye. There seemed like there was a glow, a red glow coming from Kaija’s shirt, like she was hiding a candle between her breasts and the light was shining up through the tight valley created by her halter top. It was about where her arrowhead would be – I’d noticed that jewel on many occasions, primarily because it was never the color it seemed like it should be. Sun, stars and fire are the only things I knew that created light, and none of those things belonged between the breasts of the Amazon Queen’s Consort. “Does that hurt you?” I nodded to her chest, and her eyes tracked down to see what I was talking about.

“A gift from my Pawpaw.”

“The feathers too, huh?”

Kaija reached for the leather thong around her neck and pulled the jewel and its adornments from their seclusion. The arrowhead was indeed glowing, fiercely, what I thought was a rather sickening bloody red – not a rich life giving blood, but a bright bloody sprawl that would make one cringe if they were at all squeamish. “Why does it glow? Does it mean something?”

Her thick, neat eyebrows pinched together as she studied her necklace, then looked at me. “It does not glow.”

“Yes it does. It’s bright red – can’t you see it?”

She continued to hold the jewel and feathers up then sighed in dismissal. “A gift from my Pawpaw,” she said again. She looked away sadly, and I followed her eyes to a dark doorway. I looked back, ready to ask her again if she’d talk to me and saw the red glow pulse rapidly, like a beating heart, faster as anxiety built. My own heart rate picked up as I watched and when I tore my eyes up from the throbbing point I watched the color fade from Kaija’s face, drain like it was running into her necklace, her eyes got more and more dull. It was scary – I was scared, and I grabbed her sagging shoulders and shook her, “Kaija!”

Her eyes rolled in drunken exhaustion and I heard, barely, “It wants to get out.”

My confusion and alarm cleared a moment later. I glanced back to her necklace, then her sad, golden eyes. “The rogue?” She gave a weak nod. I looked around us at the dark doorways and narrow but suspiciously parted curtains. “Is it getting stronger here?” Another weak nod. “Then we should leave, shouldn’t we?” Thick lips pulled thinly over large teeth. “What possible use is this quest now? Selah is half dead – she probably doesn’t even care about her empire anymore – and anyway, she’s not worth... you’re worth more than she is. So what about these people at the bottom of the world – what about our people?”

“Tai’gee.” Her eyes lowered, only remaining half open. “I am not safe. I cannot go back until I am safe.”

The bees and flies around us were loud, the sun was climbing high and its bright shine and radiant heat made the still world around us seem obnoxious.

“Simbaali.”

Hadimu walked up behind us, his huge, powerful body a black pillar silhouetted by the sun behind him. Out in the open, with mundane browns and cowering humanity, he looked even more like a block of man. His voice rumbled like Zeus’ thunder and lingered about us like the last groans of an earthquake. “Naendo.” He looked steadily at Kaija with indiscernibly dark eyes. “Nitasaidia.”

There was no telling what he said – he could’ve told us his left nut had just fallen off and I would still have smiled and nodded in incomprehension. Another look at Kaija and it appeared the rapid throbbing had slowed, the dangerously bloody glow dimmed; I wondered if Hadimu’s arrival had anything to do with it. I watched Kaija blink slowly, gradually come back into herself, before turning, without a word, and following the fleeing child’s path out of the village.

“Where are you going?” I called after her, but I may as well have asked the wind for all the answer I got.

Hadimu made a gesture for me to follow him, which I was none too eager to do in all honesty. I knew nothing about him, or why Kaija was leaving after whatever he said to her. But then Kaija had saved us once, I decided, and wouldn’t just leave me to need saving again – besides, this block of a man had had plenty of opportunity to mean us harm when we were much more vulnerable than now. I swallowed a mouthful of hot, dry air and set off after him.

We went back to the healing hut, much to my surprise. He pointed to our belongings without an attempt at explanation, then scooped up the still recovering Selah from her woven mats and made to leave. He didn’t so much as grunt at my demands for what he was doing, and when it was clear that he wasn’t coming back, I hastily grabbed everything I knew was ours – probably quite a bit that wasn’t – stuffed it all into our packs and jogged out after him. He had almost passed the place where he’d just met us earlier, carrying the long Selah like she were a sleeping child, her head lolled on his shoulder, limbs dangled loose and free. I trotted up behind them, all of our

gear pounding against me with each quick step. Selah's face was a study in resignation to pain; she squinted and grimaced, but made no move to get put down or see if she could adjust to a more comfortable position.

“Are you alright?” I asked her quietly. Her squinted eyes peeked at me in sad acknowledgment, her nonverbal answer ‘what can I do?’ He had, at least, covered her with a thin hide blanket to keep the burning sun off her overly sensitive skin, but the contact and movement she suffered with as he took another and another long, strong step probably felt just as bad.

We weren't long in catching up with Kaija's wavering silhouette as she walked out into the savannah. This grassy plain was much more inviting than the more desert-like one we'd passed through earlier. The sharp, shale ground that cracked and baked under the sun was sheltered here by long, dry grasses, cushioned our feet and kept them cooler. There were hills and shallow valleys, copses of jungle, and animals absolutely everywhere, grazing, sleeping, basking – the panorama was magnificent.

After probably an hour of walking, I realized I'd become a pack mule. Our three heavy sacks bit into my shoulders, and there was no adjustment that I could make to make them more comfortable. But what was my other choice – carry Selah? ‘Not likely.’

We stopped just before sundown, at a friendly edge of forest. The mosquitoes were horrendous, but the relieving shade eclipsed the insanity of their attack. Hadimu had us rub mud all over our skin, just like we'd seen warthogs and elephants do, and that kept the bugs at bay. I did wonder, ungratefully, if we weren't exposing ourselves to some other insect-like aggressor that might be burrowed in the mud, but since I wasn't suffering any immediate attacks I just kept my mouth shut and sat in my pile of wet dirt.

Selah looked miserable; totally wasted. Between the rough blanket Hadimu had draped over her rubbing against her soft skin, being carried in a not particularly cloudlike embrace, and the sweltering effect under her hide shield, I'm surprised there was anything left of her. Hadimu seemed like he was trying to be gentle, but I doubt there was any touch soft enough that wouldn't be painful. Hadimu laid her down on the mats I'd hastily grabbed up in our exodus and there she stayed in a kind of withered shock.

Kaija didn't look so great either. She looked haunted as she made a cautious way into a tuft of high grasses and took shelter in the shadowy nest. She was jumpy, her ears and eyes jumped to here and there at every sight and sound, and I decided it was really disturbing to see her that nervous. I asked her if she was alright, and, besides a startled glance, I got no response. Her necklace had stopped its angry glow – or at least dulled considerably. She curled up into herself inside her nest and dropped to sleep in moments right before my eyes. It was probably the first sleep she'd gotten in days. I backed away quietly and left her to her peace.

“She's sleeping finally,” Selah said more than asked. I nodded but didn't have the energy to be more conversational. Apparently that was fine with the dark figure because she had energy enough for both of us. “I noticed she had not been sleeping in the village. That was not a healthy place for her.”

“Why?”

“Because the evil in her mind feeds on the fear of others.”

I weakly tugged off my boot and wiggled my happily freed toes. “There was a lot of that there. Stupid people.” I shook my head then started unlacing my other boot. “She could’ve slept though. They were too afraid to do anything to her.”

It was Selah’s turn to shake her head, the pink patches on her face reflected the bright red of the sunset. “The magic the Rylah taught her to control the evil works best when the Simba is awake to control it – in her sleep she has less control.”

“But that’s ridiculous – Rylah knows Kaija’s got to sleep – why wouldn’t she teach her things for that?”

“Maybe she didn’t think it would get so bad.”

“*You* did?”

She smiled at me before slathering her face with mud. “I never count on the easy way. Life does not cater to easy ways, I don’t see why I should either.”

“Very prophetic of you. Why don’t you help her then, since you’re so prepared.”

Selah shrugged. “My knowledge does not extend so far. I know how to get in and I know how to get out – matters of control and change fall under the power of the witches.”

I tossed my other boot aside and frowned. I wanted to sleep too, but if Kaija was stone out, it didn’t seem smart for me to drift off as well and leave our safety to a strange, new man and a pathological, narcissistic liar. Hadimu saw my hesitation and nodded at me to go to sleep. It seemed ironic to me that I would trust this huge, dark man whose language I couldn’t even speak, more than his female counterpart, but he – so far – had shown a more trustworthy nature than had Selah. I nodded back and curled up to sleep.

VIII

“They’re gathering behind that set of hillocks over there and those to the west. They’re going to use the river to try to box us in.”

“What about this opening they’re leaving in the southwest? Why –”

“Because it’s swamp, impassible.”

“So we’re trapped.” Shingari sat back from the circle in irritated defeat. “Just like with the damn Romans and their civil war, pinching us right in the middle.”

“Hold it.” Tai’gee preemptively silenced the coming sighs, groans, and growls of agreement, protest, and whatever in between the various members of her council were getting ready to throw out. “Just hold on a second here. This is nothing like the Romanization war – not only were we not prepared for that, we were caught off guard. This we have forewarning of.”

“Fat lot of good it does us,” Adhera frowned. “We’re surrounded.”

Tai’gee regarded the young member with quickly draining patience. She wondered, for the umpteenth time, why this tribe refused to accept the gifts brought by planning and foresight – it was like they looked for reasons to be sad or disappointed in a head start on some desperate situation. “What would your people have done if we hadn’t joined with you?” the dark haired Queen asked calmly. “If we hadn’t been here to set up scouting patrols, to learn of this advance on our camp with plenty of time to come up with a plan, where would your people be?”

Adhera shot a look at Cyanne who remained indifferently passive in her self-relegated position in the second ring of attendees. Receiving no support or hint of an answer, the young blonde looked back at the characteristically larger Queen and shrugged her shoulders.

“You would have been slaughtered most likely,” answered Tai’gee succinctly. The Northerners flinched in on themselves with grimaces varying between rebuttal and shame. “You would have had to fight out from under surprise, which is almost always impossible to do. This warning we have now isn’t for us to use as a blanket to curl up under and wait for our attackers. Unless...” her deep, steady voice paused, “...you have no heart to fight. If that’s the case, you need to leave now, and take all of your cowardly brethren with you.”

“No! That’s not it at all!” The energy of Adhera’s outburst was reassuring, but Tai’gee raised an eyebrow, silently asking the youthful council member to explain what ‘it’ was.

Dark brown eyes darted about asking for support from her fellow Northerners as she stepped up to explain herself. “It’s just... knowing what we’re up against, all of them, the river and the swamp at our back... sometimes it seems like, to me, it’s better not to know.”

“Less scary?” Tai’gee supplied. At Adhera’s weak nod, Tai’gee smiled warmly. “That’s because you don’t know how to use the information. You have a new tool – weapon – in your hand and no idea how to use it. But you’re in luck, because we do, and we’re here now.”

Most of the Northerners looked comforted by that, and scooted closer to bring the circles together.

“So,” Tai’gee began as she returned her attention to the map drawn into the dirt in the center of the two circles of women. A long, wavy line indicated the river to the north, and the two sets of hills – one to the direct west, and one moving to nestle with the river closer to the northeast – were symbolized by soft humps. She smiled at the hills, drawn completely out of proportion, their size looking more like mountains than the pleasant undulations they actually were. She used a slim finger to draw in the marsh to the southwest, then the small woods tucked between

the hills to the east and the river to the north, where she and her Amazons had made their homes. 'Everything depends on how many of them there are,' she thought blithely. 'Let's imagine a thousand, five hundred split between east and west camps. One thousand against our two hundred.' She smiled again.

"You keep smiling Tai'gee... Is it the drawing or something else you wanna share with us?"

The young Queen turned a beatific eye to her second in command, her upturned lips never wavering. "I am thinking we may go down in the history scrolls for this one."

"What?"

"They've set everything up for us so nicely," Tai'gee continued. "We don't even have to go tramping a hundred miles to cut them off like Xena did when the Persians tried to attack Greece."

The circles were quiet, each woman looking at her neighbor for confirmation of her own confusion, despite if her neighbor was Greek or not. Each having received that confirmation, they all looked as one back at the still grinning Queen.

"Ok Taig' – we need some illumination here please," Eponin requested for herself and the others. She looked pointedly at the dirt map but couldn't see anything that would make her smile.

Tai'gee rose from her crosslegged position, dusted herself off, then retrieved two weapons: a spear and a bow. "What are our greatest strengths," she asked them all, then raised the weapons before her. "We Greeks are unmatched in the woods, our skills are best used in guerilla warfare, pinning forces with arrows. You," she indicated the Northern women with a wave of the spear, "are strongest on horseback, an unmatched cavalry we Greeks have not had."

"Cavalry?" an innocuous voice asked with a heavy Northern accent.

"Horseback. Your skills of warfare on horseback exceed our own," the Greek Queen clarified. "If we equaled in that tactic, I'd say we should cross the river and make them fight us on the plains."

Agheti, who bore a strong resemblance to Adhera, stood up to speak. "That's what we usually do. That's how we usually fight them. They've never attacked us like this."

"This is a volatile time of year between the haves and have nots," said Eponin. "The have nots are hungry in the spring when nothing has grown yet to eat."

"I told you they wouldn't hesitate to raid us if they ran out of food." Cyanne's tone rang with bitter satisfaction. "And here they are."

Dark eyes narrowed. “So they are. And their advance is an homage to our success in providing for ourselves this winter, which is something none of us were altogether convinced of being able to do at the beginning of it. Our first winter here was more of a gamble, but we’ve done very well for ourselves this time around. So now that they’ve come to take it, we need to let them know the ground rules on what we will and will not share with them.”

The uproar was immediate and outraged. “Share?” angry voices demanded of the ring leader in riotous rebellion. “It’s ours!” “We will not share!” “Are you crazy?”

The sound of a slow, deliberate unsheathing of a very sharp sword quieted them all, and Eponin’s glower softened to a glare as order was restored. Her sword’s disposition, however, never wavered.

“Yes, share,” said Tai’gee into the tense silence. “We need these men. We need allies, not enemies.”

“We don’t need men! You’re just scared,” yelled some brave dissenter who was careful to keep herself hidden.

“Scared of your ignorance maybe.” Tai’gee was growing irritated with their insistence of reactionary impulses and refusal of forethought. “Do you think the mare conceives her foal entirely of her own doing? Do you think it is only the mares that protect the herd? Come you great horsewomen – surely you know better than that...”

“They’ll want to rule over us!”

“Are you planning on letting them walk in and live with us? – Some Amazon.”

“– knew we shouldn’t have trusted you.”

“You want to turn us into whores!”

“Enough!” The sharp, suddenly high pitch surprised even Tai’gee, as her voice rarely hit that particular octave. “You people amaze me with your determination to see your own destruction.” Taking a breath to calm herself, Tai’gee continued. “You take abstinence and isolation from men too far. No society can survive without both kinds; our survival is linked with theirs, just like all other species of nature. Perhaps if your young minds had any elders remaining to teach you you’d know this by now; but your hot hormones drive you to all kinds of foolishness and here you are spouting naught but ignorance and stupidity.”

Angry exuberance pulsed back at Tai’gee from the young Northern women, displeasure at the insult as well as desire to prove themselves equal to the older, bigger Greeks. The same, brave dissenter as earlier, confirmed the energy. “Our ignorance sure saved you two winters back when you were dying of illness.”

“A debt already acknowledged and repaid,” Beckries shouted back. “And living tied to past paid debts is low class.”

Shingari also rose to speak, looking at Tai’gee for the privilege. Once granted, the slim huntress turned angry eyes on the youthful attendees. “Long has our Nation lived beside men in fruitfulness and peace, and never our way of life come into conflict or disorder by doing so. You haven’t even heard Queen Tai’gee’s plan or a word of her ideas before you try to denounce her and us.”

“I say we leave you to your fate and see how well your spells and traditions serve you,” Reena jumped in. Cho-chin immediately jerked her down and gave her a dangerous look when she started to protest. The teen remained seated.

“We won’t be leaving you to anything unless you wish us to, but it will take all of us to win this battle, and if we all don’t fully participate we may as well sit here and let them take and do what they like and not trouble ourselves with the casualties of fighting.”

“Well then what choice do we have?”

“Queen Tai’gee just listed your choices,” spat Beckries. “Apparently you weren’t listening.” The warrior had been inching farther and farther from Agheti, and now Tai’gee could easily and sadly see the distinct distance between them. Still, while it was a sad thing, it reaffirmed Beckries’ loyalty to her own tribe and the decisions of her own Queen without question. ‘She’d give up her lover for me, without hesitation. There’s something to be said for that,’ the Queen thought with a nod.

Agheti stood up this time, visibly intimidated by those surrounding her. It was obvious she rarely put herself at the center of attention, which made Tai’gee want to hear her all the more – someone like that felt very strongly about what she had to say.

“My cousin was right to say its scary knowing what’s coming for us – and we have fought well in the past not knowing. But we are a much smaller tribe than we’ve ever been and we can’t expect to keep winning without accepting that and using new strategies to fight. If it means saving my life and having the chance for a family of my own, I’ll do what the Queen Tai’gee asks.” She sat back down quickly, blushing fiercely under the weight of the room’s attention and moved closer to Beckries’ comforting allegiance.

“Thank you for your words, Sister.” Tai’gee looked over the quiet room. “Does anyone else have anything to say?” Wary eyes looked all around the room, each woman looking at her neighbor, but no one spoke. “Very well. Is there consensus that we’ll follow my plan or does someone else have an idea she would like to propose?” Here Tai’gee leveled a direct look at the sulking Cyanne. She had every intention of making it clear that this was Cyanne’s moment to state her position, and if she forfeited it that was her decision and it would not be renegotiable. The young blonde looked indifferently away. “So be it.” Tai’gee knelt before the dirt map again and around her both circles collapsed as everyone tried to see what she was going to do.

“When we leave this building, every Greek will take position in the woods where we’ve built our homes. Every Northerner will get a horse and move into position on the northwest side of these woods.”

“Why? Forgive me, but it looks like you’re setting us up to defend you while you hide in your homes...”

Many dirty looks were shot at the young Egili, a tactless but well meaning almost teenager.

“You’ve heard of fighting with a battle sister at your back?”

“Of course.”

“Well this puts all thirty of you back to back with the two hundred of us.” Slight nods but not much conviction from any but the Greeks. Tai’gee continued. “Our position in the woods will force the eastern advance to attack us on our own turf, a bunch of foot soldiers tangling with us in dense forest growth where we excel. The western advance will have to gallop over and out of the hills and all this way across the plain before they even reach arrows’ range of our cavalry, here. They’ll be tired and unable to surround us because the river will border them to the north, and if they wheel south they will have to drive right into us in the trees all over again.” Tai’gee paused to see how her plan was being received and was pleased with the many brightened expressions. “Anyone who isn’t able to ride or fight in the trees should be given a bow – they’ll cross the river and shoot down the plains riders as they approach. Shingari and Seti will arrange that contingent – they’re our best archers.”

“That’s smart Taig’,” Ep breathed quietly, and the young Queen warmed considerably under the praise.

“But if we drive them off, when do we negotiate with them?” asked Adhera. Her younger cousin practically laid across her back in effort to see over her, and the result was a two-headed, blonde giant.

Tai’gee looked pointedly at Beckries then Eponin. “We do that first. Ep and Beckries will each lead a delegation of three to each advance and explain our position. If they accept, shoot a fire arrow into the air; if not... one unlit arrow we’ll take to mean ‘No.’ You’ll need to take someone that can speak their language.”

Beckries and Eponin looked back at their Queen with grim determination. She appointed them because they were the most trusted, but their mission could also amount to suicide if the men don’t care for the message or the messengers. They would be laying their lives on the line, but it was an order from their Queen, and therefore an order from Artemis.

The meeting broke up with much chatter, both excited and cautious, but it made Tai’gee happy that she didn’t hear any questioning or dissent from the departing women and girls. Eponin and Beckries hung back to discuss in more depth what they were to say and their roles. After that, Beckries excused herself and went to find Agheti to prepare.

Eponin and Tai'gee regarded each other in the silent hall, the two big fires flickering light as their own futures flickered as well.

"I didn't want to choose you Ep. I want you to stay with me... not that I'll be any safer, but at least... we'd be together..."

"I won't fail you my Queen," the warrior replied solemnly.

"I know you won't Ep. It's just..."

The guard took a step closer, narrowing the distance between them to a gap Tai'gee couldn't restrain herself from crossing. Desperately she reached across the space and pulled the smaller woman to her – she'd meant to embrace only, hug and seek comfort, but somewhere passion inserted itself and a kiss engaged between the two Amazons that was returned to the other in equal measures of intensity. It was wild and lustful and longing and Tai'gee came to herself abruptly in that frantic embrace and pulled away.

"Ep I'm – so sorry. I didn't mean to."

The warrior heaved a half limp closer, her dark eyes boring into the equally dark eyes of the woman before her. "Don't you apologize Tai'gee. Don't you dare."

"Ep –"

"–No. This was a long time coming. You know it and so do I." Her glance skitted to the side and a small wicked grin bent her lips upward. "Actually I expected I would kill Cyanne before kissing you, but I knew it would come all the same."

"Eponin, I'm just so scared... and I mi–"

The older guard's voice dropped in pitch and raised in volume, a voice she usually reserved for barking commands to her warriors. "Don't! I said. I mean it. Kaija was nowhere in the kiss we just shared. It was me you wanted and me you got; don't cheapen yourself by denying it."

Tai'gee's dark eyes shuttered at Kaija's name – she pulled pieces of herself behind dark, boarded windows, locked them back tightly. She didn't recognize her own voice when she spoke again and supposed some of that went behind the shutters as well. Eponin leaned back from her, straightening herself to put as much distance between them as she could without actually stepping backwards. "I can't do this Eponin. Kaija and I are married in more than just Amazon ceremonies. I care for you deeply, I do; and if things were different... maybe... Kaija is my heart."

Eponin, true to the self she's never hidden or apologized for, replied as fiercely as she felt. "She is not here," the guard growled. "She is not here in this room, she wasn't in your mind, and she

damn sure wasn't in that kiss. All you feel now is guilt and I defy that sentiment when it's so obvious what you want."

"Ep, stop, please."

A difficult step forward by the crippled guard. "You haven't grown to love me? You haven't been wondering about the pleasures I could give you? Have you taken offense lately at the mistakes of the Northerners who call me Consort? You tell me this was all spontaneous and you imagined it was Kaija standing in front of you – you tell me that! When was the last time you stepped outside to check every horizon for her? You tell me!"

Tai'gee backed away, cowed but unwilling to go on. "Stop Eponin, enough. You need to go now. You need –" her voice broke. "I must go check on my children." She hurried past Eponin, more than arm's length away, ignored the guard's calls then yells for her to come back, broke into a run she knew the lame guard wouldn't be able to keep up with and quickly dismissed Dove who was babysitting. It was an unceremonious, and downright rude, dismissal of the teenager, and the flustered, bewildered girl stood outside the firmly closed door, staring at the solid wood, trying to process what had just happened. She'd been rushed out of the Queen's house so quickly she wasn't sure if she'd handed off the prince or dropped him – or maybe she still held him. Stunned, she looked at her empty hands, turned and walked befuddled back to her barracks.

Inside her home, just as bewildered, shocked and shaken, Tai'gee clung to the baby in her arms; the shock of dark hair gave no indication of which twin she held, but the smell of the baby was distinctly her son. She breathed him in deeply, her little Inon. She cried over him and he was still in her arms while she did – maybe still recovering from the shock of things. Finally, having calmed somewhat, Tai'gee held the baby away from her, looked into his deep blue eyes. Puzzled, he tried smiling at his mother's strange expression.

"What's happening to me? What am I doing?" She shook her head. "After all I've learned, what am I doing?"

Inon didn't like being held away from his mom, he didn't like her strange looks and voice. He didn't like that she didn't respond to his smiles and reaching hands. He was a tough baby, but not in his mother's arms, and he cried his sadness and rejection.

"No no no baby boy, shhhh; not you. Don't cry my little prince." As she walked and bounced to calm him, cooing in his ear, rubbing his back, her main door opened, flooded the room with light, and the surprise of it stilled them both. Eponin stood in the doorway, entered and closed away the world behind her.

"I am risking my life tomorrow, and I'm going to know that we talked about this." She spoke quietly, firmly; her strong voice filled the room.

Tai'gee looked at the woman, compunction flowed through her with the effects of a sleep-inducing drug. She moved sluggishly around the firepit, passed her son's crib and laid him in his

sister's, she sleeping soundly. He didn't stay laid, however, and rolled over to crawl to the railing and pull himself up. He tucked his big baby lip into his mouth with the effort, drool glistened on his chin, and he burred as he looked through the bars. He tried to bounce, but his legs weren't strong enough for standing, let alone bouncing, and he sat down hard, discovering his sister's foot now close at hand and started to play with that.

Eponin remained where she was, soundlessly letting Tai'gee stall by putting a pot of water into the fire, stoke it, and eventually come to sit at the little, battered table now moved next to it.

"It's been more than a year, Ep," she mumbled as she picked at a hangnail. "Much more – almost two now. The babies will be walking soon. I wasn't even showing when she left."

Eponin stayed where she was to speak. "And all this time you've not even spoken her name to them," she said with a nod at the crib.

"And I won't until Kaija returns. I won't have them pining for a mother that they may never know."

Eponin's full lips pulled themselves thin.

Tai'gee shook her head and chose a different finger to pick at. "After all these years, all this time, even with Amana, Kaija was faithful to me. She's never betrayed me, never indicated in any way that I wasn't what she was devoted to. And after Amana I thought I'd learned that and understood the bond between us – I had it shown to me in the lights of spirit and energy – she's tied to my eternity and... my... she's part of the essence of me. How, then, can I possibly find interest in someone else? How can I desire someone else? How can this be and not make all of that untrue? If she's my soul's companion how can I possibly be in love with you?"

"Because you are human and she is not." With that, the crippled guard limped to the table and stood before Tai'gee who still refused to look at her. "You are a human with desires and motivations and capabilities that are not and cannot be focused to singularity. Kaija is something else..."

"She could be here Eponin, alive and well, and just nearing this place to return to me – then what? Or she could be dead, all of them dead and I'd never know. Or her return might take another five years, or more – look at Odysseus! Penelope waited for him for ten years after the ten year war! Twenty total! A human wife married to a human husband, and I can't wait two before my heart goes wandering?" She slapped the table and took comfort in the stinging of her fingers and palm. 'Penance. Small, insufferably insufficient penance.' "*I would stand naked in a frost mist,*' I said." Her voice dropped to introspection. "Naked. And it appears I only have to wait long enough to get cold before I seek warmth elsewhere. I've tried so hard not to think of her, so I can get through the day, and now I don't. I get through every day, and I don't think of her anymore. I've been given a soulmate I do not deserve."

With her usual amount of difficulty and the added discomfort of trying to be gentle, Eponin lowered herself to sit on her haunches, her wounded right leg sticking absurdly to the side.

“Xena and Gabrielle were soulmates – they said so often. And Xena had a child, Gabrielle didn’t know she was even pregnant. She wouldn’t say who the father was. They spent all their time together and still found people to love apart from themselves.” She watched Tai’gee’s eyes go glassy and decided to change her direction. “It’s been almost two years in time yes, but it’s been lifetimes in events Tai’gee. You’re a different woman now. You may need to change the nature of your relationships to accommodate this newness.” The quiet guard rested a soft hand on Tai’gee’s nearby knee.

Silence. The finger picking had stopped. The shifting, questioning gaze had stilled. “Queen.”

Puzzled, Eponin agreed. “You ar–”

“*Queen* Tai’gee.”

The hand withdrew. Eponin’s throat tightened, her quietness turned stony. “Yes my Queen. I understand perfectly.”

Shoving herself upright and jerking her clothes straight, the guard made a salute and shuffled out without a look backwards. The door closed sharply.

The low, radiating fire had burned down to quiet embers; no happy crackling and cheery flames. Inon burbled again, but now it was in his sleep. The little bit of water left over in the pot she’d placed in the heat was now boiling – she could hear the pops of the thin, shallow bubbles echoing from the high, thick pot walls.

“Woud you like to know her?” she asked quietly. “Do I speak of her and give you an acquaintance before you meet? Or not and let her meet strangers? And if I speak of her and she never returns? Or I don’t speak, she never returns, and you never know of her? Never know the greatest love of my life, you the children we should be raising.” ~*Humans cry Tai’gee*~ ‘She always wondered what she was, and I am the real monster.’

~

These people looked like ghosts. They looked like haunted ghosts, looked guilty for surviving as only shells that had just the barest desire to live. They wore clothes that were painfully bright with life, festive even, as were the woven blankets standing guard in the doorways and windows of modest mud homes. I couldn’t decide if it was a sin for them to be surrounded by these gay things they’d made to celebrate and claim a life they looked terrified to live, or maybe just irony. Maybe these were the results of bright enthusiasm for their world from a bygone time, and their previous happiness and efforts were so strong even time and despair would be hard pressed to dull them. Funny how the physical could outlast the spiritual.

But they moved and worked and watched us with naked suspicion, studied Kaija and I with a shocked curiosity. Selah walked through her people with a posture similar to one I’d adopt if I were walking over some nasty thing; something I was forced to sully my soles with. She had nothing but disdain, it appeared, for the people she was coming back to claim, and I asked myself

for some unknown high number of times, why she was doing this... why she'd drug us along to do this.

"She has her own reasons," Kaija had said, "and so do we. So we are all satisfied."

I tried to be satisfied. Maybe I was for a little while but I didn't make a strong enough effort to make it last. I think I just didn't care to be satisfied because it meant I couldn't be angry at Selah anymore, and that was really the only thing propelling me through this adventure. Well, that and Kaija; being around her powerful presence, even weakened and fragmenting as it was, was vitally sustaining to me. Not to mention that I loved her.

I'd finally admitted that to myself somewhere between Hadimu's village and Selah's ultimate recovery. Denying it was pointless, but that's not to say I was any less ashamed. I had no right to love her like I did, it was all my doing, my fault, my allowance – it's not like Kaija ever encouraged anything more intimate than friendship between us. For the last several weeks she's not so much as smiled, barely even looked me in the eyes, just exhausted, sweeping glances that left me feeling more ignored than if she'd physically been trying to hide from me. I know why she refused to look at me though – and it wasn't just me – she was afraid to do anything that would make a connection the Rogue could use to get out, and apparently looking someone straight in the eye was just such an outlet.

I couldn't imagine what Kaija must be going through; with every step she took, passing by every house in the outer perimeter of Selah's storied great village, passed each haunted and intimidated heart, each fearful gasp as yet another person realized she was not as human as she first appeared, and the stabbingly fearful uncertainty that came with that realization fueled that pulsing rock at her neck, fed that tormentor Aries had planted deep in her psyche. I imagined anyone else would have gone legitimately insane with the torment of being held prisoner inside their own mind, and that fueled my own admiration and awe of her even more. Her every waking moment was a struggle with herself, her sleeping moments were fitful with paranoia and Spartan in peace.

What I truly did not, and don't think I ever will, understand is why Kaija never took off that infernal stone. It seemed to me the source of all her problems, all of our problems. As soon as it was figured out what role the necklace was playing, why hadn't it been removed and destroyed?

"Gift from my Pawpaw," she'd said once, but it was a gift that was destroying her, one that could lead her to destroying all of us – surely as intelligent as she is, pure sentiment wouldn't be able to outweigh those dire facts...

And still, here we were, making our way passed hostile and trepid ghosts.

Hadimu's deep voice rumbled inside his chest, which I easily interpreted to be a growl of distaste at the reactions of those by which we silently walked. Apparently, the rumble was speech, to which Selah responded with a grim nod of her head.

"The witch knows we are here. These people's connection with it is feeding our presence to it."

“Great... there goes our element of surprise,” I grumbled.

Selah shot me a brief grin. “Did you really expect to have that?” The pink patches around her full lips pulled together to pinch in blushing humor. “Even you could have given us away had you not started practicing your mind control.”

“Yeah, yeah. And they have none which is why the witch has the control over them that it does. I know. What I want to know is why aren’t they giving us a welcome party if they know we’re here? They’re just... watching us.”

“These are just the women.”

The look I shot Selah could have killed her if I had the power. “And?”

“And they do not fight.”

“Well, it’s a good thing for them we’re not here to murder and pillage then,” I said with venom. As usual, Selah wasn’t fazed.

Kaija, on the other hand, seemed to be moving slower and slower the farther into the territory we went. What little of her eyes I could see had gone glassy, watery, vague. She walked as though she were trying to pull herself through a waist high tar pit. Finally, in a more populated section of outer villages, she stopped, drug to a halt like an over-laden ox cart.

“Lioness?” I squatted down before her so I could look up and into her eyes. Her lips were parted, and something garbled past them but I couldn’t hear what it was, so I stood, put my ear right beside her lips in a more intimate posture than I’d ever been with her. I could feel her breath on my shoulder, the warmth of her face on my cheek.

“Not safe anymore, am I?”

“What? What do you mean?”

“Not safe. I almost killed her because I had no control.” Her shaggy head moved side to side in a weak shake of ‘no.’ “Not safe I said. ‘We will deal with it.’ But no one is safe. I am not safe.”

I could feel my forehead crowd on itself in confusion. “What do you mean? Who?”

“Xena.”

“You didn’t kill Xena, Kaija.” I reached out to her elbow, softly pulled her closer to me. “You haven’t harmed any of us. You’ve saved us so many times.”

“She was going to help me be safe. For my Tai’gee.”

Our bodies were pressed tightly together, all from my own inching closer and closer, still coaxing her into me with my soft touch on her elbow. And Tai'gee's name broke the spell. I dropped my hand, but did not yet back away until her next statement.

“The babies should be born now. My Tai'gee without me because I am not safe.”

And she sank, dropped as though her bones and muscles dissolved into mush; dropped before me in a heap of exhaustion and defeat, completely senseless.

“What is this?” Selah demanded. “What did you do to her?”

“N-nothing! We were talking.”

Selah looked down at Kaija as though at some sort of traitor, some poisonous pustule that purposefully chose that precise moment to explode and poison the whole body. “We're too close now.”

“Too close? Are you crazy? She's done nothing but push herself for months – she should have collapsed ages ago – don't you dare –”

A huge dark hand reached between us, then a second, and we were gently but undeniably pushed apart from our standoff over Kaija.

Hadimu looked down at Kaija's crumpled form with a tenderness one would reserve for a well loved child crippled with illness. Pushing us farther away to the ends of his massive arm's-length, he knelt and gathered her to him like he was collecting the whole of a squirming group of chicks – each one soft and fragile and precious. She looked so small nestled against his massive chest. Her face was drawn, the grayness of it was blown into the likeness of dustless granite against the moist ebony of his body. She looked dead and it terrified me.

He stood there with her for many moments, gazing at her with such tenderness and care. An obnoxious surge of jealousy shot through me. How dare he get to look at her with so much affection? But of course he could dare because his love for her was innocent, and mine, unarbitrarily, was not. He held her to him like the most precious of rare things and in his arms, under his tender, loving gaze, she was awoken, revived, reborn. I watched as her eyes, first still closed, rolled under heavy lids, then fluttered heavily, stopped to rest half open and shifted from blank stare to purposeful regard. She returned his gaze, to my horror, she looked into his soft, dark eyes with unbroken intensity; and he continued to stare back.

‘The Rogue – the way out!...’

But no evil came of their shared moment. In fact, what came of it was nothing Kaija could have gotten from anywhere or anyone else. I know this now after seeing what he did for her, but not then.

Gradually her golden eyes opened further, looked upon her supporter more fully, drank in what he offered more deeply. She grew in his arms, from weak, uncoordinated babe to struggling toddler and as her adolescence approached, a glowing emerged in her eyes – sparkling, glittering like sunlight on water, intense but glancing. But as she emerged from her adolescence, the uncertain glinting came together more solidly, strengthened, resolved itself into something fierce and prime.

And as Kaija grew, Hadimu shrank – well, not shrank so much... ungreww? It was like the lifeblood was being drained out of him, like he was bleeding to death right before my eyes, but not a drop of red splashed onto the day-dry dust. His arms began to shake, his legs, his whole body racked with tremors as his depletion neared complete – and still he kept his eyes locked onto the golden orbs before him. It was all as quick as if one of the great arteries had been cut, bleeding him dry in seconds, nowhere near a minute. He was dying right before me, sunk on the ground, giving his life away, the milk of his love nourishing Kaija back to health and on to battle, while he, having given all, withered into a bone dry body.

Kaija looked on him, golden eyes wide and full, so full I couldn't identify what was in them, for only a few long moments. Unceremoniously she turned back to our route, her immense muscles rejuvenated, propelled her forward with a power and purpose I hadn't seen from the Lioness since we'd abandoned Amazon Land.

“Come, it is time to finish,” Selah beckoned. She looked down at the life-drained Hadimu and I refused to try to identify her expression.

IX

I wrote two versions of my travels: one that encompassed absolutely everything, and one for the Queen. In the Queen's, I omitted everything that suggested my feelings for Kaija. In my heart I knew I was a traitor, but that did not mean I needed to throw doubt on Kaija's loyalty. Because who would believe, after all these months and years, that there was never more between us than her want for her wife and my want for her?

As it turned out, I needn't have wasted my time. The Queen lowered the last parchment, the last of my story I'd written for her, which she had me stand at attention while she read, and fixed her deeply dark eyes on me with illegible intensity.

“You love her.”

How much more treason could I commit? Lie to the Queen? “Yes.”

She nodded at my heavy word, and I rushed into an immediate defense. “She never felt the same way my Queen. She only thought of you the entire time.”

“I imagine she did,” she murmured. She set the scroll aside. “Tell me the rest.”

She might've asked me to stab myself. It was all there, I'd put so much into writing it. "I did – I did what you said. I wrote everything down." Looking into her direct gaze I realized just why she was so intimidating. Her eyes gave away nothing. Their depth was like a deep, dark pool, perhaps you could see what she thought down at the bottom, but more likely you'd drown before you got there. "You believe me don't you?"

A small smile. "Noki; no one knows Kaija better than me. No one will ever need to tell me I'm not the center of her heart. Tell me the rest."

~

"Meeting the witch was actually anti-climactic. We were greeted by a violent, aggressive guard as we neared the sprawling central village. They were wiry, muscled men, streaked with paints and piercings, lean and sleek like cheetahs, sneering and howling at us like angry baboons. Their lances surrounded us like a boa constrictor with porcupine quills. Even trapped like we were I couldn't help thinking how strange the three of us must look: a mottled Afrikan a full head taller than myself; me, tanned darkly but looking just as milk white as winter compared to the writhing darkness surrounding us; and of course, Kaija, smaller by far than anyone else, and – for once – her fearsome features and lines of animal heritage weren't so obvious in the face of the brilliantly bared teeth and wide eyes flamed before us.

"We kept moving, and they moved with us, chattering and yipping as the front half of the circle shuffle-stepped backwards and the back half shuffled forward, always stabbing back and forth with their lean lances. Our determined stride slowed to an inching struggle. It was suffocating, the space of unpierced air around us was growing smaller and smaller, their frightful faces closer and it was obvious, no matter that we had the Lioness, there was nothing she would've been able to do to save us if they decided to make their threatening attack real.

"None of us said anything, just kept walking as best we could. Apollo brought the sun over us, it seemed, just as close as the spear points, and it was hot beyond sanity. I was scared. I mean, it's one thing to be armed and ready to fight back at the enemies before me, but it's entirely something else to have *nothing*... to be able to do *nothing*.

"And as suddenly as we were surrounded, the pulsing warriors broke up and we were standing in front of a wooden alter... throne maybe. The dark warriors were everywhere, but the sudden freedom of air between them and us seemed to drop the temperature about twenty degrees. I kept looking at the throne, waiting for something to happen, but ... nothing. I looked at Selah and was surprised to see such an expression of hatred and revulsion. I looked back quickly thinking something must have appeared when I glanced away. But there was nothing except the wooden construction. Something did catch my eye as I looked that second time; the wood seemed carved into familiar shapes – but they weren't carved at all; the entire stage was made of human bones. Dark ravens set atop the structure bleating evilly and rubbing their black iron beaks against some man's femur. My stomach turned and I reached for Kaija.

"I couldn't touch her though. My fingers grazed against some energy that absolutely radiated around her. Looking at her I thought I could see the shimmer of the energy surrounding her, but

it could've been my own dizziness. I was starting to feel lethargic, and the world seemed slow and blurry around me; I thought it was heatstroke and then I thought, 'what a shame that would be. How could I have come all this way, gone through so much, just to pass out from heatstroke at the near end?'

"Kaija stirred next to me and her energy brushed my arm, and the fogginess cleared some. She moved forward, in front of me and said 'You will not.' I could see right over her head, and felt my eyes squint as I tried to see what she saw, but there was nothing but the human bone stage. With more difficulty this time I looked again at Selah and who had become an exquisitely tall melting candle. 'You're melting,' I said. She squinted back at me and said 'it's the witch; you have to fight it back.'

"'Oh,' I thought slowly. Then I thought of Rylah and that I needed to focus my attention on the center of myself because that was step one. It was all very surreal, especially when the blazing sun disappeared behind dark thunderheads; Zeus just rolled in front of his son in his dark chariot to steal any attention the Sun God was garnering.

"'Focus, focus,' I kept thinking to myself and it was very hard, but by bits I felt like I was getting myself under more of my own control. Things in general had a certain haze around them, but I didn't feel quite as drunk. And that was when I could see who it was Kaija was talking to, and the shock of it – my Queen, I will never forget. Seated on a chair of bones was – it was a midget my Lady – a real one, I'd never seen such a human, though I've heard of them. It looked like, well a child not fully formed, but then its arms and legs weren't jointed just right to be a normal child. I think it was probably four feet tall at most – and I keep saying 'it' my Lady because the meager coverings it wore revealed exactly what Selah had said all along. It had the breasts of a woman, but the genitals of a man – not a full man from what I've seen in my life, but it couldn't be denied that's what it was. It held a scepter of bone, and wore a crown of huge teeth, molars between canines. Its eyes were hooded in an over-large head for the rest of its body.

"The witch stood up on its throne – I couldn't understand how under the weight of so many bone necklaces – finger bones I saw, and wondered why the guilt of such use of a human body didn't make that weight overpowering. I thought that must be what evil was, and was so repulsed the fog shadowing my mind completely dissolved, and I looked on everything with a new clarity.

"I stepped from behind Kaija, and admittedly looked with disgust at the nearly naked, misshapen creature standing on its abominable throne. It looked back at me from under thick hooded lids, its dark body glistened even in the darkness of the sudden cloud cover. Then it spoke to me – and its voice was – couldn't have been human. It was so high my Queen, so high it hurt to hear. It screeched in its highness like the squeal of metals as they rub unwillingly against each other. 'You think you are free of me?' it said. And there was something of a smile in that dark, ugly face. 'I'm in your mind now. I will be there for the rest of your life. You will never be free of me.' And, I fear, my good Queen, that the witch was right. Even now I can see its hideous shape as clearly as if it stood before me still.

"Then it cut its eyes to Selah, without turning its head from me. 'What is this you've brought me Selah? Is this the creature gift you promised me in return of your rulership?'

“I turned to her myself and demanded to know what this was. Selah answered the witch in her own language and then I realized the witch had yet to actually speak – somehow it was talking into my mind. I shook my head, but I could still understand that evil wretch and not understand the false Selah.

“‘You say I’m twisting the story? Did you not pledge a creature god for me in exchange for your queenship back? It is your own fault if your companions misunderstood; of course they’re basing their knowledge of the situation on what you’ve told them.’ The witch’s eyes cut back to me. ‘I see that Selah has told you she needed your help to rescue her people and this creature god was the only savior there was to stand against me. But she has brought me something greater than a bargaining chip – be assured, that is all you were supposed to be.’ I looked at Selah again, and – Queen Tai’gee, if I could have killed her, believe me I would have. I knew she’d been lying, I knew it as surely as my own heartbeat, and even though that evil dwarf repulsed me, I knew I could believe everything it said with more surety than any promise from the gods.

“But I couldn’t kill her because Kaija was between us and the ‘you will not’ she’d ordered at the witch pounded in my mind as a directive that included an attack on our lanky guide. I looked back at her and saw that her golden eyes were lowered, but an energy was still building in her, and therefore around her, and she felt much bigger than she’d ever looked.

“The dwarf witch was speaking into my mind again, directly to me. ‘You should tell your mistress that I am as much her servant as she is mine. We shouldn’t need to fear hurt from each other.’ I thought I didn’t feel anything like fear from Kaija and the witch chuckled in my head. I was offended for sure, but angry more that the evil little thing could invade me so easily. I yelled at it to talk to her itself.

“Selah said to me the witch cannot communicate with Kaija, but I screamed at her to shut up. ‘Don’t you say another word, you worthless lying bitch! Anything else and I’ll cut your forked tongue right out of your mouth!’ And the witch laughed again and I felt a warmth from it and knew it approved of my reaction. Which of course disgusted me more and I was all the angrier as it spoke to me again. ‘But she is right. Your mistress is quite impenetrable to me. She has something I want, and I would guess she would equally like to give it to me. A mutual exchange – her burden is a gift to me – then we will go our ways in this world.’

“‘Or?’ And the witch’s hooded eyes looked coldly at me before sweeping over our heads at the hundred dark warriors surrounding us and their battle cries and blood curdling screams for violence ripped my heart with fear. They seemed much worse than the death promised by Selah at the jaws of hyenas – they seemed like they would, and gladly, prolong the torture of dying as long as inhumanly possible, and I believe firmly, the witch forced into my mind their peeling of the flesh around my fingers and removal of the bones underneath for yet another prize necklace. The gore and pain of the image was so real to me I felt myself go green with fear and revile.

“You see, life is naught but give and take – I ask no more than does life. That is not unfair. Let me say, “give me this and take your lives,” and not that I will have to take your lives and give you nothing instead. Tell your mistress.’

“It was such a compelling proposition my Queen. I was perplexed even as I spoke to Kaija; I didn’t want to be any ambassador for that monster and yet I couldn’t stop myself from saying, ‘it is a burden to you Kaija – you can give up the Rogue and be rid of it – then we can go back home clean. That’s what you want right? To be rid of the Rogue?’

“Kaija turned her head to me and I felt the numb buzzing in my mind and recognized it immediately as the control of that awful creature. I felt so weak and worthless, to be overcome so effortlessly, working for it willingly. I don’t know that I’ll ever again know such shame – it will never fade from me. And Kaija smiled at me while she kept her eyes low. ‘I want my Tai’gee,’ she said. ‘And you look like her. That will make this easier.’”

“She raised her golden eyes to me then, looked me right in the eye – all the color drained from her sparkling eyes – they became like rotten gold, putrid, diseased, and her stolid face dissolved into a monstrosity of aggressive anger. I could do nothing as I watched the Rogue surface, pulling itself from Kaija’s interior on the line of our gaze, and I was petrified as I watched it come. I felt and saw seething and growling and hate climb to her eyes as I could never imagine seeing from someone as sincere and unprovokable as she was. Even while I stared into her and knew I was staring at her, images began flashing at me, bringing that raging mania closer and closer up the anchor. I saw hate twisted faces, one after another, a big man throwing fist sized rocks at a small me – for I was both myself and herself at once – I was bleeding and scared of him and he didn’t care – I saw as an infant the psychotic disgust of a man holding a huge bleeding rock where my mother’s head should have been full and smiling at me – I saw rows of faces of men and women and children shaking in fear of me even while they shot arrows at me and lances – I felt the searing stab of knives and the curses of death hissed in pleasure into my ears – there was a crushing surrounding of me, fear and repulsion as I stood weak in the middle, knowing only sadness, just empty lonely sadness, and no one cared for my hurt – and my heart swelled in the middle with all the vengeance I never retaliated with, it burned in this one spot, hot and searing anger – I was full of desire to rip their hate-beating hearts from them and devour that hate for my own – I wanted to beat them bloody with their fear and drink my fill of their weak blood and I could feel myself growling for it –

“The witch screamed and flew at me from its bone throne. ‘I want it! You cannot give it to her – it’s mine!’ And I knew it was flying at me to dash my brains with its scepter of bone but as the heavy head of it came forward, the rotted gold exploded and the light of suns burned from Kaija’s eyes. The Rogue was between us, outside of her but not yet into me, and she pushed me sharply back and stepped forward. The joint head of the bone club came down on Kaija’s chest, directly on the gleaming white arrowhead and as it shattered a clap of thunder erupted overhead, an immense golden roar ripped from Kaija and it must have been lightening that scalded the rest of the scene into my mind as I was thrown backwards.

“There was a blue flame where the witch should have been just falling to the ground from its wild flight – a quickly burning flame and rain of ash. There were great white wings behind Kaija

and before I hit the ground there were two things – the hatred that was chasing me as I fell, looking for another home, dissolved, crumbled before me in the same raining blue ash – and a voice, deep and feminine and godly masculine with the gentleness of a virgin maid: *All your life you've known nothing but service. Come with me and know no more.*

Kaija was surrounded by gold and light, and a burst of a crying soul wounded with hurt and exhaustion, on the brink of defeat, surrounded me. Kaija threw her head back, I saw blood dripping from her chest where the arrowhead must have pierced her heart; there was a sigh – the last sigh of quick coming death – ‘Yes’ – and I hit the ground. I opened my eyes again as fast as I could but there was nothing to see.

“I blinked and blinked, but nothing remained nothing.

“When I could get up there was only this.”

I held out to the Queen a black leather thong adorned with two sparkling, iridescent, unmarred, white feathers mounted by gold fasteners, the Queen’s Circlet, and an ivory handled knife, carved by masters with god-blessed skills. The Queen took a couple steps forward and reached tentative fingers to the necklace, stroked the tips of their fine whiteness.

“Nothing else? Nothing?”

‘No body,’ she means. I shook my head, and more tears fell free. “There was nothing. I think the lightning incinerated her. Maybe a god took her. But there was nothing. Only the pile of ash that was the witch and the Rogue. The heat of it melted my clothes and Selah’s. She survived as well. I didn’t have the heart to kill her later. I just... left. I just left and it took me two years, but I came directly here. This is all I have to give you. ...Kaija... I lost her.”

X

Noki did not wish to stay with us in our new village, and I didn’t try to convince her otherwise. It was her choice, and I wouldn’t try to convince her of anything other than what she felt. She’d well earned the right to not be questioned.

Before she left our village, we had several long talks, all about Kaija, and mostly about questions Noki had about why Kaija had done what or acted like she did. I had said I knew her best in all the world, but given my temporary infidelity I felt unsure in my qualifications to answer many of her questions. Some I could, but not all.

Noki wanted to know what Kaija had meant about being unsafe. I explained Kaija’s periodic descent into the realm of the Rogue – drawing on its uncensored violence so she could wield a powerful weapon in our favor and turn herself into a killing machine. But Kaija knew she could easily lose all control to the Rogue and that it was building and could forcibly overtake her when she wasn’t expecting it. Both possibilities scared her master sense of stolid goodness. She was realistic and practical enough to know as the Rogue grew, an instability in herself would also grow and that was why she regarded herself as unsafe. Hurting other humanbeings was never

her first inclination in any situation, and doing something like that could have been so easy for her given her strength and intelligence; those skills under the control of something that wished nothing but pain on the world scared her deeply.

Noki had difficulty with that however, since Kaija never wished to acknowledge or destroy the stone that worked tirelessly to feed the evil she said she feared. And at first thought I agreed it did seem inconsistent. But I explained to Noki that I thought Kaija didn't want to destroy the arrowhead because it allowed her to be more of who she truly was. While she wore the stone, it absorbed the fear and hate and anger of anyone and everyone she met, including her own – but it also displaced her own vengeance at that treatment by diverting it to the Rogue. Kaija was never burdened with the desire of retaliation, not even to the lowly level of a grudge. She didn't harbor resentment – or at least not in the way that would encourage her to plan revenges, and that diversion of want for retribution was what allowed Kaija to remain so focused and steadfast on getting and keeping what was good in life, not returning hurt and suffering on others, not paying back with pain.

Noki was dissatisfied with that and said that maybe if Kaija had done a little of that throughout her life, the Rogue may not have been able to build to the point of destroying her. I didn't entirely disagree, but said Kaija was someone that was going to inspire fear and hate all of her life, just because of who she was and what she looked like – moreso than any average human – the proportion of people to take retribution on would always be a great number, and even blowing off a little steam on some of those situations would probably engulf her life easily.

Noki's biggest question however centered around Kaija's last words to her: why did looking like me make it easier for her to release the Rogue? Of course I could only guess but several reasons came to mind. The most obvious was that while looking at 'me' she had a reminder of what she loved most to help ground her. I wasn't entirely at ease saying this to her though; she was obviously greatly pained that even in the end Kaija never seemed to have any feelings for Noki herself. I'm sorry for that in a way, but that just wasn't how Kaija worked. I heaved a sigh for her unrequited love and gave her my second, more profound, explanation.

While Noki did resemble me in some aspects, the fact that she was wholly innocent of the life Kaija and I shared was to her great benefit. Had it been me there, in Noki's place, Kaija may well have not been able to contain the Rogue as long as she did – our connection with each other was so strong, she may have looked on me one day and lost all control. Likewise, had she made it to that great moment with me standing before her, I may well have absorbed every bit of the Rogue without hesitation, giving it life and body and trading my being to be absorbed into Kaija as I almost had been the previous times I'd ventured into her mindscape. Noki hadn't seen of Kaija's life what had ultimately fed the Rogue its biggest meals, and because of that she couldn't open herself to feel for Kaija right away – she stood as a frozen observer, and that was why the Rogue got stuck between them.

She seemed to understand that more easily, and agreed because it seemed similar to what happened between Kaija and Hadimu. The Rogue didn't come out even though their gazes were firmly locked, because Hadimu was offering nothing the Rogue could feed on. I nodded and told her of the Golden One I'd encountered in her mind and its greatness and power. She said she

thought that was what she saw Hadimu rebuilding in Kaija, that only he in all the world could do it because he felt nothing but affection for her, no pity, no fear, just love.

She was greatly interested in the Golden One, and admitted to it shyly in our last talk. She said it was the Golden One that saved her from the Rogue – just as it had me. She said the last of the sensations she felt before the gold light burst from within Kaija was a rabid desire for torment and death and it was when she was coming to realize that, that Kaija shoved her back. I suspected that's when Noki's own mindscape was starting to open to the Rogue and Kaija knew then to draw on all the love she'd ever felt. Noki said she felt that, an undeniable pulse of melting affection and she believed that was what incinerated the Rogue's energy. It sounded like the Golden One manifested completely once the Rogue was evicted and I watched Noki's gaze go back to that last, dramatic image.

“She was huge. Her eyes were glowing like golden lava. She was bigger than I'd ever seen, and great wings rose up behind her – I think they were her wings – they looked like the feathers she left behind. The power she emitted was like a thousand suns – that's why I'm not sure if there was lightning or not. Maybe it was drawn to her energy. But when she touched me to shove me back I felt love, not for me or for anything in particular, just love. Then it was all gone.” She shook her head from her reverie and said she didn't know if she could ever feel anything properly again – that moment was so immense she wasn't sure she would ever be calibrated properly to know emotion as she had; and the sudden loss of a feeling so overpowering left her doubting she'd ever know love or happiness again. “I can't find that with anyone else – I'm not sure if that's a blessing or a curse but I feel like all the elements of me are misaligned because of it. Maybe you feel the same, and if you do that would let me know I can live with it, but I'll never be...right.”

Before she left I gave her Kaija's great knife. She accepted it silently, gentle fingers curled around it, and I could see a tremble of – something – trace through her arm as she touched it. She didn't know what she would do or where she would go; I suspect she would just wander the rest of her life and see if there was anything the world could offer to heal her.

~

Noki stayed with us for about a month before heavily turning toward her next phase in life. The entire village wanted to herald her return with a celebration and to have a funeral ceremony for Kaija but neither thing happened. Noki was too beleaguered to feel like a returning hero and I never accepted Kaija's death and wouldn't acknowledge it with a ceremony. Noki was content to spend her time re-meeting the remaining familiar faces from our old lives in Greece, and she smiled genuinely on the Northern tribeswomen, even after learning of their non-Amazonian beginnings. She was sad to learn Beckries had been killed in our battle with Sarmations but pleased to hear we had since built a much better relationship with those wild men.

“I don't understand exactly what happened. You fought two armies?”

“No, it was one army, but they divided themselves into two advances.”

“And only one of them fought?”

I sighed. It'd been a grand mess – and I probably shouldn't have left it to Beckries to pick her accompanists for her mission. Eponin chose another Greek and a Northerner who could speak the Sarmation's language, and that combination worked in her favor as she approached the eastern advance. They saw two huge women unlike any they'd ever seen before and wanted to know if there were more of us. Their leader – who turned out to be the chief of all the Sarmations – was easily enticed into our offer of alliance. Beckries' group, on the other hand, consisted of herself and two Northerners, and the lesser warchief saw nothing to warrant consideration and had no communication established with his other forces. He wasn't close enough to cut Beckries down as they turned and started racing back across the plain, but they were within easy arrows' length and three of those unerring projectiles unseated her and left Cinga masterless. The western advance roared with pleasure and charged and we, in our trees, hadn't known if the east was a trick and if we should stay to fight or if we should abandon our posts and join our sisters in the open fields. But the eastern warchief wheeled his advance south and attacked his own people with us. In our later consultations over treaties and alliances, the warchief, Mancha, said he wasn't sorry over the loss of his men because he didn't trust them anyway. He was sorry for our losses however and would order his men to provide us with daughters to replace them. Poor uneducated fool – but when all of your beliefs and reasonings are based in myhtales and superstitions how could you know there was no way to control the gender of a child?

Noki smiled warmly at my children, at play among some saplings nearby. “She thought of them. She wanted to be here. Not that it matters, but they're beautiful.”

“Beautiful terrors – I thought they'd be the death of me when they turned two, but the threes have proved a much deadlier adventure.” The aged guard nodded absently. Then a final question sprang to mind, and I asked if Noki ever found out why Hadimu had laughed at her name.

Her smile was deeply wistful. “In their language it means ‘falls in love’.” She raised her own dark eyes, and tilted her head to the children then to me. “I wish them, and you, long health and happiness. Long may you rule and the Princess Inana after you.” And then I watched my last living connection to my beloved wife leave.

~

Eponin was right – I never spoke of Kaija to my children, and because I never spoke of her, no one else did either. Kaija's role in our lives seemed to mesh and tangle with the Goddess Artemis'; it was less and less a wild half-sphinx that led our charge into battle with the last contingent of Romans, and more often the Goddess herself, cutting down those evil men before her with rage at their intrusion. It was the Goddess in the form of plague that killed so many of the ambushing army that waited in the night for us outside our mainstay before we were able to wage an attack. I wondered often if I further demeaned Kaija for not correcting these inaccuracies, for not keeping her contribution to our survival alive. But she never considered

herself a hero and would never want glorification for doing what she felt she had to do as a course of nature.

When I presented the feathers to Inana and Inon they asked me where they came from as I draped the necklaces around their small necks. “The last of a great creature that no longer exists.”

“What kind of creature?”

“A sphinx – the last of the sphinxes. These are the only two in all the world.”

Inon looked at me thoughtfully as if he were going to ask me something but decided to keep it for council himself or ask me later. He was moving out of a phase of intense interest in all kinds of creatures – the centaurs were his most recent fixation. Inana never shared his enthusiasm and he may have not wanted to discuss it in front of her. She was a powerfully willful child, and when she decided something wasn't worthy of her continued attention she grew impatient and irritable if she had to endure it.

Inana studied the feather with her dark, scrutinizing eyes, and turned it about to see how it took the light. I realized I was hoping she wouldn't be indifferent to her present, that she would find it special. To my relief she let the feather go to hang largely against her chest, and without purposefully doing so, she reached up to pat it and hold it close against her. She didn't say, “it's pretty Mama, thank you,” like could be expected from most young girls, but she did seem to regard it as a valuable treasure, and for that I was pleased and grateful.

Eventually I took Eponin as a lover and she moved in with us. None of our tribe seemed uncomfortable with this arrangement, including my own children. Eponin was around us all so often they considered her their heart mother long before she came to live in our home. I never married her though, and I can't say – especially in those first intimate embraces – that I stopped comparing her to Kaija. They were different; very, very different, and her being my next came with being a comparison. She never eclipsed Kaija in any part of my life – Eponin was easily a better lover than Kaija by her sheer volume of experience, but she still didn't bring me to the climaxes Kaija did with her less polished skill. They were different people is my only point, and having known the love of my life... well, everyone would be compared to that.

“Mama, what's a sphinx? No one will tell me.”

“Do not speak that pidgin to me Inon, you know I don't like it.”

Our entire next generation was starting to speak some conglomeration of Greek and Macedonian and I was none pleased with it. I think in realizing that, that was the first time I thought of myself as getting old. Inon repeated his question in perfect Greek with a dramatic rolling of his eyes.

“When you no longer talk to me, you'll be free to speak any way you wish. But to me and around me you will speak like a proper son of Greece.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I nodded firmly. “Now, to answer your question – the sphinxes were creatures of the gods.”

“Which gods?”

“I don’t know exactly all the gods that bred sphinxes, because I was told they were originally created in a land far, far to the south – a place beyond all human knowing with gods all its own. But when I knew sphinxes, they belonged to Athena, wisest daughter of Zeus.”

“You knew sphinxes Mama? Did they talk to you? Could they talk?”

“Come here son.” Inon immediately moved into my open arms; his small, five year old body was still easy to pick up and he hadn’t yet grown out of cuddling. He came to stand between my open knees and let me wrap my arms lovingly around him, relaxed and waited for everything I would tell him. “There were different kinds of sphinxes; some had tails of serpents, some had the heads of men and others the heads of women; some had wings and others did not. But they all had the bodies of lions – great, brown cats, bigger than you’ve ever seen, almost as big as a horse....”

Our talk of sphinxes lasted about an hour, and my young son surprised me by looking at me soberly when I was done. “Can this be our secret? Can you not tell Inana about the sphinxes?”

I tilted my head to the side and looked at him with genuine curiosity. “Why not, son?”

“Because she is going to be Queen after you and give you everything you want and need for an Amazon life. But I think it would make you happy if I found another sphinx and I want to do it all on my own.”

My eyes immediately burned with tears, and before they began to fall I nodded and promised I would keep it our secret which satisfied him greatly. He wiggled from our embrace and went out to play and once he was well enough away from me, the flood gates of my mourning for my missing Kaija finally – FINALLY – opened. I cried and wept so bitterly, sadness and longing I’d pinned deep inside me for years were beckoned by that young earnest voice and refused to be damped down again. When Eponin found me hours later after returning from a hunting training with Inana, I was just as inconsolable. It was weeks before I could let her touch me again, and months before we could sleep together. But eventually our lives wound back to that normalcy before I’d started mourning for my missing wife. Eponin was good to me and didn’t push, and she was careful to hide her desires for me from me – right or wrong, I couldn’t handle that when Kaija was so prevalent in my mind, regardless of the life I’d built with Eponin.

Our lives with the Northerners smoothed over greatly once many in both our tribes started having children. The gap between the Northern tribe’s and the Greek tribe’s living space narrowed and filled with children learning to walk, playing, teasing the village dogs. It became a natural place for a school, and one was soon built. Educations were shared between our tribes

and the man clan's, which is exactly where the pidgin-speak first started. We accepted their girl children, adopted them into our folds, but we would have nothing to do with their women. They were soft, flabby creatures, too long depressed with naught but childrearing and foraging. They reminded me most vividly of bleating sheep, never learning to fight or defend themselves, never building their bodies for anything other than birthing and eating, needing others to shear and keep them. How they wailed when their menfolk took those wretch-bound daughters from them – and how shocked those girls were to find themselves in the middle of such requirement and expectation. Suddenly, stubby fingers were blistering with the constant rub of bow and arrow. Their young legs were sore from riding, a position they'd only ever seen their brothers and fathers in. They, of course, never grew to our height, and even our children born from their men never grew to our much finer beauty, but they all flourished under the mixing of our cultures. We even took the boys and we kept our own, until they were ten – I wasn't interested in having to constantly deal with powerful and uneducated men roaming these plains, and the best solution to that was to indoctrinate those young male minds then give them to the men to learn whatever else they could teach them. We blatantly molded their young thoughts and understandings, brainwashed, if you will, our rules and expectations into them, then gave them back to the teachers that would make them strong men. It would be generations before we would see any real effect of this, but if there was any effect that was enough for me.

One thing I had to adapt to was the regard of wood. Wood wasn't scarce exactly, but it certainly wasn't as abundant as it was in Greece. That meant no more funeral pyres. Our funeral rites changed dramatically and I wasn't the only Greek concerned about being buried for eternity. The Northerners and the Sarmations shared with us their rituals and showed us the elaborate mounds they made for their dead; the more powerful and higher ranking the person, the more beautifully he or she was provided for with treasures, weapons and armor.

“I don't know Queen Tai'gee – there seems something unholy about leaving our bodies to rot underground – it's like we're not really dead – like we're dishonoring our dead by entrapping their spirits in the earth.”

That was from Zupé. She dressed in the robes of a priestess, and though just a teenager, wore the headdress of the High Priestess. I doubt she would've gotten the role if we'd never left our land, which would have been a shame in my opinion. As the High Priestess, Zupé was a brilliant religious leader. She wore her power delicately, not with discomfort, but with respect for everything the position required, implied and portrayed. She had stood Cyanne down on many religious points that she absolutely would not compromise on, and, while she was still growing, then and as always looking on the draining edge of illness, she defended whatever she felt was necessary with as much zeal and force as any whole and hale warrior.

“It would be obnoxiously wasteful for us to insist on funeral pyres for our dead without the access to wood we used to have.”

“Maybe so; but the limited resources of this world are less my concern than the unlimited eternity of your soul. My spine tingles at the thought of you, my Queen, being hidden under the earth for dirt beasts and grave robbers to pillage. The essence of an Amazon must be able to reach Artemis and that has long been by the release of fire.”

I hummed in consideration. I didn't know what sort of consciousness, if any, awaited me in the afterlife – if I would retain any knowledge of my life or body here as the Queen Tai'gee. But if I did, seeing my rotting bones left exposed by the corrosion and rain of a hundred years or more, or being ransacked by grave robbers, or even more fresh violators of insects and rats burrowing in to devour what of me they wanted, was an exceedingly disturbing proposition. Still, while Zupé may not have been concerned with our more limited supply of wood, I had our futures and the futures of our children to consider. A land stripped of trees and replaced with piles of ash would bode no good for anyone. “I admire your determination to protect our religious heritage, and I trust your connection with the needs of our collective spirit. I'll abide by whatever guidelines you suggest. I just hope you're weighing your judgment with the advice of our martyred teachers that adaptability is our greatest advantage.” The young priestess looked thoughtful. “You think about it all a little more then tell me what you think we should do.”

I spent a great deal of time thinking about adaptability. I wondered how much adaptability was just acquiescence, how much was growth or evolution, how much was choice and how much was necessary. We adopted much into our way of life, and for we original Greeks the adaptations were obvious. They would not be so for our children, this mixture was their normality, and as the acclimation continued and we grew further away from Greece, further away from our Greekness, I wondered not only what would we as a people come to look like, but would I like it? I led us out of Greece, away from everything that made us Amazon for over five hundred years – we could have stayed and died and never changed, never had to compromise our language, the structure of our homes and government, the looks of our children. So, in five hundred years would I like the acclimated Amazon? Would I look at her and see my battle sister, my daughter, would I see Artemis in her life and warrior in her face? Would I be like Arteminius and be able to recognize the Amazon in our descendents? How much Amazon would be left to make our exodus a success? How much Amazon would be left at all?

~Epilogue~

“What do you mean they're alive? That's impossible – they'd be like a hundred years old.”

Dark eyes rolled. “Hardly. Even if there weren't magic involved they'd be fifty or sixty – old, but not a hundred.”

“It's still impossible. People don't come back from the dead over two decades later. I'm sure there's some mistake.”

Tall, graceful, lithe even in her middle age, Noki looked at me as though I were a child with which she was running out of patience. She took a short breath, composed herself and continued. “My Queen, I would not waste your time with mistakes. I went to great lengths to get confirmations before bringing this news to you. Xena and Gabrielle are alive, and just as young as they were when they went missing.”

Of course it made absolutely no sense whatsoever, and beyond not making sense it was completely preposterous – who'd ever heard of such a thing – or thought such a thing?
“Ridiculous, this is ridiculous. And they're back with the Amazons?”

“From what I heard they've just suffered terrible losses by ambush and sabotage, not to mention the detriment from the constant persecution by the Romans. Of the handful of Greek Amazons left behind, only a pinch's worth remain now. It sounded like from my informant that the end of the Greek Amazons has come and what's left needs to be rescued.”

‘It's the beginning of the prophecy. It must be.’ I shivered with the thought, both in excitement and anxiety. The few remaining Greek children now grown and towering over the Sarmations and the Greek-Sarmation mixes had mumbled and muttered throughout the years about getting to return to our homeland, and I couldn't say I hadn't wanted to go. But what if Noki's informant was wrong or mistaken, or worse yet, lying? We could walk ourselves right into a trap we couldn't escape, and then there really wouldn't be any Greek Amazons left.

“You're sure? Absolutely sure?”

Noki smiled at me briefly, but I didn't know why. When she answered the smile was gone. “My Queen, if I am wrong I offer my life in payment for my error.”

“If you're wrong there may be no one left to take that payment.”

I ran my hand through my hair and my fingers snagged in a tangle. Frustrated, I yanked through the snarl and looked around the outside of my home. Bridges and ramps and ladders made of rope dangled all over the trees. Women walked along the transports with ease, calling out greetings from tree to tree, yelling hellos to those on the ground. For twenty-five years this had been our home, the only home many of us had ever known. Unlike the Sarmation men, we weren't nomads. The Northern Amazons were much more comfortable with migrating place to place, following the herds, having winter and summer camps. In fact, the most recent Cyanne had left several weeks prior to look for a suitable winter camp... Or...

I narrowed my eyes at Noki. “Who else knows of this miraculous turn of events?”

“I must admit, I'm surprised I'm the one to be bringing you this news – the Queen Cyanne has been rumored to have joined the Greek Council. There has been much in discussion.”

I ground my teeth, hard, and the railing on which I leaned even harder. ‘That treacherous wench. Just like her predecessor.’ “Is that so? And I wonder if your source happened to mention just how many of the Northern Tribe knew of the reason for Cyanne's departure?”

“No my Queen.”

I had thought we'd gotten well beyond this rivalry between ‘them’ and ‘us’. I looked down at my milling Amazons and spotted a familiar head. “Egili! Come here!”

Noki stood behind me, big, imposing, unfamiliar to almost everyone here, but undeniably an Amazon. I could feel her eyeing Egili as she finished climbing the last leg of rope ladder to my platform and hoisted herself over the side. Once she straightened up, Egili returned the studious, questioning examination she was getting from the mysterious Noki. Egili, unlike the other Northern tribeswomen, had grown to be almost as tall and broad as we Greeks, with glossy brown locks, startling blue eyes, and an endearing tendency to speak before censoring which made her feelings pretty easy to read. Finished with her wary study she looked at me.

“Queen Inana, you summoned me?”

‘Formal. Interesting. She must be intimidated by this new comer.’ “Your Cyanne. Do you know where she’s gone?”

“To scout a winter camp for the coming season my Lady.”

I held her firm with an ungiving gaze I learned from my mother. I was Queen right now, and my feelings for Egili could not play a role in this inquisition. I couldn’t deny a flash of regret as Egili grew stiffly uncomfortable with the interrogation. “Is that what she told you, or what you heard? Because you are the best scout she has, I would think if she didn’t want you to come she would have given you a special reason why.”

Surprise swam across the clear ponds of Egili’s eyes, then they shifted over my shoulder to the tall stranger behind me. “She said it was too routine a trip to bring me and she wanted to train some new scouts this time.” Her gaze shifted back to me, with a softer expression I knew well. ‘She hadn’t pressed the issue because that meant she could spend more time where I was.’

“So it would surprise you to hear she is in Greece?”

‘Clearly.’

“That’s not – why would she? I mean – what would she be doing there?”

“I intend to find out, but I’d prefer not to have to go all the way to Greece to see. I’m pretty sure someone here would know why she’s not looking for a winter camp.”

Egili looked back at Noki, suspicious and defensive. “May I ask where my Lady gets this information and if the source can be trusted?”

Somehow I knew Noki smiled at that, and I couldn’t help smiling as well. Egili didn’t know anything, and keeping her in the dark would just be rude at this point. “Egili, this is Noki, a trusted friend of mine and my mother’s.”

“Inon’s guide! I mean – Prince Inon...”

“Inon’s guide and advisor, yes,” I supplied. I reached for Egili’s hand and she hesitantly moved closer to me. We were still newly lovers and she remained very shy to publicly show she had my favor. “Come – let’s all go inside and talk.”

I was never as big a fan of teas as my mother was, but I did learn they had their place. In our pseudo-merger with the Sarmations, our access to foods, herbs, fabrics, metals and craftworks quadrupled. Wild though they may have been, they were wealthy – or at least became much wealthier once we saved them from starving to death in such great numbers over the winters. One of the things we were introduced to was green tea, a finely ground leaf, sweet and light and very calming – a perfect beverage for a tense meeting.

Egili made small talk with Noki about my brother’s searches for centaurs, griffins, hinds, and his most important search, for sphinxes. Even though Mom had tried to convince him there were no sphinxes left, Inon insisted no one could ever be sure, and said, much more lightly though probably his most truthful feeling, that Mom just didn’t want him to leave.

Inon didn’t know the truth Mom had lived with though, and there’s no way I’d be able to convince him of it now since the lore and hunt for the gods’ creatures had been his mission for more than half his life. He wouldn’t have believed the truth from me anyway because brothers never believed their older sisters on things that countered their hearts’ desire since childhood. Besides that, everything I knew had come from Noki’s hand, and when Mom appointed Noki to help guide and protect Inon on his godsdamned quests, she also pledged her to silence. Noki was his trusted teacher, a mentor and probably hero, and if she’d led him all over the known world in search of sphinxes, there’s no way I’d be able to tell him that she was there when the only offspring of the last sphinx died.

“Why didn’t the Prince come with you?”

Noki accepted tea from me as she answered they had parted ways months ago. “He finally met a centaur – the last by his own sad story, and his son. It was the great Queen Ephiny’s only son.”

“The Centaur Prince!”

“Indeed. But all of his brotherhood had been murdered, and he and his son are all that remain as far as he knew. Inon said he would help them try to find others if there were any to be found.” She sipped her tea and her dark eyes looked weary over the rim of her drinking bowl.

“Do you think there are more?”

The weariness deepened. “Only time can tell,” she answered.

It must be so difficult for her having nothing but memories and secrets to keep for all her life, no one to share either with, and nothing to offer ease of the hardship of bearing them. I wondered if it wasn’t a cruel thing for my mother to pair Noki with Inon and make her endure his excited prattling hopes of one day finding a sphinx. But since Mom never truly believed Kaija was dead, maybe she was hoping Inon’s hope and Noki’s knowledge would be the best possible team to

find her – her ambivalence of Kaija’s existence was evident on her death bed, when I’d first heard this shocking name.

~“I have hoped all these years that she’s still alive. But now that I’m dying, if she lives I won’t be able to see her again. I want my Kaija so badly.”

I could barely feel her thready pulse as I wrapped my hands more firmly around her wrist. I encouraged her to stay quiet to keep her strength, but she wasn’t having it, and her eyes misted with tears I had never seen before.

“I have kept quiet for too long, and now I will not. Kaija was my wife; my life’s love.”

My heart pounded hard and I feared the confusion of death was coming fast on her. I started to rise to get Zupé, but she grabbed my wrist with cold firmness.

“But Mom,” I said gently and stroked back her thinning hair. “Mama Ep was your wife. Remember?”

“No child. We were never married. A good, good friend, and I loved her. But Kaija was my wife and I lost her long ago. Before you were born.”

“Lost how? Where? What do you mean?”

She smiled an eerie smile, closed her eyes and hummed. I called to her in a panic she was slipping away, but she was just remembering. She opened her misty eyes again and raised a long, cold finger to touch my cheek.

“I thought I was going to lose you the same way, to the lightening god that day. You saw my Kaija then, but I never told you. She gave you the silver eyes of Artemis – I wanted so badly to have seen her.” She paused and pushed herself to sit up in her bed, refusing my help. “There is a book by the Wanderer Noki; I hid it with the oracle in the tree cave. Talk with Great Grandmother Dotra; she has tales that you haven’t heard and you should before she can no longer tell them.” Her eyes drifted down and tears fell from them. She looked long at the feather swinging softly before my chest. “I rode on the back of the sphinx whose feather this was. Her father. She loved me and children.”

“Mom?”

Her face was getting paler and her hands colder, and her tears flowed more freely. “My beautiful girl. She would have loved you and your brother, she would have been a good mother. She loved Pi – our little Pi. All my life I wanted her back, now what if she’s not where I’m going?”

“Mom, please, you’re going to exhaust yourself.” But she hiccupped and sighed a sad “Oh” and died.

No Amazon Queen had been buried before, and none will ever be buried as my mother was. The Queen Tai'gee was much loved and worshipped and even the Sarmation men mourned her as though she'd been the Creator Mother. We dressed her in gold mail, the finest of leather armor, surrounded her with the best weapons, her great curved knife held firmly in her hand. Gold amulets and statuettes of Artemis surrounded her and we supplied her with quiver upon quiver of arrows to stock her for hunting with our Patron Goddess in the fields of Olympus. She was the last of us to have seen and talked to the Goddess Artemis, and we honored that grace with the best wines and oils, spared no worthy pelt or hide, but gave them all to our passed Queen so she could pay tribute with them to our Goddess.

We let the Sarmations choose the place for the burial mound, since they'd had centuries of practice in burying their great leaders so that they could not be disturbed by thieves and vandals. They guaranteed no one would find the Queen Tai'gee's resting place, not even to know where to go sit by her grave to mourn. The warlord Kamaizanshi said even he couldn't say where his forefathers were buried as we turned to leave. He pointed to a soft rise miles away and said "that could be my grandfather Mancha, or maybe the great and terrible Lord Khamalmal, or maybe the Earth and nothing more. We protect our great dead with anonymity and forgetfulness," he said with a warm smile.

But the least I was going to do was forget, and after my mother's funeral I went straight to the oracle for Noki's book, and received not just hers but a journal of the exodus from Greece by Dotra and a small journal of my mother's. Dotra was my next to find and old as she was, she sang tale for tale for me of the mystical Kaija, feared and heralded for her power and simple dedication to the Amazons. As I read the last of Noki's account of the meeting with the Afrikan witch, I shuddered with her familiarity of Kaija's death? to my own prophecy sending.

My mother had already called me in from my drills with my new spear, but I'd ignored her and wanted to try another maneuver first. Clouds had been building all morning, and the threat of a long and strong storm that would surely keep me inside for hours made me want to stay out just as long as I could. I was seven and being seven, inside while it rained and thundered meant studying.

"Inana, I said now!" Distant thunder rolled and I wondered if Mom didn't do that just to make herself sound more threatening.

Sulking, I stabbed my spear into the ground to try my maneuver anyway, but before I could grab the shaft every hair on my head raised and I could suddenly see the veins in my eyes pulsing with my heart beat. I was surrounded by searing hot light and stood frozen as a paralyzing energy numbed me to everything. A voice spoke to me, a static and strong, disembodied voice: You must take them west – farther west than is known. Look for the gold trail and follow it west. Long will be the journey of your daughters but you must follow the gold trail until your guide shows you home.

The brilliant light dropped so quickly all the world was a blackness I could do naught but stare unblinkingly into, just as I had the light. But backlit against that darkness was a broad, powerful face, wide with high cheekbones, a stern mouth pulled thin to guard long, sharp teeth, golden

eyes split by a thin black pupil and a shaggy mane to frame it all. The blackness surrounding the face glowed with gold and the energy of the glow was both fierce and gentle. She looked at me, and while her mouth remained tightly closed a soft roar filled my ears and built until a rushing roar that was all I could hear.

Mama Ep said it was the driving rain I heard rushing in my ears as I stood dumb in the downpour. My spear was cinders, the bronze spearhead a puddle of metal glued to the earth. Mom couldn't believe I was unhurt and checked me over and over before finally seeing that my dark eyes had been bleached of their color and still stared largely in a shock of silver. "You've been anointed by Artemis," she told me softly.

"She told me I had to take them west. But why me, Mom? Why not you?"

"Child, Artemis has missions for each of her Queens and you will be Queen after me. It is your mission alone, not mine."

I shook my head and felt my hair sway by my shoulders, back down where it was supposed to be. "Not alone. She gave me a guide."

It was a curious look my mother gave me, but when she asked me what I meant I couldn't tell her. I drew the face I had seen in the dirt, and having read and heard the memoirs, I now knew the shock and pain that filled her face. I understood why Mama Ep went away for so long after my lightning strike. And I understood why Mom would stand sometimes and stare into a golden sunrise or sunset and quietly wait to see if her beloved would walk of it.~

"What does she mean by going to Greece in secret?" My anger was plain and I would do nothing to hide it. Long had I been told I had my mother's temper but I never felt that was a bad thing.

Noki merely shrugged. "I can't say Inana. They were having a council to decide what to do about the dwindling tribes, and from what I had gathered, messengers were sent to summon you both back to Greece. I don't know why she would have kept the message from you. There doesn't seem to be any way to benefit from it."

Egili looked nervous. Cyanne was her Queen and by all allegiances, she was not my citizen. Queen Tai'gee had gone to great lengths to make sure the Northern tribeswomen did not feel usurped by we Greeks, and even had a mass adoption ceremony so we could officially recognize them as the Northern Amazons, a separate but sisterly tribe. Cyanne's action was a breach of faith at least, and, if Artemis hadn't divided the tribes, it would have been high treason. Which meant Egili would need to make her allegiance very clear and distinct. "What are you going to do?" she asked me meekly.

'What indeed?' Below us I heard Seema and Meica laugh, one just offset from the other, or it would've sounded like one person laughing. "Shut up!" was spit after them, and that had to be the gruff, sour Ghiran. As long as I'd known her, she'd been angry and sullen; a pure waste of life in my opinion. Of course she had her rights to dislikes and disapproval, but to choose active

dedication to anger and misery for as long as she lived was an irresponsible squandrance. I was glad she'd never had a daughter to breed her melancholia into, but she still had a way of injecting gloom into anyone's day if one passed too closely by. Long had she bewailed a return to Greece and cursed our resettlement. Would she be first in line to march back?

Noki said the remaining Greek Amazons were decimated; Artemis' own son feeling we'd betrayed her exacted a terrible revenge on our sisters. But returning to support those who remained wouldn't give us the ability to stay. I'd never been, but I knew Greece was lost to us. But what to do?: go back to try to rescue a handful and risk our total extermination; wait for any refugees that might join us and head west from here; not wait at all and just take who would go and start the journey without delay?

Absently I swirled my tea in its bowl. Going west had always been an abstract directive that would happen... eventually. I hadn't given much thought to what it meant, or how to go about it. "Ok," I began as I set my untouched tea down, "We're going to run a quick stealth, in and out rescue mission; get in, get our sisters, and get out. Then we're coming back here, getting everyone and everything else and we're leaving. Cyanne had better hope we don't cross paths or I may add murder to my to-do list."

Both of Noki's thin dark eyebrows lifted. "Well, you've certainly got your mom beat on decisiveness. Is my Lady Queen considering to present her plan to the others?"

I waved my hand in dismissal. "I'll ask for volunteers for the rescue mission, but as far as heading west, that's nonnegotiable."

A beautifully manicured finger tapped softly on the table at which Noki and Egili sat. There were so many emotions running across Egili's face I couldn't exactly identify what she was thinking. Noki, however, looked calm and patient as ever, and once she ordered her thoughts, she lay her hand flat against the tabletop. "It is your choice my Queen, of course, how you wish to proceed. I'm not a part of your council and come only bearing this disturbing message, but if I may suggest – you might find a stronger base of support if you hear the thoughts and feelings of your citizens."

I looked at my elder and frowned. What did she mean 'a stronger base of support'? We were leaving, end of discussion. Even without the directive from Artemis we wouldn't be able to stay now or I'd have to consider waging a war against my sister clan for its treason. Every day the Sarmations inched closer to our settlement, using their sheep and goats as excuses to narrow the distance between our borders. These lands were not our lands, we didn't understand them, we didn't understand the people that live on them. As much as we had survived on them since first moving those twenty-five years ago, we were still foreigners. Artemis told me to continue that trek into foreign lands, and I wasn't going to disobey my goddess. "Artemis told me to take everyone west – this was my command since I was a child. I am Queen now and they will go because I said we will go."

Noki's expression of patience stiffened, then saddened, which I thought was strange. Glancing at Egili, I thought she looked distinctly uncomfortable, confused, angry too. She was biting her

tongue in her thoughts for the moment so I looked back at the elder. “What’s your problem with this? I wouldn’t expect difficulty from you on following orders.”

Her frown deepened and she leaned forward in her chair. Her dark gaze shifted far away even though she was looking at the table. “It is a shame you weren’t raised in Greece, and I think the outside governance of men has become strong in you because of it. Democracy, voting, debate is our foundation and how we have defined ourselves for hundreds of years. We give ourselves choices in every matter, as Artemis gave us the right to choose. These people –” she waved her hand back to indicate the Northern clans – “rule by force, and they are weak for it. It is the right of every Amazon to decide her fate.” She looked at me so soberly it was almost the hardest look I’d ever gotten. “You don’t have the right to take that from them.”

My first impulse was to decry her as a traitor and have her arrested. My second impulse was that this was Noki, revered Elder, royal advisor, trusted, honorable. My third impulse was to repeat that this was my directive from Artemis and ask where was my choice in the matter, but just as quickly that seemed a childish complaint. “Is that what my mom did; when you all left Greece, did she ask you if you wanted to go?”

Noki nodded. “And some didn’t; they tried to make a new life for themselves – some succeeded and others returned to us. The ones that chose to go, however, were the most dedicated, trustworthy and loyal. I think that, more than anything, protected us.” Her previously frown-thin lips lifted in a wry smile. “Although, to be honest, I’m not entirely sure you mom didn’t ask us all just so she wouldn’t have had to make the decision all on her own.”

“What do you mean?”

Noki tilted her empty teacup back to inspect its state of emptiness again. “I didn’t know it at the time, but as I saw her in later years I realized she was a shy Queen at first.” Her head remained down, but her eyes lifted to me. “You, obviously, lack much of that shyness, but your boldness can be just as crippling.”

I waved her off and told her I’d already heard the same advice many times. “I know, I know – think before I speak.”

“No. Feel before you lead.”

I cut my own eyes at her and thought I saw a fleeting flinch at the flash of silver that movement always created. I briefly wondered if I would’ve had that ability had my eyes remained as dark as my mother’s. “What do you mean?”

“I mean listen to your heart, find the directions of your emotions before charging into a role that requires others to follow. They can’t know your heart when they make up their own minds, but they will lose faith with you if you find, in the middle of all things, you only listened to your impulse and not the real voices inside. And sometimes they,” she said with a nod to the door, “can help you listen by expressing their own feelings.”

I studied her. “Maybe you should be Queen since you’re so wise.” I can’t deny there was a little bit of challenge in my voice, and even while I knew she was as faithful and loyal an Amazon as could be found, I couldn’t help feel something challenging between us... something mildly antagonistic.

“Not wise, my Queen, just thoughtful. I do not wish to offend.”

I studied Noki for a couple more moments from my reclined position in my chair. Her tone and manner were so calm, so casual, she could probably have said “Fuck you” and it would’ve come out like the most sincere of praises. So, unreadable as she was, I turned to Egili to ask what she thought of all this.

“You’re going to leave? Just leave?”

“You know of the prophecy I was given as a child – what Artemis told me to do.”

“To go west down a path of gold.” Her darkened eyes looked on me severely, and she shook her head. “You don’t have to do this – why would you do this? Why would you want to do this?”

“It’s my destiny. Just because I learned of it as a child doesn’t make it any less my path. Artemis has laid it on me to do.”

She shook her head again and dark locks bandied about with the definity of her rejection. “I’m finding it hard to believe in a god that wants you to abandon your home for oblivion. You’re safe here, and she wants you to give that up for... what?”

‘Nothing I’d ever see.’ It was on the tip of my tongue to say, but if I said it I would have just given her more ammunition against me. So I remained silent and let her continue.

“Here you have a life, you have a family, we take care of each other. There’s – there’s land here and food and... and your home... us...”

“You?”

It was Egili’s turn to look at me soberly and I could see her eyes mist, clear, mist again, clear as she fought to hold down her emotions. “I can’t go. I can’t leave.” She shook her head and pulled her thick, full lips in tight. “I can’t.”

“Can’t and won’t aren’t always different words.”

Egili’s tight curls shook with her startled shudder but her soft blue eyes remained wide and expressive. Her voice was thin and much higher than her normal pitch. “How can you just do this? You were a kid.” Frustrated she threw a lax hand out to the side and half laughed. “You got hit by lightning as a kid and you came through that with a story of Artemis telling you to go west. How do you know you didn’t just make it up?”

“How dare you?” I jumped to my feet and gave my offense full reign, but Egili, true to her nature, kept talking with all censorship thrown right to the wind.

“Yeah, yeah – how do I know about your precious Goddess; like I could have any idea? Well I can tell you about my ideas and what I know – and what I know is that Artemis isn’t your god of lightening, Zeus is – so why is it you think it was Her talking to you? And you and your people have always thought we’re just backwards, backwoods little witches but one thing we know about you and other people of your kind is that you look to gods to explain things you can’t explain yourself. You tout your superiority and sophistication like you have all great things explained and controlled – that’s what makes you civilized and us ignorant savages, right? But you know nothing of how things work; maybe you made that voice up as your brain was getting fried. Maybe that vision you had was you imagining what you looked like as Zeus’ bolt surrounded you. I saw you too – and your hair was wide and long and on end – that’s all I could see sticking out from the sides of that fat bolt. You didn’t look so very different from that face you drew – what about that?”

I was so angry my ears were ringing. She was beneath me, my *lover*. I barely tolerated Noki’s countering and she was a much more prestigious guest than Egili. My throat constricted as I forced myself not to yell, becoming very conscious of Noki’s quietly observant presence. As I opened my mouth to put Egili in her place, a very dour, very distinct voice – a female voice, but not a woman’s voice, with something of a growl and greatness rolling through it – spoke into my mind: *Learn from your mother*. And that instruction conjured images and memories of sound, conversations – nothing in particular but snippets that culminated in a feeling of my mother as a calm and reasonable debater. It put an unreasonable wash over my earlier approach. I felt small muscles around my eyes relax, and being truthful with myself, the softening was nice.

“I have to trust in the Goddess. I have to trust that She wants me to know that She wants me to survive and that She wants Her people to survive. I’m human, I’m mortal – and no, I don’t know all the answers or all the explanations; I don’t know what going into the west is going to bring us –” I felt a surge of doubt and then an energy of guidance from the Voice – “but I feel that’s what we’re meant to do... and that it’s a good thing.”

The lack of credulity from Egili pained me with sadness. And that confused me... I’ve never felt sad about not being agreed with before – angry, irritated, superior, but never sad. “A good thing to go from a life you know you have to probably nothing? That’s crazy. Just crazy.”

“Egili... no great thing ever happened from staying put. Someone had to take a chance and go somewhere. If the Amazons are ever going to be great again, it won’t be under the shadow of Rome. It won’t be as the wives of Sarmation plainsmen. It will be as we are, when we will have to be called by name as we are and reckoned with.” My own proclamation flashed before my eyes as a green and misty possibility. How much hope could I have for it? Just how foolish was it all?

“Greatness means nothing if you don’t survive.”

I could feel my eyebrows pinching together in disappointment. “I take it this means you won’t be coming with us... me.” I frowned over the fact that all I really wanted was her acceptance and support even if she didn’t go, and not getting those was like a barbed lash on my heart. ‘Rejection. She’s rejecting me.’

She shook her head at me, eyes hard with disbelief. “No. And you shouldn’t want to either.” Then she turned and summarily left my hut. She walked through the open doorway and disappeared down the plank path without any punctuation of a door closing. When I pulled my eyes from the empty exit, I found Noki looking at me with lifted eyebrows.

“That hurt,” I admitted in an uncharacteristically small voice.

Her expression held. Then: “That is precisely why you should propose it to your sisters. You would not want to get that reaction by so many in the middle of nowhere. That may not work out well for you.”

“But Noki.” I shook my head. “Artemis told me to do this. *Artemis* told me to take them west. Do you understand – The Goddess – *Our* Goddess. If She didn’t think we would follow Her instructions why would She give them to us? Why would they consider refusing me?”

Again she looked upon me with such kindly patience that I wanted to cry for my own ignorance. What she said was firm and resolute, but her voice was soft and tolerant. “Because She gave us the choice to refuse or accept. Can you really appreciate that?” Her head moved like she was trying to answer her own question, trying to decide for me if I could answer it myself or if I was mature yet enough for the responsibility of answering. “Do you understand what it means to have a choice, that it is your decision and yours alone to make? Can you have learned what it means to accept the responsibility and the respect for deciding one’s own way?” Dark, intelligent eyes squinted at me; seemed to be discerning my character. “You talk about it sometimes, but I’m not sure you really understand an Amazon’s right to choice.”

In the end, our discussion concluded rather sourly with me pouting and Noki reserved and observant. I’d answered her question too quickly, and the ringer was saying “Of course I understand –” which is the first red flag that indeed one actually has no comprehension of the matter at all. I resented how juvenile Noki made me feel. I was Queen after all, no longer Princess Inana, no longer my mother’s student – but while I felt I had Noki’s respect as Queen, I had a pervasive feeling that she quietly summed me up as having been a poor pupil.

So I decided to put off the Queenly test on our ultimate exodus and focused on the rescue of our remaining Greek sisters. By the time our small party departed the northern compound though, I think I could have made a case that the party selection was just as much a Queenly test as the exodus would be. “I need a small, elite, stealth group,” and no matter how many times I said that it seemed the crowd of volunteers multiplied. “This is not a homecoming, it’s a search and rescue.”

“But we haven’t had a chance to go back to Greece – back to our land! This could be our chance!”

“And neither have I,” I said firmly. “I’d love to, but I’m not going for sightseeing. We have a mission and we need to complete it while Rome’s eyes are turned inward to focus on their power vacuum.”

“You can’t stop us from going if we want to,” Ghiran growled. “It’s our right to go.”

I blew hard through my nose and ground my back teeth. “I’ve been hearing a lot about what’s whose rights lately and I’m getting tired of it. Yeah, it’s your right – you’ve had the right for twenty-five years and you’ve never exercised it.” I looked hard at all of them and especially at Ghiran, the most sullen face there. “Yeah, you’ve got your right to choose – go or stay. But let me tell you what you don’t have the right to do – jeopardize a sister’s life. And that is exactly what’s going to happen if all four-hundred of us go marching back to Greece.” The eager, demanding gazes shifted inward, most became disappointed. “I want five others besides myself and Noki – that’s it.”

Seti, Seema, Lanchi, Tess and Shingari were my chosen few. What I determined to be halfway there, we discovered Ghiran following us. “I never wanted to leave Greece,” she muttered under my scathing glare. “Always wanted to go back – find my mom.” And while I looked at her, I realized what she said was absolutely true – and not only that, she wasn’t brave enough to go by herself. So she tagged along behind us, skulking and scowling the entire way.

Noki, of course, was our guide, and it’s my judgment that the proof of her great skill was in the fact that she lead us through the entire way without a breath of trouble to stop us. That meant taking everything but the shortest route possible, but it was a worthwhile track. We found our despondent, drifting sisters on a shore I was sure was nowhere near Amazon Land. And with them, Xena, Warrior Princess and Gabrielle, the Battling Bard of Potedeia.

“You’re real...” I reminded myself to breathe as I looked into Xena’s hard blue eyes. I remember thinking they possessed a visible intelligence that I wanted to be seen in my own eyes one day. I wanted to look as formidable as she looked.

Gabrielle came behind me and to the side, lightly grabbed under my elbow as she walked around to inspect me from the front. “Tai’gee? But your eyes...? Is this Artemis’ plan for you – that you’ll never age?”

At the sound of my mother’s name from Gabrielle’s lips, our newly greeted sisters regrouped and knelt before me. I was used to being bowed to, having been the center of many ceremonies back home, but not by strangers. Suddenly the position of Queen felt very big. “My mother died. I’m Queen now. My name’s Inana.”

Gabrielle’s fine blonde strands draped her face in the cut of a Roman slave – many of our Returnees arrived with the same style and were anxious to have it grow out. Her lips pulled tight in an expression of deep sadness. “What about Kaija?”

Noki flinched beside me. I didn't know what to tell them about Kaija, I'd never met her. "I hope they're together," was all I could think to say. Xena's gaze sharpened on me, like a spear point inching closer. Gabrielle sniffed.

"It's not always the case, but if they died together that's probably the best thing... I can't really imagine one living without the other."

"Where's Pi?"

They were the first words the great, dark warrior spoke to me and I'll never know if it's for this reason or the utter unfamiliarity of them that I'll never forget them. My expression answered for me that I had no idea who Pi was, and I finally recognized that the look of sharpness from Xena was actually suspicion. I looked questioningly at Noki.

"Pi was killed Xena. Long before we left Greece. Long before Inana and Inon were born."

The Aegean frozen – that's what Xena's eyes looked like – the stormy blue frozen in its tempest with Poseidon's power lying in wait somewhere unpredictable below the surface. And when those eyes cut to Noki I was so grateful to have the weight of that sea shift off of me, my shoulders sagged with relief.

"And you are?"

"Noki. I doubt you would remember me from the village. I was a loner child and didn't stand out much. Pi was killed as she was being drug off by the first wave of Romans. Kaija didn't make it in time to save her – she never forgave herself for it."

Xena's heavy gaze rode a hefty wave back over to me. "So you are all that remains of the Royal Family."

If Noki made me feel immature, Xena made me feel downright inadequate. I managed "my brother, Inon and I," in a pathetically weak voice.

"How many are there of you left in the north?"

"About four-hundred of us; plus the Northern Tribe."

"You haven't merged?"

I was glad to turn to Gabrielle. "No – my mom felt it was very important for our tribes to keep our separate identities. We initiated them as Amazons, but other than that we rule ourselves separately."

Xena muttered something that only Gabrielle could hear and apparently the small blonde agreed. Her gaze on me deepened as well and I was getting irritated with everyone sizing me up and judging me. At length Gabrielle said, "Xena's right – that could pose a serious problem."

“Why?”

“Because Cyanne was killed. Belerafon and his army killed everyone, and this handful is literally all that’s left of the Amazons below the north.”

The sound of the waves crashing on the shore at the edge of the woods surrounding us came loudly to our small group in our shared silence. The signs of battle easily distinguished the survivors from our own group – Noki and Shingari were the only ones of us to have seen real battle, and that a very long time ago. I studied my newly found Amazons, studied their wounds, their low spirits. I could easily identify the two Northern tribe survivors from Cyanne’s ill-fated entourage. I could recognize the few Greeks from their clothes so similar to ours. The rest were women from tribes I’d only ever heard of, with colors of skin and hair, body smells and body paintings I’d never smelled or seen.

“This is all...” It was much more a realization than a question. Long had my mother, had Grandmother Dotra, spoken of a time when Amazons were so numerous that our Nation had micro-governments so we could manage ourselves. They said we were so significant that we were called on as allies for war – sought for council – beckoned for teachers – our crafts and weaponry were wanted at markets all across the Mediterranean. It seemed that we could know no recession. *“When I led us out of Greece, I worried everyday that I led us into oblivion. I didn’t think I would see another newborn Amazon child.” Then she smiled at me. “And then you were born. The first of my hope for all of us.”*

“The council – the Queens... they’re *all* dead?”

“Oh yeah – about that –” Gleaming bronze was unsheathed so quickly, and the razor edge of death placed against my neck so swiftly I could do naught but freeze in my surprise. Noki, Shingari and Seema jumped forward latently, their own weapons drawn but I was already compromised. I looked at Xena and waited. “Where have you been?”

“What?”

The narrow blue gaze narrowed further. “It’s awfully convenient for you to arrive now – awfully convenient that Belerafon knew exactly when to strike and neither you nor none of your tribe around for the party.”

“She didn’t –”

“No! I want to hear what Xena has to say,” I cut Noki off. My temper boiled inside me, I could feel my anger just at the base of my heart, ready to help it pump my fiery blood to action. So I wondered how I managed to stay so calm. “Go on.”

Her eyebrow twitched. “You tell me. Just how much coincidence is involved here?”

I didn’t deny myself a cocky smirk. “None at all. It was all treachery.”

I could tell my guards' surprise in the wavering of their swords, and Gabrielle's in the widening of her eyes. But Xena's face hardened with condemnation and she grabbed me with an iron vice of a hand between my neck and shoulder. I felt a sharp pain, like an arrow, through my nose then everything below my neck went numb. Breathing against that numbness was painful and draining, and as I lay on my side in the pine needles, staring at Xena's Amazon-made boots, I thought I might have gone too far.

"There's been enough treachery visited on these women," she was snarling at me – "I don't have patience for anymore."

"Xena wait! She didn't know about the Council. Cyanne concealed the summons from her and bade us all to silence!"

I assumed this was the beautiful, young blonde Northerner who was jumping to my defense. Through my incommensurable suffocation I said to myself that I should remember a swearing of silence does not extend beyond the other party's death for her. And then I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of the thought, but the effort was too great for even a chuckle.

"What are you smiling about," Xena asked me as she turned my face up to her with the toe of her boot.

"Dead man's humor," I wheezed. "Mom said...makes it easier."

"-Xena..."

"Yeah, yeah."

Another hard stab and a tingling as excruciating as relieving flooded through me. The pounding in my head was worst of all, and I wanted to rip my skull in half for a measure of relief. Gabrielle helped me to sit up. "You must be their daughter," she muttered. "Tai'gee's brass and Kaija's riddles – hopefully you get old enough to learn some temperance to go along with those."

After a minute or so I could stand again, and now, having had my brush with death, felt emboldened. "Yeah, speaking of temperance," I jibed and looked at Xena with as much smart as I put into my voice, "Cyanne was supposed to be scouting for a winter camp. She was much better at hiding it, but she was just as ambitious and deceitful as her predecessor."

"Seems deceit is to be expected from a Queen," one plain girl muttered, and the comment earned a quick snap from Gabrielle.

"Tyro, enough. Now is not the time for divisiveness."

It was easy to see the furtive, distrustful glances being shot at one particularly striking Amazon – dark hair, dark eyes, fierce features and the least beaten looking of the others – at least physically. She had an air of shame around her that reeked like day-baked garbage though.

“Varia has paid her price. She is no longer Queen. That is settled and done.” Gabrielle’s green-blue eyes looked carefully at each person there, only moving on once she secured a response that agreed with her statement.

“Come on,” Xena motioned, “let’s set up a camp and do some talking.”

~

Xena and Gabrielle were as sad to hear the story of the rest of Tai’gee and Kaija’s lives as Noki was distressed to tell it. I must admit, hearing the story of Kaija’s journey to Afrika was much harder than reading it. And hearing of all the love and dedication the half-sphinx had for my mother made me wonder how I ever thought my mom and Eponin had had an all consuming love.

“So you never knew Kaija.”

I shook my head at Gabrielle and said I only knew of her, and even then, only after my mom’s death. “She gave me this as a child,” I explained and pulled my prize feather necklace from the place behind my leather armor, “but even then she told us only that it came from a sphinx – the last sphinx. My brother’s dedicated his life to finding another one.”

Xena closed her eyes and shook her head. Gabrielle continued to process the history in her own silence. The firelight played over our group in quiet flames. We kept our fires small and low since we weren’t sure how many of Belerafon’s men may still be around. My own Amazons mingled among the other Greeks, trying to learn of the fate of various lineages that had remained at the Capitol. Ghiran’s usual scowl of resentment softened as she listened while trying not to look like it. Thankfully the night would remain warm and dry, so we didn’t have to worry about finding shelter on top of everything else.

“So Tai’gee led most of the Greek Amazons out of Greece and to the Northern Tribe, where you’ve all remained since. Is that your plan? To return with these remaining few?”

Noki gave me a look then picked up a twig and began snapping it into little pieces. I studied my hands, smooth, supple, nothing like the war-worn hands of Xena; I could see their martial age even across the fire pit. I tried to order my thoughts.

“I will take them back,” I said at length. “But when I was a child, Artemis came to me and told me I was to lead them west – farther west than anyone had been for longer than anyone remembers.”

Gabrielle squinted. “And then what?”

“*Follow the Golden Trail west. Not for you to see but there will be a home there. Long will be the journey of your daughters.*”

“In other words, you don’t know.”

I lifted my eyes to Xena and thought I saw a flinch as she looked back. “Your contempt for the gods is well known, Xena. But there are those of us who don’t share your disdain. There are those of us who love and trust the gods. And those of us who’ve been provided for and protected by them will not lightly turn our backs to their guidance.”

“You’ve been without the gods’ protection and guidance for a long time now. Using some of your own judgment will be to your advantage.”

The dark head of the beautiful Greek – Varia – lifted at this comment from Xena. She started to look over, shook her head, and resumed her position of withdrawal. I was intrigued by her... I don’t know why; but I wanted to hear whatever she had to say, and she wouldn’t talk without encouragement. I called out. “You disagree?”

The other of my firemates followed my call to see to whom I spoke. Gabrielle gave me a hard look and bit her tongue. I beckoned the separated woman to join us, and once she was close enough I said, “You seem like you have something to add to our discussion. I would hear your thoughts.”

She kept her eyes down as she spoke, and if her hair hadn’t been tied back by her braided headband, she would have had a curtain of thick, dark hair to hide behind. “It’s just...”

“Speak,” I encouraged her after she trailed off.

“I only hesitate because I’m sure I will be considered rude and out of place.”

I glanced between Xena and Gabrielle and both sat tensely, forcibly quiet. “You have my leave to speak freely.”

“It’s just that it seems so hypocritical – so backwards. Xena, you killed Artemis –”

“– To save my daughter!”

“– To save Eve!”

“– Artemis is dead?”

“– To save one person you killed all the gods. You killed our benefactor, you killed our patron deity – the one who created us, taught us, blessed us as Her own – you killed Her and, to save Eve, you sacrificed the whole of our Nation who was innocent of your contempt.

“You talk about using our own judgment and being responsible for our own actions, to trust ourselves – but trusting just ourselves often leads to directionless mortals. The gods provided a direction for us, a direction for our loyalty, a sense of purpose for our lives, and even when we hadn’t heard from Artemis for long whiles, we could still drive ourselves along the path She set

for us. You robbed us of that – you stole it from us – our whole path is wiped away, our future, our purpose – the whole Amazon Nation exterminated so you could save your daughter. What responsibility are you going to take for that action? What happened to the Greater Good in your personal war against the gods?”

Gabrielle constantly shook her head while Varia spoke, and when it was clear she was done, she smacked her lips hard. “You just don’t know when to quit, do you Varia? Did Xena not offer her life again and again to save you? Me? All of us? I brought the whole Nation to Helicon to save you, as you well knew we would.” I watched Varia’s eyes lower again. Gabrielle went on. “Sometimes the Greater Good narrows down to focus on one person because that’s what it needs. All of the Amazons came for you because the Nation needs its Queens. The world needs Eve and the message she brings.”

“Xena didn’t kill the gods for the world or for any message. She killed them for her daughter. She killed Artemis – mother of thousands – for her only child. She killed them to make the world in her own self-reliant image – oh, but she spared Aries. He was the only one she had any feelings for so she spared him – because of *her* feelings. Nevermind the feelings of all the rest of us and what we wanted! And my position as Queen has now been taken because I was willing to do for the Greater Good – I who would sacrifice one for the many.”

Varia had the attention of everyone now. They had all moved closer, interested, and now they stood thinking, even the ones who looked like they’d had enough of thinking and wanted mindly rest more than anything. For my part I just observed, curious about the outcome of the debate, not yet having understood Artemis had been killed.

Xena spoke next. “Is this another bid for power Varia? You just upset because you’re not Queen anymore and you want it back?” The dark warrior stood, her height topping most of us, and when she looked on Varia, the younger Amazon seemed a mere youth under that wizened gaze. “Because you can’t be Queen now. Your choice to turn on a sister – even for the Greater Good – makes you untrustworthy. None of your sisters are safe if they feel you’d sacrifice them for whatever you determine is the Greater Good. Besides, Tai’gee was the ordained Queen of the Capitol Amazons – when she led them away, the line of succession went with her. Inana is Queen, and the only legitimate remaining Queen of all the Regions.” She quirked a brow at the glowering warrior. “You’ll have to get in line.”

Varia’s dark gaze smoldered, but she remained composed. “This isn’t about me being Queen. It’s about how much you’ve meddled in the lives of the Amazons and how much that has cost us.”

Again I looked back at Xena. I was starting to doubt that she and this blonde were the real Xena and Gabrielle of the legends – I didn’t recall any meddling in their heroic tales. Varia noticed my expression and continued. “Not everyone knows why you were banned from all Amazon initiations Xena – not everyone knows about Alti and what you did to the Northern Elders as you used your own judgment. There aren’t many who remember your raid on our village for vengeance against Gabrielle. Or your insurances in bringing Rome’s war to Amazon Land so you could fight Caesar.”

“What is this about Varia,” the plain Tyro called.

“It’s about Xena trying to talk our Queen out of an instruction given to her by Artemis – after everything she’s already contributed to us that’s led to our destruction – would this be the final blow, just because she wants no influence from the gods?”

There was quiet. The low fires, abandoned now, crackled. A soft breeze swayed the thick pine branches and strengthened the scent of evergreen; a dislodged pinecone thumped heavily on the ground.

“Artemis is dead? Really dead?”

Everyone looked directly at Xena, and I was glad that Seema reiterated my question.

The great warrior pressed her lips together and gave a short, curt nod of affirmation. Gabrielle, at first looking grim and guilty, then saw the tide turning against her lifemate and spoke up. “This changes nothing. Artemis was still dead yesterday when we fought Belerafon, She was dead when you all decided to forgive Eve, and She was dead –”

“Who will lead our souls to the Land of the Dead? Who will let us in if Artemis is dead?” This was from one of the remaining Greeks; I had yet to learn her name. A tall, rosy haired woman who looked haggard after the onslaught she’d survived. “All of our sisters who’ve just died,” she said with wide, glazed eyes looking beseechingly at me. “Queen Gweyn-dyr... Bane, Selentelanya, Kinlimta, Nixalné, Posenee, Potahra, Allarmeny, Sheetopa, Braxus, Tren, Velta –”

“Enough,” Gabrielle hissed.

“No – no – don’t tell me enough!” The young warrior’s exhaustion drove her to hysterics and drove her pitch to a screeching plea. “They’re all dead and more and Artemis is the gate keeper to the Land of the Dead – they’ll be trapped in the Netherworld if Artemis isn’t there to admit them! What about their souls? What about our souls – we’ll be trapped too!”

A foreign Amazon stepped quietly up behind her and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Shenti... enough,” she said gently.

“Our sisters will be forsaken without Artemis,” Shenti cried. “We all will be!”

“What friend of the Amazons would kill their Goddess?”

“How could you?”

“How could you Xena?”

“What’s going to happen to us?”

Xena's brave blue eyes shrank back from the fearful questioning; the exhaustion and fatigue was giving way to despair, and now there was no battle to divert to, to deflect the hopelessness. The uncertainty of our survival made us look back at how we came to this and if what Varia said was true, Xena's stamp played enough of a role to give the mounting anxiety a close target.

It would have been helpful, perhaps, if Priestess Zupé could have come along. As our spiritual advisor she was best equipped to address these questions and concerns. But then – I was Queen, I was Artemis' Chosen and while Zupé was our great shamaness and healer, I was Artemis' first daughter – Zupé wouldn't be closer to the Goddess than I, no matter how otherworldly she was.

“My mother – Queen Tai'gee – told me that Artemis would always be with us, no matter what, because we are Her daughters.” I remained sitting as I spoke, relaxed, even, and it seemed to be having an effect. They drew in, some choosing to sit in the companionable quiet, all listened. I was nervous – I'd never spoken for Artemis before. Mom had met her, talked to her – me she'd almost fried... “I don't think any of us would ever expect something like death to happen to our gods. But even still, now that it has happened, why should we expect their journey in the afterlife to be any different from ours?” I took a deep breath, feeling more confident in what I was saying. “When we die, sisters, whether in the midst of battle or of old age in our beds, we are called Home. We are called to join our sisters and mothers and grandmothers and to Artemis. If Artemis is dead – all the sooner for us to meet her in the afterlife.

“As for getting talked out of my instruction –” here I loosed a cocky and mischievous grin “– it has yet to happen. I may not have gotten to walk with Artemis as my mother did, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't know when She's talking to me. She has a home for us in the west. I intend to go find it – or my daughters will, or my daughters' daughters, but I will go and nothing nor no one will change my mind.”

The fears and hysterics were calmed. Everyone sat now, peacefully, contemplative, breaths were drawn in easier, hearts beat softer. Varia, to my unexpected pleasure, looked immensely satisfied.

I left the issues with Xena unaddressed. No matter what she'd done, she was still the Warrior Princess, Consort of the Queen Gabrielle, and I felt like any more discussion of her roles in Amazon history would only turn into a trap for her she would not be able to escape. The next day, as we were organizing ourselves to leave, the dark warrior came to thank me for that.

“What you said last night was exactly what was needed. You acted like a true leader – a real Queen.”

I smirked and asked her to tell Noki that. “She wonders about me.” I lightly shook my head while I smiled and tugged the cinch on my mount's saddle more tightly. “I try. Sometimes I think I'm getting the hang of it – others it all seems so big no mortal should be expected to deal with it alone.”

Xena smiled, too. “You seem like you have a pretty good head on your shoulders, and more importantly a good heart. Tai'gee and Kaija would have been very proud of you.”

I nodded. “I think about her a lot, now that I know who she is. I try to imagine what she was like – what she and Mom were like together. It’s hard because I’ve only ever known Eponin – her image keeps blurring in. Don’t get me wrong, I love her, too – it’s just, you wonder, you know?, about the love of your mom’s life.”

Xena nodded and glanced off for a moment. “I understand. Kaija was a remarkable creature. As impulsive and spontaneous as Tai’gee was, Kaija was deliberate and patient. Strong, intelligent... She could have been the end of me on numerous occasions,” she admitted with a self-deprecating chuckle, and I couldn’t help but laugh as well. Then she sobered. “But most importantly, she loved your mom. She loved her more than I’ve seen anyone love anyone else in all my life – and that, more than anything – is why I know Kaija must have felt she was an unmitigated danger to Tai’gee to leave the tribe. It would have destroyed her soul if she’d ever done anything that hurt Tai’gee.”

“Noki said in her writing that Kaija thought you would help her... you know, with the Rogue.” I wasn’t trying to be accusing, just wondering about the intertwining of roles and expectations.

Xena pressed her lips together tightly, with a slight shake of her head and a sigh. “I was. It was like all things you mean to do, but since it looks ok for the time being, you keep putting it off. I wasn’t so concerned with what Aries had planted inside Kaija because I thought nothing would come of it under Artemis’ protection. And, apparently, that was the case until she came off Amazon Land, then it was a feeding frenzy.”

“You think it was like your dark side?”

Xena nodded. “Similar. Only my dark side has always been a part of me – something like a deformed limb that you grow up learning how to deal with. Kaija didn’t have a dark side, it was inserted into her, and completely foreign to how she would normally interact with the world. I just hope – wherever she is – that she’s truly free of it.”

“I think... and Mom thought... Artemis took Kaija. We think Artemis gave her to me as my guide west.” I explained to Xena, and summed up to Gabrielle who joined us in the middle of my story, the prophecy sending I had received.

“Oh no... I hope not.” My questioning look was enough to prompt Gabrielle to explain herself. “If Artemis put Kaija into Her service, she can only be released by Artemis. With Her dead, she and Tai’gee may never be together again.”

That stopped me cold. “That can’t be right.” I looked back and forth between the blonde Queen and the raven warrior. “This can’t be right,” I insisted. They looked back at me steadfast, straight-faced. “But that’s not fair. They don’t deserve that. My mom waited the rest of her life for Kaija! She died scared she’d never see her again. They don’t deserve that!”

Xena, to her credit, looked remarkably guilty, but she remained silent. That was the worst thing she could do for my temper. “So what’re you going to do about it? You killed Artemis – what’re you going to do to fix this?”

“There’s nothing we can do Inana. I’m sorry. Very sorry.”

I looked hard at Gabrielle’s gentle eyes, and as guilty as Xena looked, Gabrielle looked truly pained over the situation. Her gold locks hung slack against her head, limp, wilted.

My temper wouldn’t be sated with an apology however, no matter how sincere. “You’re sorry? You’re sorry for the suffering of Amazon souls? *Your* sisters! My *mother*! Queens who gave their lives under your leadership relied on the blessing of a goddess you helped to kill! Yeah, I can see you’re sorry Gabrielle – and? You’re sorry and that’s it?”

“Inana...”

“Sorry’s not good enough Gabrielle!”

“Inana,” tried Xena but I would not be stopped.

“Are you ‘just’ sorry too, you self serving murderess? My mother’s going to roam the Land of the Dead forever, looking for her love, but you have your daughter – great for you. You just stood there and gushed about how wonderful Kaija was, but you’re just going to leave her banished to purgatory? Well fuck you Xena – and as for you Gabrielle –” I jabbed a stiff finger at my counterpart’s chest – “Your actions – your choices – are the most despicable of all. No true Amazon Queen would idly stand by and watch someone kill her Goddess. Xena may have done it for her daughter – and you? For what? Or you weren’t Queen of the Amazons then? Isn’t it funny how ‘once an Amazon Queen, always an Amazon Queen’ doesn’t really apply to you until you want something? Well, I can help you with that.”

“What’s going on here?” Varia stepped around my horse, followed by Seema and Noki. “We’re ready to go – we were waiting for you Queen Inana.”

I took a deep breath, but it did nothing to calm my racing heart. I looked back at Gabrielle, sizing her up just as she had me, then yanked the necklace she was using to identify herself as a Queen from her neck. “You are no longer an Amazon Queen,” I sneered at her and added a look of disgust as the conclusion of my measuring, “and from your behavior, you never were one.”

“Inana, don’t do this. You need –”

“– Nothing more from you Xena. Let’s go everyone. Mount up.” With arrogant ease I swung onto my horse and looked down at the much diminished pair. “Xena, you may have dedicated your life to repairing the damage you did as the Destroyer of Nations, but you better hope for another miracle lifetime to work on the desecration you’ve caused as the Warrior Princess. I’d pray that your soul never knows the unrest you’ve condemned my mother and Kaija to, but you’ve killed all the gods I would’ve prayed to.”

~

With ten new Amazons to bring to our thriving ranks, the journey back to Northern Land should have been a bustling and exciting trip. I should have been contemplating what I was going to do about the now leaderless Northern Amazons. But the loss of two of our greatest legends made the trip very sober and lonely for me – the loss of my Goddess – of the deity to whom I'd dedicated my life and would have looked to for help in fulfilling my mission to the westward unknown left me vacant. The confirmation of my mother's dying fears and the hopeless wandering of Kaija's soul tied in service to a dead goddess sank an anchor of depression deep into my heart – what could I hope for and believe in? They were my evidence of love transcending all, but now love meant nothing but despair. I felt empty, lost, unsteady – anything a Queen shouldn't be feeling I felt, and a loneliness so profound it approached destitution.

Noki rode way ahead of us, scouting, leading, being remote as always. Part of me wished she'd ride back and talk to me, and the rest of me just didn't want to talk. What would we have talked about? The first thing out of my mouth would've been to ask her what I should do; just like a child running to mom or aunt or teacher ~Fix it for me Mommy!~ Noki couldn't fix anything and I know that added to the pain she carried in having to retell her and Kaija's journey to Afrika. I wasn't quite sure why Noki took everything about Kaija as hard as she did, but Kaija was special to her, and after a trip like they had, with the outcome it had, it shouldn't be unreasonable to see why Noki would feel off kilter to revisit that lifetime.

Still, I would've liked some guidance, or some advice – even if it was advice I would've just shot down immediately. I would still have liked to hear it; perhaps I could use that brave person's energy to figure out how to think for myself again. This was the lowest, heaviest feeling I had ever known, and my Goddess to whom I would have thrown out my fears and prayers, could no longer hear them... or if she could, there was nothing she could do about them. I alone was responsible for the lives of hundreds of women, hundreds more children; decisions I made may well affect an entire region as we contributed greatly to the commerce of the area where we lived. We were protected – for the moment at least – by the powerful Sarmations, so I couldn't deny an annoyingly niggling voice that said to leave would be a sign of greed on my part. To add a desire for our own identity on top of wanting our own land and power was just asking for too much, wasn't it? And what if that voice was right? What if Egili was right and it was all just craziness? Or what if I'm right and we should go? I took in a long, sad breath and closed my eyes against the sun.

Within a few moments I felt an energy approaching. Some energy that was aggressive and sure and alluring because of it, so it must have been Varia. I didn't acknowledge her as she rode closer, moved up beside me, paced me in studious silence for several minutes. Obviously she had something to say so I was going to let her say it. Eventually she did.

“Are you having regrets about Xena and Gabrielle?”

“No.”

“There’s not a lot of people with the guts to talk to them like you did – no one that would strip Gabrielle of her title. It was really very impressive.”

I answered flatly, with my eyes still closed. “I didn’t do it to be impressive. I did it because I was angry. Maybe I shouldn’t have but what’s done is done and I’m not going to waste time rethinking it.”

I could feel her looking at me, first my face – longest at my face – then down and back up; an appraisal more than a judgment. While I found Varia incredibly attractive, there was still something about her that made me wary and cautious.

“Of course I don’t know you well at all,” she offered lightly, “but I’ve liked what I’ve seen of you so far. You seem strong and in touch with doing things the way they need to be done.”

Now I tilted my head forward, slowly opened my eyes to look at her. She glanced at me nervously a couple times while I observed her, but held her tongue. Having made my own judgment, I spoke my piece. “Varia, let me be clear – I have many difficult decisions to make in the coming weeks and they are going to try my patience. If you have been so observant of me these last couple days, I hope you will have picked up that patience is something I have very little of. I know you were a Queen once, not for long, and you may be wanting that position back. Understand that I won’t tolerate that ambition from you, especially on top of everything else I’m dealing with. So if you’re seeking to get on my good side to win power or prestige, or I suspect you want to usurp my position, then I will eliminate your threat. Do we understand one another?”

The way she continued to look at me made me think that either she was really pissed off I’d called her bluff, or she would see just how overtly she could convey her desires and not commit treason. But then she smiled widely, and genuinely I thought, and laughed. “We’re going to be good friends, you and I.” I wasn’t sure yet, but I’d wait and see.

“You know, we knew you were there, that the Queen Tai’gee was there raising you, but somehow you still didn’t seem real. You’re much more real now. I wish I could’ve met your mother.”

“She was a wonderful woman,” was all I could manage to say; her dying tears choked me.

I’m going to trust that Varia sensed the sensitivity of the subject and had the grace to steer away from it. “Is it very different, this land to the north?”

I looked around us, at the lush woods, thick, green leaves, the zipping insects glittering and glinting in the sunlight that flickered through the trees. We passed small farm plots rich with vegetable gardens and livestock; unexpected pools of water, clear and unclaimed; random statues to the now defunct gods pointing this way and that to towns, cities and villages. I nodded: “Yes, it’s very different. You should take as much Greece with you as you can now. The Northern Land is beautiful in its own way, but it is its own way.”

“Like what?”

“For one thing, it gets cold – it snows – the ground freezes in the winter and can’t be used for anything until spring. It’s handy in a way because we can dig holes in it and use the ground as cold storage, but those holes have to be dug before winter sets or it can’t be done after.”

“And I heard a man clan lives with you?”

“No. They live nearby, but they inch closer every year. Mom wanted to educate their boys so she wouldn’t be neighbor to ignorant men, but I think it may have backfired because now they cling to us. I think the Northern Tribe doesn’t mind so much, but they’re a confused bunch that changes their fancies every season.”

Varia looked at me with piqued interest, then around to see where the other riders were. In a lowered voice she confessed she had her reservations about the Northern Tribe. “They were beautiful but... undisciplined. The one they called Cyanne as Queen, I wanted to take her down a couple pegs. Those two back there,” she said with a toss of her head, “they look fascinated at the mainstay, like they never would have imagined people could live differently than them. Are they backwards?”

I shrugged ‘maybe’. “Probably just out of touch.” Then I smiled as I thought of Egili. “They know enough to be offended at being thought ignorant.”

It grew quiet between us but it was an uncomfortable quiet, so I looked to Varia to see if she looked as awkward as she was making me feel, and found her thoughtfully studying the reins held lightly in her slender hands. “What?” I asked her.

“Huh? – Oh... nothing. Well... I was going to pay you a compliment but didn’t want to come off as power hungry or ambitious.”

My cheeks grew hot, and if they didn’t show a flush they damn well should have. Clearing my throat I asked her what she wanted to say.

“Just that you have a beautiful smile – and to ask who inspired it just now.”

“Oh, just thinking about a conversation I had with my friend.” ‘Friend’ rushed out very quickly and wavery because I wasn’t sure what Egili and I were now – if anything. I wasn’t sure what we were before we’d argued, so now vagueness seemed to morph into a fog. I think Varia sensed the sensitivity of that subject too and turned back to the safer weather, climate, environment. Which, of course, meant it was a very short conversation. Fortunately at that point Noki returned with a report.

“There’s trouble waiting for us if we stay this route. Troop of Centurions heading back to Rome, we’re going to run right into them.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Anything good to add?”

“Yes in fact,” she grinned. “We’re very close to the Capitol. We can probably skip back there without too much trouble, get a chance to get as much from the mainstay as we can, let these guys pass, then be on our way.”

“Well why didn’t you say that first?”

She grinned again, and before she answered I was already smiling. “Because I didn’t want you thinking I was all rays of sunshine.”

With a jaunty tug, Noki turned her horse and headed off the main path. I made a signal and a couple others followed her, some turned off where they were farther behind us, and the rest followed me further down the path before we turned in. By breaking up our entry ways we made it less obvious how many of us there were and where we were going. Obscurity was going to be our biggest help here.

“We’re going to raid our own village... our dead sister’s homes?”

Varia’s chin was held tight to her, shamed dissatisfaction squinted her eyes.

“Salvage, if that will make it sit better with you. Either we take what we want or it gets left to be taken by whoever invades our land. Which would you prefer?”

“Neither – I wish it hadn’t come to this.”

“That’s not an option, and doesn’t make the reality any easier to deal with.”

She gave me a pointed look. “The only reason you can say it like that and see it like that is because it’s not *your* home we’ll be pillaging. For you it’s someone else’s so it’s just something to be done. For us, it’ll be the same as grave robbing.”

‘Understandable’ but “That still doesn’t change the other option. You’d do yourself a favor to look at it like you’re doing your sisters a favor.” Varia remained contrite, and I thought she might be a type that would make a point not to like something and then stick with it. So I let her stew and kicked up to join Noki.

Depressing was a fair beginning to describe the state of the great Greek Amazon Capitol. Everything was remnants. I could see the remains of the once massive and impenetrable double wall that protected the Capitol before Queen Tai’gee led us out of Greece. There were places where several posts clung together in all their glorious prestige, and then a few feet away a clump of charred stumps, rotten strappings dangling in the breeze. It was easy to see where the new city regrew within the old, shrinking in from the destroyed walls, trying to find some semblance of security behind a thin shield of saplings by comparison. These damaged posts stabbed jaggedly at the sky, broken with blunt force, by a much less sophisticated attack than the invasion waged by Pompei so many decades earlier.

The initial and superficial clean-up after Belerafon's attack was also easily visible. The charred remains of women set to burn in release to the Land of the Dead before Gabrielle led the remaining Nation to raid Helicon still smoldered; dilapidated homes still smoldered, the Great Temple of Artemis smoldered. I could see Belerafon's intent in his tactics, and it wasn't just to kill Amazons – all if possible – but to literally wipe us from existence, to completely destroy everything we'd built and enjoyed through the blessings and tutelage of his mother. His mission wasn't just for vengeance – this type of carnage doesn't display 'just' vengeance; this was his exaction of reckoning; this was what he felt we owed Artemis. I never understood the concept of a broken heart until I looked on the crumbling temple and felt the full impact of the loss of getting to see so fine a symbol of my heritage in its whole glory.

“Still feel like salvage?” Varia walked by me, trailing her horse behind her and headed for what I assumed was her home.

I swallowed hard and looked uncomfortably at everyone else. “Those of you... we need to take everything we can. If there are any wagons... Just everything. Leave nothing our enemies can further desecrate.”

Noki suggested bringing all of the valuables, remaining stores and livestock, weapons, scrolls – anything we wanted to take, to the main circle, where the still decorated and bloody dais was. “We were celebrating the eclipse and Varia's coronation; we knew this would be a powerful reign,” Tyro mumbled as we had approached the first walls. She constantly shook her drab locks, her face pulled tight in reconsideration of the sudden tragedy of it all as she helped to sort the growing piles of desirables.

Once again I wiped my dripping forehead. I was completely unused to this muggy heat, and while I wasn't dressed as heavily as the original Northerners, I was more dressed than the original Greeks. So I undressed. None but the Northerners seemed to notice my bared body – and it occurred to me they, being more fully dressed, were also more modest about nakedness. It also brought to mind and clarified a statement I heard Mama Ep make when I was a child. *“I'll tell you why Romans aren't trustworthy, they wear too many clothes,” she said with a jerky stamp of her cane. “Just look at them, hiding knives in all their folds and flaps, no guts to bear themselves and fight like warriors. No, they leave that to their stripped gladiators – true fighting turned to sport, bravery for entertainment. Backwards, the whole lot of them. Give me a naked man over a Roman any day!”* Well, trustworthy or not, at least I felt less likely to die of heatstroke.

‘Then again, maybe not.’ Two watery figures shimmered in the building heat waves, walking through the wavery trees like ghosts. I wiped my stinging eyes again, blinked, but they wouldn't clear, the image wouldn't change. It was Gabrielle and Xena and they would only just become more solid the closer they got. With a frustrated exhale I threw the lances I'd gathered aside and went to meet them.

“What are you doing here?”

“You've got trouble ahead,” said Xena.

“Yeah, the Centurions; we already know. So what are you doing here?”

“I may not be Queen anymore, but I’m still an Amazon and whether you like it or not you’re going to need our help to make it out of Greece again.”

“You’re going to take all this?” Xena asked as she looked critically at our salvage heap.

I gave them both impatient looks. “We’re collecting and sorting right now and why do you think we need any more of your ‘help’?”

Xena scratched lightly above her eyebrow. “Inana, there are less than twenty of you. If you take even half of all this with you, you’re going to be a very wealthy target. You need all the help you can get.”

“Could you two be any more irritating,” I muttered soto voce. Neither of them heard what I said, but my agitation was clearly evident – I never took too much stock in hiding that particular emotion.

Gabrielle took a half step towards me. “We’re your friends Inana. We want to help; and whether or not you like it, you know you need it.”

I shook my head, thoroughly unconvinced. “Let’s leave friendship out of this for the moment, because that’s a whole different issue. I am currently surrounded with people I trust, and I don’t particularly want to taint that. Especially since my trustworthy sisters have demonstrated they’re quite capable of finding and avoiding whatever trouble we may encounter.”

“Yeah? Well here’s an update on those Centurions you’re so informed about. They aren’t going around you – they’re going to cut straight through the heart of Amazon Land. They’re going to exploit the treaty Gabrielle sent to Rome for a shortcut. So – are the heavily laden less-than-twenty of you ready to deal with a battalion of Rome’s best?”

My anger continued to boil and I would soon really lose my temper. Xena had no right to be so antagonistic; I was in the right here – she was the cause of our current grief and toil, yet she was daring to lecture me? “You have a very difficult time with not being in charge, don’t you Xena? We’re not your warriors, nor am *I* under your command. You are here uninvited, and I have extended about as much courtesy as I care to since I’ve yet to have you both shot down.” I appreciated that the dark haired warrior’s face hardened and Gabrielle’s eyes quickly flitted about looking for my hidden sniper; just another example of her fallibility as a Queen and Amazon – she should’ve known to look for that as she walked up, not as an afterthought. Seti could’ve had them both through the eyes before they even started talking after one discreet motion from me. “Now, with the last bit of my patience, I’m going to ask why I should trust that you didn’t divert these Romans here for some grand showdown.”

Xena charged me like a raging bull, stormed right into my face, damning me the entire way. “You have no right. No right! Now I’ve made my mistakes,” she told me and jerked my halter

top hard while I listened quietly. “Mistakes I’ve paid for, and ones I’m still paying for, and ones I’ll never know were mistakes because everyone’s dead who could’ve told me –” she heaved that last bit out with the last of her breath and took in a ragged one to keep going – “mistakes I can never make right, and I’ll claim everyone of them that’s mine. And mine alone!” She jerked me hard again. “I won’t have some ignorant pissant assigning me ones that aren’t mine and damning me for not taking them.” She shoved me back so hard I knew I would have dark bruises from the imprint of her fists; it wasn’t a dramatic move and all the more powerful because of it. “Now let’s get something straight between you and me right now. I loved your mother and I loved Kaija. I would never have intentionally set either of them for an eternity of anything but happiness. If Kaija went into Artemis’ service, I had nothing to do with that. That was her choice – but let me tell you something - - that girl was smart, she wouldn’t let herself be trapped anywhere, and especially not to be kept from Tai’gee forever. But you wouldn’t know that about her because you’ve been so busy judging me you haven’t heard a word I’ve said. You take that with you up on that high horse of yours and ride with it shoved in your tight crack for a while.”

Her stone hard blue eyes bored into me and I truly don’t know why I wasn’t afraid... maybe I was too shocked. I just stared back and watched the blueness flit down at my hand wrapped threateningly around the handle of my knife, still sheathed in my waistband. She turned her back to me with a smirk of humorless defiance and walked away to rejoin her blonde friend.

Gabrielle was looking at me as though Xena had just played the trump card and I was outdone – but my eyes fixed on her with a very dangerous look and her composure changed, almost entirely. She lowered her eyes and I wondered at the sudden submissiveness. In a strong voice, but with a downcast face she said, “we have some suggestions, Queen Inana, that we feel could help you on your way – you can do with them as you like, but really what would it hurt just to hear them at least?”

I’m not stupid enough to think Gabrielle and Xena didn’t have good ideas, but I am willful enough to deeply despise the manipulation they have obviously become very good at using. They put me in a difficult position that could pretty much only be best handled by capitulating to their lead. I suspected that’s why Gabrielle half-ass tried to look like she was making an offer of help with that insincere deferred gaze. But as soon as she said ‘would it hurt’ in front of all my warriors, she’d made my only honorable escape be to listen to them. I briefly toyed with the idea of telling them to fuck off, but a sensation of gold was burning in my stomach that told me following their advice was the way to go.

“You are both brazenly conniving assholes,” I directed pointedly to them, “and I don’t appreciate it at all. However, to keep the dignified appearance of a Queen I will listen to what you have to say – along with my council. We will decide what we want to do after you make your presentation. What we decide is it – you will not interfere any further.”

Xena pulled her hands to her hips and growled out an unflinching “Fine.”

“Noki – Varia. Come with me.”

~

I may never have met Kaija, but my mother taught me many of her skills in moving through the forest with silent speed. She taught me how to track, hide, keen my ears to a specific target by forcing every other sound back in order to amplify it. Sometimes as I move through the woods I love so much, I imagine Kaija being proud of, and even impressed by, me. I realized she'd become a hero to me, an idol, and even while I knew she probably wouldn't like to have that role with anyone, I still felt a childlike pulse of thrill at trying to do something that could encourage a nod of approval from her.

So I was especially pleased when I'd successfully snuck up on the great Warrior Princess and the Battling Bard as they whispered together. They'd presented their plans and I'd dismissed them with no pretense of grace or courtesy. And then, unashamedly, I followed them. The eavesdropping was necessary in my mind – I needed to know what they thought when others weren't around to be censored for – I needed to know where they were coming from when no one was watching them approach, so I could decide just how much trust to put into their ideas.

“-can't keep going at her like that Xena. She's a different person.”

“Different than what Gabrielle?”

“Not what – who. She's different than Tai'gee and if Tai'gee grew into a Queen anything like Inana, you wouldn't have been able to approach her like this either.”

“Yeah, Kaija would've had my head skewered with my arm.”

A laughing sniff. “Maybe – but I wouldn't put it passed Inana to do the same thing herself. You've got the drop on her twice Xe, and just because I'm not a tribe child doesn't mean I don't know that's no accident for an Amazon. She's much more willful than the Tai'gee we knew, and a lot cockier about who she is in the world. Maybe because Tai'gee had Kaija to focus on that grounded her some... Inana's focused all of her energy on her own development.”

“Yeah, cocky's about right, and I'm about through with it.”

“Xena, are you hearing a word I'm saying?”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. She's grotesquely self-assured and knows no ignorance.”

There was quiet between them. Then Gabrielle again. “I agree on the self-assured, but I think somewhere along the way she's learned a Queen has to be direct, decisive, and inflexible or she shows weakness. You're challenging that and she feels that's making her look weak.”

“She's going to get them all killed if she doesn't get over herself.”

“Xena, she doesn't trust us. She thinks we've condemned her mom and Kaija to an eternity of torture. We're not going to browbeat trust into her.”

“So that’s what the sweet smooth talk was supposed to be for?, loosen her up?”

“Yeah well... she saw through that about as easily as you did, and I only just met her. She’s sharp Xe, and I think she’s really struggling with trying to figure out how to keep everything together. She’s got it in her head that she has to do it all on her own so she’ll look like a strong leader and she’s not going to loosen up if you keep pushing her.”

“What is this, Attack Xena Day? In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m on her side, Gabrielle. I’m trying to save her skin!”

“And you’ll best be able to do that by letting her think she saved it herself. She has to feel like the plans and decisions she makes are hers, or that she really has a choice in adopting someone else’s. You’re backing her into a corner and wondering why she’s fighting back. By the gods, she may not have been raised by Kaija, but she’s got the exact same standoffishness. I don’t know how that happened.”

“Maybe Artemis put a bit of Kaija into her.”

“Mmm... maybe. Still – you never could pressgang Kaija – it was always negotiation or nothing at all. Inana’s going to be the same way.”

“I don’t have time to deal with ego Gabrielle – and neither does she. That battalion is going to be here in full force within hours and if she doesn’t wizen up she’s still going to be looking for her ‘own way’ when they get here.”

“You know Xe, something I’ve learned from you is that sometimes a little patience in a rushed situation goes a lot farther than an immediate reaction.”

“I’ve never said any such thing.”

“No, you haven’t. But you do it before every fight – take a breath, get your mind together; you have this look on your face right before you squench your eyes and dive in.”

“I do, do I?”

“Mm-hm.”

“Well... you’ve always been the better negotiator between the two of us. And these are your Amazons – maybe I should just keep my mouth shut.”

“They aren’t my Amazons anymore, and I think you should keep you mouth shut just long enough for Inana to ask you to open it. Let her take her moment before she dives in.”

“My bard... always with her finger on the pulse...”

I faded back then, made my way back to think, sort, decide.

~

We made it back – by the gods, we made it back and only the Goddess knows how. Or... someone other than any of us mortals. We only just got the last wagon out of eyesight of the Centurion battalion and the hastily wiped tracks of our troupe could've easily been spotted if they'd had any suspicion we were there. Every muscle in my body hurt from the frenzied scrambling we'd done to get supplies we were taking and keepsakes we were hiding sorted and put away. I'm sure I tore ligaments as I picked up and tossed things much too heavy for me, at a pace that was much too strenuous for my stamina. But what I wanted to remove from the Capitol was set in my mind and I wasn't going to leave anything behind that I'd put on my mental list.

I let Xena talk me out of taking the harvested food and the majority of our livestock – we just didn't have enough people for that kind of expedition, and the food would've rotted before we'd gotten close to our northern home. But I insisted we take the seeds, bulbs, tubers, anything to help us build our agriculture once back in the north. Xena, of course, had her arguments against that – “You don't even know if the majority of this stuff will grow up there” – but I told her she had no more room for suggestion per our agreement.

We hustled. Every single one of us drove a wagon with horses tied to the back in mini herds. One wagon was dedicated to goats, chickens, piglets (we left the sows and hogs), ox instead of horses to pull it. All of the wagons were pulled by our sturdiest oxen and we all wore armor and armed ourselves with every piece of weaponry we could get our hands on. We were hot and sweaty. Our yoked teams strained under the weight of the heavily laden wagons – and to think we didn't even bring it all!

But the moment of my highest anxiety came just after the last wagon had cleared the Capitol wall – an earthquake – a big one. A deep roar from the ground preceded the unmerciful and ill-timed shaking and all we could do was freeze and wait. The trees trembled like someone had grabbed their trunks to collect them like flowers. Hand-sized and bigger rocks danced and skittered across the ground and thudded with surprise when they struck against some object they'd been thrown into. The heavy wagons trembled first, like the trees, then a hard shake like a giant hand grabbed them to see how sturdy-made they were; then a pause before a heavy vibration and a sickening side to side jarring. Finally an unpleasant wave, and we were left with two broken axels, a wagon full of screaming livestock and a handful of horses to collect that had snapped their leads and bolted. It was another hour and a half before we were moving again, and no small trick to repair our caravan with the scattered and befuddled Roman battalion practically in the next room.

There were benefits to the quake though, if some silver lining needed to be found. For one, things we were leaving behind us we put into the Temple, which, I'm sure, completed its deterioration into unexplorable rubble after all that shaking. Secondly, the Romans, whether we needed them to be or not, were very distracted. Xena, who was acting as a spy as well as trying to cover our tracks, said she heard several mumbling about Artemis being unhappy with their

trespassing, and they hurried all the more to get off Amazon Land. Thirdly, Ghiran had defected from us to start her search for her mother, and the message she carried had just that much more time to spread while we tried to revive our caravan. To my great surprise, women came to join us. Returnees, a lot of them. “My mother always said she made a mistake leaving in the first place.” “Mine too.” “It was my mistake to make and I want to take it back now. That’s my choice, too.”

“Grandmother, you may be too old for this journey,” I said as kindly as I could to the rheumy eyed woman bowing before me.

“Henh? Old? How old am I? I don’t know. I’m as old as the time I can remember. And I remember Queens before your mother, young one. Melosa. Jada. Penesthila. Long before your time, long dead. You look like one of them from ‘ago’,” she said with a jab of her walking stick at Gabrielle. I can’t deny a clenching in my stomach wondering if the elder crone would recognize Gabrielle’s Queenship before my own. But the blonde just smiled and told the woman she was more valuable to us than any vase or scroll. And I breathed a sigh of relief and nodded, for she absolutely was – she had to be as old as Grandmother Dotra, maybe even older, and her memories held our history. Before we made it well off Amazon Land, we had the guards I wanted so desperately. We were forty strong – not a huge number, but it offered more security than our previous less-than-twenty, as Xena pointed out so candidly.

As I said, the earthquake was my most anxious moment, but there were other adventures along the way. The elder crone did die two days into the trip, and her granddaughters insisted on a ‘proper Amazon funeral.’ “She was the last real one – the only one to know the Before Time. She deserves a true passing ceremony.”

I was embarrassed to say the least, because I didn’t know the rites and rituals of the Greek Amazon funeral procession. We did things differently in the north, and it didn’t include a funeral pyre. I was horrified to lead a ceremony of which I was almost entirely ignorant, but Gabrielle and Varia helped me through it with as much grace and dignity as could be had. I don’t think I won any points with the Greeks for my ignorance of such an important ritual, but fortunately they also didn’t have a lot of time to grouse about it because we were moving again right after it was over.

There were two attempts to raid us which we turned back at only the cost of one Amazon life; four more sisters that joined us once they caught up; nine proposals of marriage to various of us, myself included; three more broken axles; four split wheels; two oxen that died from overexertion; one minor clash of misunderstanding – mostly due to the shortcomings of sign language between two very different cultures; six attempted kidnappings at various markets, again myself included; and seventeen parasites that had to be dispatched once they were discovered following us – not counting the five dogs of course, which we kept. I did lose my temper with Xena one more time, and had the great satisfaction of surprising her first that time – my knife at her neck before she could move. Gabrielle was right, I think there was a bit of Kaija put into me, and that I moved so fast and was growling while I did it I think made perfectly clear to Xena that I would not be bullied. It made a great impression on my Amazons as well. I’m sure I’ve left out a number of other trials of our expedition, but those were the highlights.

We were greeted by my home tribe with as much excitement and curiosity as wary suspicion. The newest Greek additions were able to merge fairly easily, but the Amazons from those farther, lesser known regions were marginalized and studied. Many of the original Northern Amazons drifted over from their homes to inspect what we had brought back. “Where’s Cyanne?,” several asked at first but once they saw Gabrielle and Xena, they skipped over to fawn and fuss and I returned to my tree home, alone and exhausted. I remained in my elevated home, half listening to the celebration that had erupted at sundown. I listened as Xena told stories from her travels to the far northern west, of flying women and blonde-red sailors bound to frozen seas, sailing for fish and glory; of Britannia, and an island even farther north and west of blue, barbarous men, screaming maniacs who speak in a tongue twisting language half song and half curse. And beyond? The warrior couldn’t say: sea, ice, oblivion.

“Inana is going beyond,” said a quiet voice in the pause of the drums. I didn’t recognize the speaker from my distance, but I suspected it was one of our newly arrived, who’d been freshly made aware of my stolid determination to fulfill my role in the prophecy I’d received. The drums beat a few more times, hesitantly, then paused again.

A lot happened to me during that pause. I wondered what would be said about my unquestioned dedication to my prophecy. I wondered what truer feelings would be expressed out of my earshot. Most importantly I wondered if they would change my mind. My mother raised me to be a leader, to respect the word of the Goddess – she never doubted the authenticity of the prophecy, and really until these last couple weeks neither had I. Now that it was coming time to birth the idea that had been gestating in me for almost twenty years, I was toiling through a mental labor. I was either going to have to accept and suckle this babe, or discard it and never speak of it again. Now at the very eve of the birth of my life’s mission I worried at my fitness to parent this idea. All that in the space of the paused drums, and then I knew not only the speaker, but that the newborn idea wasn’t just my own baby anymore:

“And I’m going with her.”

~The End~