I Will Camp At The Banks Of The Styx For You

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Summary

A fluffy, angsty, self indulgent correction of "that" DLC.

Notes

Like many people fishbone76 and I were “disappointed” by the dlc and the subsequent handling of it.

But while we were grumbling together, we realised that it wasn’t that we disapproved of the idea of a little Eagle Bearer altogether.

We didn’t like the idea of Kassandra having to take a year off work to deal with swollen ankles, morning sickness and cracked nipples, thanks to the sperm donor who shall not be named.

Kassandra massaging someone else’s swollen ankles, traipsing around searching for sickness remedies, hovering protectively while some other woman nursed a tiny Eagle Bearer, though? We were all aboard that train. We just needed to find a way to secure Kassandra’s bloodline without the input of some bloke.

So that’s what we decided to do.
We decided that in a world of heroes and gods there was clearly an opportunity for a temporary body transformation. If that isn’t something you enjoy, hopefully it will be possible for you to skip around the later chapters that involve the temporary alteration to Kassandra’s anatomy. I’ll try and remember to tag each chapter so you can avoid them.

Hopefully that’s enough info for you to work out if this is your cup of tea.

Although we did this together, any lackadaisical hand waving of canon is entirely my fault and fish has no doubt rolled her eyes at me about it already. Grumbles should be directed at me, not her.

She also let me play with some of her toys, and very sportingly did not say “don’t make Savina’s life a misery”.

This doesn’t in any way tie in to any other stories that either of us have written, you don’t need to have read anything else to follow it, but there are some little “Easter eggs” if you have.

It’s best to have completed the main game because otherwise, spoilers abound!

And you definitely should go read fishbone76’s other stuff cos it’s awesome.

Let’s begin...
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
PROLOGUE

“And that’s your great plan!” Myrrine hissed, eyes narrowed. “You could be conquering the world and you’ve chosen to lie in a sterile marriage bed with a provincial politician because you can’t stop thinking with your cunt!”

If Kassandra looked like she’d been slapped it was because she felt like she had. She took a step back, jaw clenched, nostrils flared.

“I have no desire to conquer the world, mater,” she shook her head. “I’ve done enough fighting and killing for a dozen lifetimes. Is it so wrong to want to settle down, raise Phoibe, try and help make the lives of the people on the Silver Islands safer, more prosperous? I have done everything you have ever asked of me mater,” she held out her hands pleadingly. “Is it wrong to want a little peace with Kyra?”

“Wrong?” Myrrine folded her arms, scowled. “Is it wrong to settle for mediocrity, when you could have greatness? For the greatest warrior the world has ever seen to spend her time breaking up tavern brawls? To put all your efforts into raising a street brat rather than continuing our proud bloodline? Did I put personal desire above all else when I had you? Do you suppose for a moment that it was base desire that drove me to the arms of Pythagoras? No. I put our legacy first and the sacrifice was all worthwhile, all of it, because it gave me you!”

Kassandra turned on her heel, stalked to the door and out. Myrrine followed her, calling down the corridor after her.

“Go then! Turn your back on our noble history. Throw away my sacrifice as though it meant nothing. You could have the world in your hand. Kings and Generals in your bed, instead you choose to sniff around after some rebel girl with a nice ass!”

Kyra was packing her things when Kassandra strode into their room, pale faced, nostrils flared. She glanced over, gave a humourless smile.

“Well at least she thinks I have a nice ass,” she shrugged, “so the whole thing hasn’t been a complete loss. Though if I start to think about your mother checking out my ass it’s going to get strange, very quickly,” she gave a shudder.

“We should leave,” Kassandra began to gather her things, tying them together roughly, glancing about the room.

“Good, good,” Kyra nodded. “I was going anyway. But I’d rather go with you.”

Kassandra took Kyra’s bag, shouldered her own.

“What about Alexios?” Kyra asked, moving next to her, hugging her arm. “We aren’t going to leave without saying goodbye are we?”

“No, no,” Kassandra shook her head. “Let’s get to the Adrestia, and then I’ll go find him.”

She bent, kissed Kyra’s forehead.
“I love you,” she breathed. “You do know that, don’t you?”

“Even though I’m just a provincial politician?” Kyra tilted her head, invited a kiss.

“A provincial politician with a nice ass,” Kassandra laughed into the kiss. “Don’t forget the nice ass.”

They went downstairs and found the tavern keeper. For a moment Kassandra entertained the idea of not paying for her mother’s room. Kyra gave her a wry smile though and she settled the whole bill, sighing quietly.

When they reached the Adrestia it was readily apparent that no one was expecting them back for a good long while yet. The sun was beating down and most of the crew were lying about on deck in their underwear or swimming off the dock. Even Barnabas was lying flat on his back on the widest part of the rails, in nothing but his perizoma.

He jolted upright when Kassandra called his name, nearly toppling overboard, saving himself at the last moment.

“Kassandra!” he exclaimed, climbing down from the rail as they came aboard. “We weren’t expecting you back for a couple of days. Hello Kyra.”

“Hell-oo Barnabas,” Kyra gave him a theatrically appraising look.

“Evidently not,” Kassandra glanced about. “I’m sorry to spoil everyone’s relaxation but we are leaving, preferably before sundown. Is everyone aboard?”

“Most, but some have gone into town,” he was glancing around, trying to remember where he’d left his tunic. “I take it things did not go well?” he sighed sympathetically.

“Not particularly, no,” Kassandra shook her head.

“Your mother will not be attending the wedding then?” he ventured.

Kyra snorted.

“No, there’s a spare invitation if you want to bring someone along,” she laughed.

“Would you send someone into town to round up the rest of the crew?” Kassandra asked. “And for the love of Aphrodite put on some clothes, Barnabas.”

“Oh, don’t listen to her Barnabas,” Kyra gave him a playful nudge. “I can appreciate a well proportioned older man even if Kassandra can’t.”

Barnabas went red to the tips of his ears, but couldn’t prevent a little smirk.

Kassandra shook her head, glanced from him to Kyra and back again, smiled despite herself.

“Odessa!” Barnabas spotted her leaning against the mast, chatting to one of the rowers. She sauntered over adjusting her strophion as she approached. Kyra gave her a sharp look, moved a little closer to Kassandra.

“Well hello,” Odessa seemed immune to her displeasure. “We weren’t expecting you back for ages.”

“Well, plans change,” Kassandra sighed. “I need you to go into town and round up the rest of the crew, as quickly as possible. We need to leave by sundown.”
“Someone on your tail?” Odessa laughed.

“Just do it, would you?” Kyra sighed, “we’d like to make a move.”

“Okay,” Odessa raised her eyebrows. “Should I go like this or would you like me to put on some clothes first?”

Kyra opened her mouth, but before she could speak Barnabas took Odessa by the elbow and led her away in the direction of the gangplank.

“Let’s go stow our things, eh?” Kassandra slipped an arm about Kyra’s shoulders, easing her in the direction of their cabin. “Then... I suppose... shit... Alexios,” she frowned.

As they unpacked, Kyra sat on the bunk, watching Kassandra put away her clothes, stack her armour in the corner of the small cabin. She was clearly troubled about her brother, she realised.

He had been due to come join them at the taverna later in the day. No doubt Kassandra was concerned about meeting up with him without encountering her mother again. He would be upset enough that they were leaving early, without being witness to another row between his mother and sister.

“Hey,” she hopped down from the bunk, took a step or two over to stand behind Kassandra, slipped her arms around her waist. “Let’s go now, see if we can intercept Alexios before he gets to the taverna, no? If we wait further up the main path we should be able to catch him?”

“Yes, yes you’re right,” Kassandra turned in her arms, sighed a little. “I’m sorry Kyra, I shouldn’t have brought you with me. You shouldn’t have had to hear all that.” She bowed her head to Kyra’s, rested their foreheads together.

“You know that I would never have let you come on your own right?” Kyra stroked her cheek, gave her a soft kiss. “And I’ve heard worse my love, my years as a rebel weren’t accompanied by the music of soft compliments I assure you. I’ll live.”

“Strangely, that doesn’t make me feel better,” Kassandra stroked her face gently.

“You’re doing well at making up for all of it,” Kyra assured her. “Come now. Let’s go before we miss Alexios, or the day will get very upsetting.”

She wasn’t wrong Kassandra realised. She knew the best place to go and wait for her brother, but if he’d decided to ride instead of walk, they might be cutting it close.

He had, and they were, but Kassandra sprinted the last short distance, yelling his name. He reined his horse to a stop and slid down smoothly, running over to meet her, throwing himself into her arms, hugging her tight.

“Hello, sister,” he drew back a little. “It’s so good to see you,” he beamed. “You look so well.”

“And so do you Alexi,” she smiled, stroking his jaw. “Growing a beard here I see,” she teased.

“I’m thinking about it,” he blushed. “Do you like it? Do you think it will suit me?” he asked hopefully.

“I think you will look extremely handsome,” Kyra came up to them, leading his abandoned horse. “Kassandra will have to up her game,” she teased.
“Kyra!” he grinned. Releasing Kassandra he turned towards her, seemed on the verge of reaching out, then hesitated, nervous. Kyra held out her arms, invited him in and he wrapped her in a huge, grateful bear hug. “It’s so good to see you again,” he rocked her a little in his embrace. “I’m excited about the wedding,” he smiled, gradually releasing her, easing back.

“Well it’s not exactly a wedding,” Kyra laughed.

“But it’s going to be just like a wedding, no?” he looked from her to Kassandra. “So we can say it’s a wedding? Can we say it’s a wedding?” he looked at his sister, suddenly unsure.

“You can say it’s anything you want, Alexi,” Kassandra smiled fondly at him. Kyra was leaning into him, an arm about his hips, her head resting against his chest, his arm about her shoulders.

Her heart twisted at the thought of what she was about to tell him. He had taken to Kyra very quickly, she’d handled him well, giving him distance when he needed it, encouraging his halting attempts at affection, gentling his debilitating panics. He was going to be so disappointed.

“Then I’m saying it’s a wedding,” he grinned down at Kyra.

“So am I,” she patted his chest. “All the best people are,” she smiled.

“Should we go see mater now? We can tell her now, no? She’s going to be so surprised,” he looked hopefully from Kyra to Kassandra, seeking reassurance again.

Kyra glanced sadly over at Kassandra, squeezed her arm a little more tightly about his hips. Kassandra gave a heavy sigh.

“Let’s sit down for a minute Alexi,” she indicated a cluster of large rocks by the pathside. “I have something that I need to tell you.”

He immediately picked up the change in mood, his face sank and he drew back from Kyra shaking his head, walking slowly backwards.

“It’s mater, isn’t it?” he said quietly. “She’s said something to upset you hasn’t she? I knew we should have told her sooner. She’s going to be cross with me for keeping it secret isn’t she?”

“Not with you Alexi,” Kassandra approached him slowly, open hands held out. “Never with you Alexi. She’s cross with me.”

“No, no, no,” he shook his head violently. “She does this every time. I don’t understand. When you aren’t here she talks about you all the time. How brave you are. How strong you are. How clever you are. All the things you’ve done. All the things you are going to do. And then you get here and she just gets cross with you, all the time, just cross with you…”

“Alexi, Alexi,” Kassandra soothed, drawing close, taking his hands gently in hers. “It’s all right little brother. It will all be all right. There’s nothing to feel afraid about.”

“You’re going back aren’t you?” he mumbled, lowering his head. “You’re going back to the Silver Islands aren’t you?”

Kassandra couldn’t speak. Kyra took a deep breath and came over, took his hands from Kassandra’s, lifted them to her chest.

“Yes, Alexi, we’re going home. Your mater doesn’t approve of Kassandra committing herself to me. She’s upset and angry with us right now,” she soothed. “But you mustn’t blame her. It was a surprise
for her, and she’s upset that she won’t have any grandchildren from us. That’s understandable, no?” she bent a little, met his gaze, encouraged him to raise his head.

“She’s not cross with you Alexi,” she continued. “Your mater loves you with all her heart. And she loves Kassandra too. She’s just hurt right now. She will calm down. Your mater and Kassandra...it’s difficult to explain. Sometimes people can love each other very much, but they can’t live together, can’t get on with each other for very long. It’s like that with them I think. None of it is anyone’s fault. Certainly not yours.”

“But I did do terrible things,” he whispered, so low she could barely hear him, but she knew what he was saying, she’d heard it before. “Perhaps the gods are punishing me, punishing me by hurting the people I love?”

“Then they are pretty shitty gods, brother,” Kassandra stepped close, wrapped her arms about them both. “And not worthy of anyone’s worship.”

“It’s not the gods,” Kyra cut off that line of argument. He didn’t need Kassandra upsetting him with blasphemy right now. “The gods don’t work like that Alexi. It’s a people thing. People just don’t work together sometimes, however hard they try. And it’s sad and it hurts and it’s no-one’s fault.”

“Then I don’t like it,” he was crying quietly now, tears running down his cheeks gathering in his nascent beard. “I want it to be different.”

Chapter End Notes

The glorious picture? That’s fishbone76 for you!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The ever wonderful fishbone76 has blessed us with another masterpiece here. Just to remind us that the Archon is a lovely creature and given the opportunity some of us would probably also do the dumb things Kassandra is about to undertake, if it would make her happy :)

Want to see more of fishbone's work? Go check out "Until We Meet Again" where you'll find much more as well as a cracking story.

Six months later.

At the last, breathy, tremulous whisper of her name Kyra raised her head from between Kassandra’s thighs, a smug smile easing across her features.

“Better, my love?” she crawled up Kassandra’s sweaty body, her smile growing into a grin at her lover’s exhausted, sex drunk expression. She moved to crouch above her, leaned down to kiss her, allowing Kassandra to taste herself in Kyra’s mouth.

“Much,” the Spartan laughed weakly, reaching to pull her down into an embrace.

“Aahh,” Kyra drew back quickly. “You are very sweaty, and Savina will be here any minute to tell me, very politely and respectfully, of course, that I need to get ready.”

“But,” Kassandra, stroked her fingertips down Kyra’s flanks, chuckling as she felt her quiver under her touch. “I didn’t even get to...”

A light tapping at the door interrupted them, followed by the sound of someone discreetly clearing their throat.

“What did I say?” Kyra hissed, grinning down at Kassandra as she sat up on her heels. “Yes?” she called towards the door.

“It’s me... Savina,” came a hesitant reply from the other side of the door.

Kyra tried to swallow a laugh.

“Yes, I’d...what is it Savina?” she shook her head.
“I hesitate to...interr...pressure you to rush your...morning routine, but you have an early appointment with the couple from the vineyard,” Savina replied.

“Thank you Savina, I am getting ready now. I will be with you shortly, thank you for reminding me,” Kyra climbed off the bed.

“Morning routine?” Kassandra raised herself on one elbow to watch Kyra getting ready for the day.

“Well she’s not entirely wrong,” she laughed, beginning to wash her face, rinse out her mouth, scrub her hands. “How else is she going to say it? You delight in embarrassing the poor woman, I swear.”

“She’s so deliciously easy to tease though,” Kassandra grinned, watching with approval as Kyra began to put on her perizoma. “Would you like me to give you a hand?”

Kyra laughed heartily.

“Well that’s a crafty question, misthios,” she glanced over her shoulder. “Would I like you to give me a hand? Yes, obviously. May you give me a hand? Absolutely not! I have work to do.”

“You’re no fun,” Kassandra flopped onto her back, pouting.

“Definitely not what you were saying ten minutes ago,” Kyra teased. “Oh Kyra, please, please baby, don’t tease, I’ll do...”

“Not fair,” Kassandra protested, smiling, but admitting defeat. “So, which young couple from the vineyard?”

“Elias and his wife,” Kyra said, a little abstractedly, concentrating on applying her eyeliner. “They took over that disused vineyard on the slopes a while back, remember?”

Kassandra vaguely recalled something about this, but not much. Kyra’s ability to recall every detail of the minutiae of governance was a constant source of amazement to her.

“You have no idea who or what I am talking about, do you?” she could hear the laugh in Kyra’s voice. She heard her get up and approach the bed.

She opened her eyes and looked up at her. Kyra was standing by the bedside gazing down at her with a fond, slightly hungry expression.

“Fortunately I don’t love you for your brains,” she winked, bending to kiss her. “Don’t grope, I have to go.”

Kassandra made a showy point of keeping her hands in the air by her sides as she melted into Kyra’s kiss.

“And are you going to lounge in bed all day, my love?” Kyra checked an earring. “Like a decadent politician’s wife?”

“I may do,” Kassandra gave a luxuriant stretch. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well you know where I will be if you want to listen in to what’s happening, you may even be able to help them, who knows?” she made for the door. “Also they have a brand new baby, I said it would be all right if they brought him with them, I wanted to make sure his wife could attend the meeting too. So that will make a cute change from my usual appointments.”

“Very well, my love,” Kassandra rolled over to watch her leave.
She didn’t actually have any work for the morning. Phoibe would be with her tutor first thing, something Kyra had insisted upon when they had adopted her. Kassandra had half expected protests from Phoibe at first, but she had leapt at the opportunity, drinking in everything presented her, soaking it up like a sponge. Kassandra was proud of her, she herself was making sure the girl would grow up strong and resilient, Kyra was making sure that she was equally educated and quick witted.

Kassandra got out of bed, gave another stretch, decided to wash and then go seek out breakfast. Perhaps she would go and attend the meeting. It would please Kyra if she tried to show a little interest in the day to day workings of the islands. Then this afternoon she could take Phoibe hunting perhaps.

Post breakfast, Kassandra ambled through the house, nodding greetings at the guards as she passed. There was still time to kill before Phoibe would be finished with her lessons so she decided to drop in on Kyra. She was always trying to gently persuade Kassandra to take an interest in the politics of the islands but frankly Kassandra was happier if she was just pointed in the direction of a problem and told to get on with it.
She was a little surprised to see that Kyra was already sitting deep in conversation with a young couple, the vineyard owners, she assumed. The man, what was his damn name again? Kyra had told her. Ellio? Elias, yes, Elias! He looked like a pleasant enough young fellow, open friendly expression, sun tanned face, neatly trimmed beard, and his wife was a pretty young thing, with a light, musical voice. A voice currently directed at Kyra.
“Oh please Archon, do take care of your earrings!” she was warning, “only yesterday he pulled my mater’s ring clean out of her ear.”

“There was nothing clean about it, Phaidra,” Elias laughed. “Quite the opposite in fact.”

“So, young Okeanos, you are attracted to shiny things, no?” Kyra laughed, rocking the little shawl wrapped bundle in her arms. “Let me remove temptation,” she glanced up and caught sight of Kassandra. “Ah, mighty misthios, how good of you to join us,” she smiled fondly.

“I’m sorry to barge in like this,” Kassandra watched as she unhooked her earrings before a chubby, pink hand could make a grab.

“Not at all,” Kyra said distractedly. “Catch, would you?” she casually tossed the earrings over to Kassandra. “Now, that’s better my little man, is it not?” she beamed, lifting him up and pressing a kiss to his head. “Does he sleep well?” she turned to Phaidra.

“Tolerably,” she laughed. “So long as he is clean and warm and his tummy is full, he sleeps tolerably well.”

Add sexually satisfied and Kassandra thought she pretty much agreed with him. She looked at Kyra’s jewellery in her hand, what in Hades was she supposed to do with this now? She settled on dropping them in her coin purse and returned her attention to Kyra.

She looked as happy as Kassandra had ever seen her she thought, the meeting must be going well. Whatever proposition the couple had arrived with had clearly proved feasible.

“Kassandra,” Kyra tilted her head, smiling warmly. “Come and greet our newest resident, Okeanos,” she waved her over.

It was quite an authoritative wave Kassandra felt. She was always aware that here in the leader house she was very much on Kyra’s ground, this was her battle field and Kassandra was merely a soldier. A particularly high ranking soldier with some absolutely delicious special privileges, but a soldier nonetheless. If Kyra said “come say hello to the baby” she went to say hello to the baby.

“Chaire, young man,” she smiled down. “It’s nice to…”

“May Kassandra hold him, Phaidra?” Kyra was getting to her feet.

“No, no, that’s not necess…” Kassandra waved her hands dismissively.

“It would be an honour,” Phaidra smiled.

“Yes, imagine,” Elias grinned “to be able to tell him of the day he was held in the arms of, not only our Archon, but the mighty Eagle Bearer herself.”

Well there was no going back from that Kassandra supposed, resigning herself.

“Here you go Okeanos,” Kyra was right next to Kassandra now holding out the wriggling bundle. “Say hello to Kassandra. Put your arm right under his head to support it, yes, just like that, there you go,” Kyra checked that he was safely snuggled against Kassandra’s breastplate, his head resting in the crook of her elbow. He gazed up at her with huge dark blue eyes.

“As I was about to say Okeanos, it’s nice to meet you,” Kassandra looked down at him. She liked children but babies were strange little creatures. So tiny and vulnerable but she’d seen them bring strong men to their knees without a word. “I look forward to getting to know you when you are a
little older, my young friend.”

Kyra was very close to her now, leaning right against her. Did she have an arm about Kassandra’s hips? Her face was certainly almost resting against her upper arm as she leaned over to look at the child. She never displayed such physical intimacy in front of petitioners. Kassandra was taken aback.

“Isn’t he beautiful?” Kyra breathed, gazing down at him with a rapt expression.

“He’s...lovely yes,” Kassandra settled.

“You are so blessed Elias, Phaidra,” Kyra turned to them. “Thank you for blessing the Silver Islands in your turn, I’m so glad you have decided to remain here and I hope we can arrange for the import of your vines as soon as possible. Aegeus is away for two, possibly three days as I mentioned. As soon as he...”

Okeanos began to wriggle suddenly, his face crumpled a little and he began to wail, softly at first but with the air of a child about to make his feelings known in no uncertain terms.

“Oh...he’s...crying?” Kassandra looked over at Phaidra. In her experience that meant he needed feeding or changing. She couldn’t do the former and she wasn’t about to do the latter.

“He’s hungry I’m afraid,” Phaidra cast a glance out of the window, judging the sun. “I’m sorry Archon, I hoped he would manage until we were finished.”

“No, no, no” Kyra dismissed her worries. “Here Kassandra,” she took him from her and went over to Phaidra. “Is it all right in here? Is the chair comfortable? Kassandra could bring in...”

“No,” Phaidra smiled. “If it will not distress you I am happy to nurse him here and we can continue the meeting. I am quite comfortable and we don’t wish to waste your time, you’ve been more than generous already.”

“Yes,” Elias agreed. “We can’t thank you enough Archon. You have been so kind already. The cradle. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Not at all,” Kyra was rocking the baby, crooning to him as Phaidra rearranged her shawl, unclipped her chiton.

Kassandra was watching Kyra curiously. She looked different somehow, the little bundle cradled to her breast, murmuring soothingly to him, telling him to be patient. And what cradle? Did she send out presents every time a baby was born? Come to think of it, when was the last time a baby had been born? A while, she thought. Kyra was right, she should pay more attention.

She watched as Kyra handed the baby to his mother, he nuzzled against Phaidra’s bared breast immediately, busily latching on, instantly suckling. Kassandra smiled despite herself. Instant quiet. Then it dawned on her that she shouldn’t really be here. She was well aware that her reputation not only preceded her but sometimes hung around to keep her company. She didn’t want Phaidra to be uncomfortable, to imagine that Kassandra was standing here thinking inappropriate thoughts at a time like this.

“I’ll, I’ll leave you to it,” she looked away, gave a smile that she hoped took in the whole room. “It was lovely to meet you all,” she turned.

“Actually, misthios,” said Kyra, all business again. “Elias had a request to make, if you’d be good enough to hear him?”
Really Kyra? Kassandra sighed to herself.

“What of course, I would be happy to,” she positioned herself facing Elias with her back to Phaidra and the baby. “What may I do for you Elias?”

“I am a little embarrassed to ask, misthios, I know a man should be able to protect his own family, but,” he looked at his work roughened hands. “I am no hunter.”

“Just as I don’t know the first thing about growing vines,” Kassandra reassured him. “We play to our strengths Elias. Tell me what you need?”

“Our neighbour told us that he had seen a lynx on his farm,” Elias explained. “It has killed his cat, attacked his dog, he thinks there may be more than one, he keeps some goats, perhaps the prospect of easy prey has lured the beast?”

“Very likely, if there have not been goats there until recently,” Kassandra folded her arms, nodded. Now this was something she was comfortable dealing with. “And where there is one lynx there may well be more. No doubt you’re worried, what with your new son.” She briefly glanced over her shoulder. “Leave it with me Elias. You’ll have some lynx skins for young Okeanos before long. My gift to him, to line his cradle.”

She glanced at Kyra and was rewarded with a appreciative smile.

“Gods bless you, Eagle Bearer,” Phaidra drew her attention. Kassandra kept her eyes firmly above her neck. “You are as kind and generous as your wife…” she halted, no doubt wondering if she had overstepped the mark.

“She challenges me every day,” Kassandra smiled to put her at ease. “If you’ll excuse me, now is as good a time as any to ride out and assess the situation. “She looked over at Kyra. “I will take Phoibe with me, it will be good experience for her.”

“Lynx!” Phoibe bounced excitedly. “How many do you think? Can I bring one down? Where do you think they are?”

They were in the stable, strapping supplies to the saddles of their horses.


“It’s not disused anymore,” Phoibe hauled herself aloft. “Elias and Phaidra have been there for ages now. He’s trying to breed a new strain of vine that’s more resistant to powdery mildew. If he can manage….what?” she cocked an eyebrow at Kassandra’s expression.

“How do you know all this?” she asked as they set out.

“I listen,” Phoibe said reasonably.

“Are you saying I don’t listen?” Kassandra frowned.

“Oh you listen when you think it’s interesting,” Phoibe conceded. “The rest of the time you’re thinking about hunting and sex, so you miss a lot.”

“Hey!” Kassandra protested.

“Don’t have a go at me,” Phoibe held up a hand. “It’s what Kyra says as well. Don’t worry, I’ll fill you in,” she grinned. “They’ve just had a baby as well. Little boy…Oki…something.”

“Okeanos!” Kassandra supplied proudly.

Phoibe arched an eyebrow, smiled.

“I met him,” Kassandra explained, a little smugly.

“Aw, when?!” Phoibe whined.

“This morning. His mater and pater were meeting with Kyra, about those vines you were talking about, I suppose,” she reasoned.

“Aw,” Phoibe pouted. “I wanted to see him. You could have come and got me. Dion would have let me go and see the baby.”

“I didn’t know you’d be interested.” Kassandra shrugged, leading them off out of town and in the direction of the vineyard.

“But it’s a new baby,” Phoibe complained. “It’s like a year or so since we had a new baby.”

Hmm, maybe she did need to listen more, Kassandra realised.

“What’s he like?” Phoibe was still going on.

“Like?” Kassandra frowned, genuinely puzzled. “What do you mean?” she saw Phoibe’s frown and thought hard. “He’s small…a bit…wrinkly…bald…cries…I don’t know what to tell you. They all sort of look alike don’t they?”
Phoibe rolled her eyes dramatically.

“Honestly Kassandra,” she sighed. “I don’t know what Kyra sees in you sometimes. You must be a lion in the bedroom, cos you’re useless out of it half the time.”

“Excuse me!” Kassandra protested a bit squeakily. She cleared her throat. “I’m useful more than half the time I’ll have you know. And stop talking about the bedroom, young lady.”

Phoibe snorted.

“Young lady!,” she laughed. “Don’t be so touchy, I was saying you must be good, after all.”

“That’s quite enough of that talk,” Kassandra said snippily.


Kassandra’s horse had stopped and she was sitting astride looking dumbfounded.

“What do you mean, you know ‘what’s what’?” she frowned. “Is there someone I should know about? Do I need to have a talk with someone? Have you…”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, no not you horse,” Phoibe clarified. “Calm down Kassandra. There’s no one yet. All the boys around here are either too old or really…. she searched for the right word.

Kassandra waited nervously.

“Dull,” Phoibe settled. “Have you ever noticed how dull they all are? I don’t suppose so since you’re not planning to hunt them or f…”

“So not,” Kassandra hissed a warning. “Do not even dare.” She spurred her horse over. “But no. I hadn’t noticed. I will now though.”

“Great!” Phoibe laughed. “If there’s anyone who’s not dull or too old, you’ll scare them off good and proper. Life of solitary pleasures for poor Phoibe,” she pouted.

“Phoibe!” Kassandra was a shade scandalised. ”Who’s been..”

“Kassandra,” Phoibe shook her head, deeply amused. “I grew up in and out of a whorehouse. With a big sister who had bedded every willing woman on Kephallonia. I don’t know why you expect me to be all innocent and blushing.”

“I don’t think we should talk about this any more,” Kassandra heard the reasoning, but part of her still wanted Phoibe to be her scrappy little sister, head full of ludicrous schemes, not this increasingly worldly young teenager.

But that wasn’t fair was it, she told herself as they rode along in silence for a while. She hadn’t much cared for that attitude back when she was Phoibe’s age. And it was good that she was prepared. But she was her... little sister. She glanced over, guiltily.

“It’s okay Kassandra,” Phoibe smiled. “We don’t have to talk about it anymore if it’s upsetting you.” She was clearly on the verge of laughing.”It’s a good job Kyra isn’t as weird about it as you or I’d be reduced to listening to tavern talk. Anyway, here’s the vineyard.”

As they rode past, Phoibe halted, slipped out of the saddle, handed the reins to Kassandra and vaulted lightly over the wall. She walked in a little way, crouched between the vines, looked at the...
leaves, scooped up a handful of soil.

Kassandra watched curiously. The lynx hadn’t been on Elias’ vineyard by his own admission, they were headed to the farm over the slope.

“They’ve worked really hard on that,” Phoibe climbed back into the saddle and they resumed riding.

“They’ve used a load of… I think chicken muck, smells like. They’ve not skimped, and they’ve dug over deep too. They’re not cutting any corners. Not like Markos,” she rolled her eyes. “He just wouldn’t put the work in. Bloody get rich quick schemes.”

“How do you know so much about growing grapes?” Kassandra eyed her curiously.

“I don’t know a LOT, “ Phoibe shrugged. “But I know a bit. Enough to tell they’re doing it right. They’ll get decent wine off there, not that foul cat piss Markos used to pass off. It’s a wonder it never killed anyone.” She saw Kassandra still eyeing her curiously. “What? What do you think me and Dion talk about all the time?”

“I.. I hadn’t really thought about it,” Kassandra admitted guiltily. “I figured you were learning to read and write and…”

“I could read and write before I got here,” Phoibe snorted. “Selene taught me to read and write, Markos too, even you a bit,” she conceded. “I’m better now mind, my writing is better, neater, easier to read. Kyra says it’s important, it’s not enough to be able to just write things down, people have to be able to read it. Don’t give them any excuse not to hear what you have to say.”

Kassandra looked at Phoibe as though she was seeing her for the first time. Here was something else she needed to pay more attention to.

The farm that Elias had mentioned was in view now. On reaching it they hopped down and went to talk to the farmer. He was relieved to see them, being concerned himself about the safety of a new baby. When he had pointed them in what he considered to be the right direction they set off again.

It had proved to be a longer ride than Kassandra had anticipated. They would have to find them soon or they would be in danger of losing the light. A short while later Phoibe began to complain that she was hungry. Kassandra was initially reluctant to stop but the voice of reason told her that the girl would be far more likely to make a mistake if she was hungry and frustrated. They should stop.

“How was Kyra with the baby?” Phoibe was lying on her back watching the clouds and eating an apple.

“How was she?” Kassandra played for time. Kyra had seemed smitten she thought. There was an look about her that Kassandra hadn’t seen before. It was a little disconcerting.

“Mmmm?” Phoibe crunched thoughtfully. “I think she likes kids. She goes to see little Agafya, the last baby, now and again. I’ve not seen her for a while. Kyra said she was just starting to walk the last time she saw her.

Kassandra’s experience with babies had been largely limited to her brother and it had been a pretty truncated experience at that. She preferred not to think about that period of her life too much these days. Everything was sorted now, as well as it could be after such a nightmarish start. But he certainly hadn’t been there for any developmental milestones.

Was it good that the baby Phoibe was talking about was likely to be walking? Was that early or late or what? She had no idea. She had no idea about a lot of things she thought awkwardly. And now here was Phoibe telling her that Kyra was going off visiting and she’d had no idea.
“When was this then?” she asked quietly. “When she last visited?”

“Mmmm…” Phoibe was picking a small fly off her apple. “About, oh, probably two, maybe three weeks ago.” she took a bite and crunched, “Two probably. It was the same week that goat bit Savina.”

Kassandra remembered that all right. But not Kyra going to visit a toddler. She hadn’t said anything.

“Does she always go on her own?” she asked, glancing over at Phoibe.

“That one looks like a shark, right there,” she was pointing at a long cloud. “Don’t you think? No, I go with her sometimes. She’s a nice little thing. The baby, not Kyra. I mean Kyra’s nice but..”

“You’ve never taken me,” Kassandra interrupted.

“Well, would you have wanted to come?” Phoibe spat out a rogue pip. “You don’t really care about little kids, do you?”

“I cared about you!” Kassandra was affronted, she turned to look at her with a hurt expression and Phoibe had the grace to look shamed.

“I’m sorry Kassandra, I didn’t mean that to come out sounding like that,” she touched her hand gently. “Not babies though, you like children when they’re old enough to have a conversation with, like I was. Plus I reminded you of you.” she glanced up at her. “I don’t mean that you wouldn’t have looked after me if I’d been younger, or older, or a boy, but...well, it had to help surely?”

“Phoibe,” Kassandra drew up her knees, plucked at the grass between her feet. “Have I ever…”

“It’s all right Kassandra,” Phoibe reached out to cautiously touch her arm. “I didn’t mean to say that, it just came out wrong, of course you…”

“No, Phoibe,” Kassandra interrupted. “Have I ever made you feel like I didn’t care about you? Seriously? Please?”

“Gods no!” Phoibe defended. “Never Kassandra. I’ve never once felt like you didn’t lo...didn’t care for me, honestly. You are the best... big sister ever. Truly.” she stroked her arm soothingly.

Even this was wrong Kassandra sighed to herself. She should be comforting Phoibe, not the other way round. She was making a hash of this again. How often had she told Phoibe she loved her? In so many words, not in euphemisms and actions, but “Phoibe, I love you”. In fact how often had she said it to anyone that wasn’t a woman she was fucking?

She gave a sigh, rubbed her face.

“Kassandra!” Phoibe hissed.

“No, Phoibe, I need to…” she began.

Phoibe punched her arm softly,

“No, Kassandra, look!” she pointed over her shoulder.

Kassandra followed her gaze. There was a huge lynx, padding, heavy pawed across the ridge of the hill, stopping occasionally to sniff at the ground. She felt Phoibe reaching out for her bow, stopped her with a hand.
“Wait till he reaches that small patch of brush,” she whispered. If the cat knew they were there, he was paying no mind at the moment. “If you stand now, he’ll see you. If you don’t bring him down with your first arrow he’ll be off down the other side and we’ll lose him.”

“But he’d be injured, we could follow his trail”, Phoibe reasoned, slowly, smoothly gathering her bow and quiver.

“We’d only catch him if he was badly injured, it will get too dark to follow a blood trail soon,” Kassandra reached for her weapon, got smoothly to her feet as the lynx approached the scrub, sniffed, turned, sprayed.

“We should have brought Orion,” Phoibe sighed, thinking of the big dog dozing peacefully under Kyra’s chair no doubt.

“Yes, we should,” Kassandra agreed. “No use thinking that now though. Come on, let’s get closer. Keep to cover and stay downwind.”

Following him at a safe distance they crested the hill and Phoibe gave a little gasp. There were two other slightly smaller cats down the slope a way. Kassandra sized up the situation. She wanted Phoibe to get a good kill out of this, to boost her confidence. She selected the easiest looking target.

“Here, Phoibe,” she took her by the shoulder. “Settle here, see the greyer one there? She’s yours. Don’t look at the others. Just her. Look at her like you’re in love with her. Follow her every move. Wait till I’m in position. See that little stand of saplings there? Wait till I’m there all right. When you see me in position bow drawn, then you can take your shot as you see fit all right? Full draw, like I’ve shown you, remember?”

Phoibe nodded.

“Aim for the eye, keep the pelt clean,” she was already watching the cat intently.

“It’s a small target from here Phoibe,” Kassandra sized it up. “Go for behind the shoulder there, hit the heart, or the lungs at the very least. It will give you enough time to get a second shot in if you need it. Understand?”

Phoibe nodded, half crouched behind the low scrub.

“Phoibe,” Kassandra hissed stopping halfway to her destination. “If one of them runs at you. Don’t panic, stay totally still. I won’t let anything happen to you. Totally still.”

Kassandra was almost in position when she saw Phoibe twitch slightly. Her target was moving, turning away to slink downhill. There was no need to panic, she tried to will the thought across to her as she nocked her own arrow and took aim at the largest cat. Phoibe’s target wasn’t running, merely ambling along, glancing over at its companions now and again. It was well within range, a step to one side and Phoibe would have the shot.

She knew it was going to go wrong before she’d fully drawn her bowstring.

Phoibe loosed too quickly, caught the lynx a glancing blow on the rump. Kassandra had been aiming for the head of her own target, but as he heard the whistle of Phoibe’s arrow and the following cry of pain, he turned to investigate.

They were going to lose them all if she wasn’t careful, the third was already loping out of range. She shifted aim slightly to the neck, loosed her arrow, saw it hit home, slice clean through the animal’s throat and out the other side, nocked a second arrow, all the time watching Phoibe out of the corner
of her eye.

She was rattled, her target was limping, favouring its injured rear leg, torn between running at Phoibe and making a dart for safety. It chose the latter but the injury was clearly worse than it realised, the leg buckled beneath it, Phoibe loosed her second arrow hitting it square in the chest. It reared up a little, flailed at the protruding shaft, wailed briefly and hit the floor. In the meantime Kassandra had felled her own target with a second shot to the skull.

She took a deep breath. That could have gone better, but then again, it could have gone a lot worse. They would have to come back to track the third cat, but they’d killed two and Phoibe had made an unassisted kill. She made her way over to her, grinning proudly.

“I’m sorry Kassandra, I’m so sorry,” she looked crestfallen, shaking her head.

“Why are you sorry?” Kassandra put a reassuring arm about her shoulders. “You got the kill. Well done Phoibe. Your first big cat.”

“But the other one got away,” she sighed, clearly disappointed. “We took two shots because I fired too soon.”

“And now you’ve learned,” Kassandra smiled. “Tomorrow we’ll come back, and you can get the third one.”

“Really?” she looked up hopefully.

“Really,” Kassandra nodded, patting her shoulder. “It’s yours. Come now, we need to skin them while there’s still enough light. I want the pelts for little Okeanos, to line his crib?”

“That’s a nice idea,” Phoibe seemed cheered. “I still sleep on the ones you gave me and they’re the softest thing ever. Do you remember the day you gave them to me? I’ll never forget that day Kassandra, it was one of the nicest things anyone had ever done for me.”

“Of course I remember,” Kassandra pulled her close, ruffled her hair. “I still have that bear skin. And the scars,” she grinned.
Chapter 4

It was dark by the time they returned home. Orion smelt them coming and barked excitedly, running up to greet them, wiggling his butt madly and writhing around their legs. He darted inside, ran back out, darted inside again, stopping only when they were safely indoors and on their way to Kyra’s private rooms.

“Home come the hunters,” she was reclining on a low couch, sipping a cup of wine and reading a scroll, seemingly for pleasure rather than business judging by her relaxed demeanor. “Were you successful?” she inclined her head for a kiss from Phoibe.

“Sort of,” Phoibe admitted. “Could have been better. I let one get away.”

“We let one get away,” Kassandra corrected, bending to kiss Kyra, tasting the wine on her lips. “But two down, we’ll get the third tomorrow. Two good pelts, that baby is going to sleep like a king,” she sat down on the couch, pulled Kyra’s feet onto her lap, slipped off her sandals and began to rub her feet, kneading firm fingers into the soles, drawing an appreciative moan from Kyra.

“If you two are going to start making those sorts of noises I am going to take Orion for a run,” Phoibe gave a playful grimace. “Come on boy, let’s get out of here.” she slapped her thigh. He bounced upright, banged his head on the underside of the couch, shook it off, romped over to Phoibe, wriggled happily against her.

“You’ve only just got back, “ Kyra protested. “Kass will stop, won’t you?”

“I don’t know that I will,” Kassandra grinned, lifting Kyra’s foot, pressing it to her lips. “But you don’t have to go Phoibe.”

“No, we don’t have to,” Phoibe grinned, “but we want to, right boy? We’ll stay in the town limits and away from the taverna, promise Kyra,” she reassured her.

“Is she all right?” Kyra looked over to Kassandra when Phoibe had left. “She doesn’t seem as excited as I would have expected.”

“Oh I think she was imagining bringing it down with one mighty shot,” Kassandra was working the soles of Kyra’s feet with strong thumbs. “She’ll bring down the last one tomorrow. I’ll let her keep that pelt for herself, she can do what she wants with it.”

“It’s kind of you to do that for the baby,” Kyra wiggled her toes to draw Kassandra’s eyes to hers. She smiled at Kyra’s fond expression, shook her head dismissively.

“He has to have something to line that cradle, no?”

“Nevertheless,” Kyra burrowed her foot playfully into Kassandra’s crotch. “I think it deserves some kind of reward.”

“Really,” Kassandra gave an involuntary wriggle against the pressure. “Did you have anything in mind?”

“Take me to bed, handsome misthios, and your Archon will express her gratitude,” Kyra put down her scroll and the cup, watching as Kassandra got to her feet. She held out her arms, wrapping them about Kassandra’s neck as she bent, effortlessly lifted her from the couch and carried her to the
Much later Kassandra found herself drifting outside the moment as she watched Kyra come beneath her. She studied her face intently, every shift in expression, listened hard to every breath, every whispered word.

“What is it?” Kyra laughed moments later, recovering her breath, carding her hair back from her face. “You’re looking at me so strangely,” she reached out and stroked Kassandra’s cheek gently.

“You know that I love you. Don’t you?” Kassandra looked down at her, frowning slightly.

“Of course I do,” Kyra smiled curiously. “What is it?”

“I tell you often enough, do I?”

“Yes. You tell me nearly every day my love, in words and in the things you do,” Kyra was shuffling up into a sitting position. “What’s this about, Kassandra?” she watched her flop down beside her, roll onto her back and look up at the ceiling.

“Do I make you happy though?” she didn’t meet Kyra’s gaze.

“All right Kass, what is this? What’s upset you?” Kyra sat up fully, looked down at Kassandra, puzzled. “You make me happy all the time. Just being with you makes me happy. Being with you and Phoibe is everything I could want.”

“Is it though?” Kassandra met her eyes.

Kyra frowned quizzically and tilted her head, waiting for Kassandra to follow up. There was a slight pause and then she did.

“I saw you with the baby, Kyra,” she said quietly.

“I know you did,” Kyra laughed. “I saw you seeing me, remember?”

“I saw how...happy you were.”

“He’s a very sweet baby,” Kyra said, a shade defensively. “They’re a nice couple. I think they’ll be very valuable, productive members of the community. This is their first child, but I have no doubt they’ll have more later, we need more young families, I want to keep them happy. If we…”

“Do you want a baby?” Kassandra blurted suddenly.

Whatever Kyra had been about to say died on her lips. She closed her mouth, looked down at Kassandra for a long minute. For her part Kassandra stared resolutely at the ceiling. Kyra took a deep breath, sat back, folded her arms.

“It’s all right,” Kassandra said at last. “I understand. I should have thought about it before. Sometimes I’m really stupid. I think I’m this great hunter but sometimes I can’t see what’s right under my nose if it doesn’t have four paws. Phoibe’s right. I’m useless half the time.”

“I have no idea what you two got up to today,” Kyra shook her head. “But you are not use...”

“No, you don’t have to try and make me feel better,” Kassandra leaned up on one elbow. “I’m not a child, even if I behave like one sometimes. I’m going to try and do better Kyra,” she reached out, took one of her hands in her free hand. “You deserve a better wife. One who’s more help to you. And I’m going to try.”
“You are perfectly helpful,” Kyra squeezed her hand. “Today? Elias and Phaidra needed someone to hunt those cats. I can’t do things like that anymore, I need to be here, running things. But you can do that, you do it well and you enjoy it. And that is useful to me.”

She turned to face Kassandra, pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth, whispered in her ear.

“And you are useful to me in many other ways. Ways only you can be. I could demonstrate if you’d like?”, she smiled.

“I...not just now Kyra, please,” Kassandra smiled sadly.

This was a first, Kyra sat back, looked at Kassandra, a little unnerved.

“I want to talk instead,” she turned to face Kyra slightly. “About the baby thing.”

Kyra gave a dismissive huff.

“There is no baby thing, Kassandra,” she folded her arms. “I like children, he’s a very sweet little baby. Kissing babies is something of a political maneuver after all.”

“You didn’t look like you were being political,” Kassandra laughed sadly. “It’s all right Kyra, I understand. If...if one of us was a man we’d be thinking about starting a family, no?”

“We have a family,” Kyra protested. “We have Phoibe, there’s your mater, your brother, your family on Kephallonia, just bec…”

“You know what I’m talking about Kyra,” Kassandra sighed. “Why won’t you just talk to me about it, tell me how you really feel? I’m not going to be upset, I promise.”

“Are you sure?” Kyra gave a humourless laugh “because to be quite frank, you seem upset already.”

“We...we could have a baby you know...if it’s what you really want…” Kassandra ventured cautiously.

“Indeed?” Kyra sighed. “And how do you propose we do that Kassandra? I know you’ve done some things that people regard as miraculous but I think this might be a little beyond even your impressive skills.”

“We...we...just need…” she tried to steady her breath, licked dry lips. “We just need a suitable man,” she blurted quickly before she could think better of it. Someone healthy of course, intelligent, kind. Someone who won’t be interested in being involved with the child afterwards because, well I’d want to, I’d want to be the sort of, not the pater obviously but I wouldn’t want the actual pater hanging around. Someone like….Alkibiades! He would be ideal and he would probably do it if we asked him. You like Alkibiades no?” She looked up at Kyra.

She had drawn back from Kassandra, was looking at her with an expression of total disbelief and horror. Kassandra ground to a halt.

There was a long, awkward silence, eventually broken by Kyra.

“Should I go and bathe in readiness?” she said coldly. “Because it sounds like you’ve already asked him to come and cover the mighty Eagle Bearer’s broodmare. When should I expect him?”

“What…?”. Kassandra’s stomach felt as though it was filling with ice water. “I...I hadn’t even thought about it until today, I swear, I was just....thinking aloud...”
“And that was your first thought?” Kyra snapped. “Not,” I understand darling. I understand that sometimes you feel sad that you can’t have my child, it’s all right. It’ll pass. You’ll get over it. I know that you completely understand that it’s a foolish imagining, a day dream! That it sometimes makes you happy, as well as sad, imagining carrying my child. Imagining watching it grow, smiling my smile, looking at the world with my eyes”, none of that occurred to you? To just humour my foolishness for a few moments? To comfort me? To tell me that yes it’s sad we can’t do that, but that we have so much else to make up for it? No! You go straight to throwing me under a man?! “

She was crying now, hurt and angry and even more angry at herself for crying.

“You’re a hammer Kassandra, and every problem you encounter is a nail. Well not this one! I don’t want A baby. I don’t want Alkibiades’ baby, you idiot. I want YOUR baby. And I’m a fool but I’m not stupid. I know it can never happen, but I can’t help the feeling...no, get off me,” she slapped away Kassandra’s tentative hands.

“Don’t touch me,” she was sobbing so hard now she was barely intelligible. “Don’t say anything. Just don’t touch me.” she was scrabbling out of bed, searching around for her discarded chiton. Dragging it on roughly, pulling on a robe over it, turning a final scornful glance at Kassandra.

“How can you be just absolutely perfect so often and then such an utter idiot in the blink of an eye? And don’t follow me. I’ve got work to do.” She stormed out, slamming the door behind her.
A couple of years previously Kassandra had been kicked in the chest by a horse. It had been her own stupid fault she remembered. She felt the same exact sensations now, right down to it all being her own stupid fault again.

What was wrong with her?! Normal people didn’t try to comfort their unhappy wives by suggesting breeding them with a family friend! Phoibe was right, she was useless outside the bedroom half the time. She wasn’t fit for civilised company.

She imagined recounting this to her mother. Well, no, not her mother actually. Myrrine would probably think it had been a sensible, pragmatic solution and that Kyra was oversensitive. Selene then? She imagined telling Selene about it, the look of horrified disappointment.

Kassandra felt sick, sick to the point of throwing up. She got out of bed, paced back and forth, breathed deeply till it passed.

Just what the fuck was wrong with her? Kyra was right. She was a big, stupid hammer and when she tried to change, she just made things so much worse by spewing forth the first addlebrained nonsense that danced into her mind. Why had they ever thought she could be a suitable wife for an Archon. It was a miracle no one had tried to assassinate Kyra just for her appalling lack of taste in romantic partners.

She thought back miserably to that afternoon, sitting with Phoibe. She was already more mature than Kassandra in some ways. “I thought you were learning to read and write “ indeed. Fucking idiot! She knew damn well Phoibe could read and write as well as Kassandra before she left Kephallonia. What she’d meant was ‘I never really gave it a thought’. Gods damn it. She should live in a cave like a bear. A particularly dense and insensitive bear. The bear the other bears never invited to symposiums.

She went to the door. She’d go and throw herself on Kyra’s mercy. Beg for her forgiveness. Tell her how sorry she was. She’d ask Kyra what she could do to make it better, to earn her forgiveness, how she could be a better wife, a better parent to Phoibe.

And then Kassandra would listen, and listen properly, and she wouldn’t get frustrated and give up when it turned out to be hard work, and hard work of the type she didn’t enjoy.

She opened the door and took a few steps, then stopped.

She wasn’t listening already. Idiot. “And don’t follow me. I’ve got work to do.” That’s what Kyra had said as she left. Obviously she didn’t have work to do that couldn’t wait till the morning. If Kassandra hadn’t been such a boor they’d be curled up in bed together right now. She wanted to be alone. She didn’t want Kassandra blundering in making it all about herself. Kyra didn’t want to see her right now, and she should respect that.

Kassandra turned on her heel ready to return to their room, contemplating gathering up her things, going to sleep in a guest room to give Kyra some space when she heard a noise. A low voice and, crying? She should leave her be. But who was she talking to? Who was comforting her, doing the job that Kassandra had failed at so miserably?

She made her silent way to the door of Kyra’s office. It was opened to Orion’s signature gap she realised. She could hear Kyra talking to him, sounding calmer that she had minutes earlier.
Even the bloody dog was better at this than Kassandra she thought miserably, resting her head on the cool wall beside the door frame and listening.

“...do I even put up with half of her nonsense Orion?” she was clearly petting his head. He gave a low, sympathetic “boof”. “I know. Big, stupid, insensitive ox. She can go back to Kephallonia for all I care,"

“Wait, what?” Kassandra frowned, shocked. A figure of speech, surely?

“Or she can go set up a fucking breeding program with bloody Alkibiades, she likes him so much,” Kyra spat. “They’d get on just fine. I don’t know why she didn’t just marry him, they’re made for each other.”

“What?” Kassandra peeped through the gap in the door. Kyra was at her desk Orion at her feet, his great solemn head resting in her lap, gazing up at her with worried eyes. Kyra bent her head to his, rested her forehead on his big, wrinkly brow.

“Or go back to bloody Sparta!” she sneered. “Live with her fucking mother, she’s never liked me anyway, the cold bitch.”

“Wait...what now...no, she didn’t actually mean any of this did she?” Kassandra frowned nervously. Orion nuzzled his head on his mistress’ lap, made a quiet little half grumble, presumably intended to be comforting.

“You’re a good boy, yes you are,” Kyra pressed a fond kiss to his head.

Kassandra felt a chill run down her body that had nothing to do with her standing naked outside Kyra’s door in the middle of the night. She should definitely get her things and move to the guest room, anything to head off this terrible possibility.

Had she done something so irredeemably crass that she wasn’t going to be able to beg, or charm or fuck her way out of it? After all this, had she broken the most important thing in her life through lazy stupidity?

“...her so, I just love her so much Orion,” Kyra was still talking. “I thought I was in love before but I’ve never loved anyone like this.”

Wait..was she talking about Kassandra now? Her ears pricked up.

“I don’t know why I do sometimes,” Kyra scratched behind Orion’s ears, he wiggled them appreciatively. “Big, dumb, handsome ox...”

Yes, she was talking about Kassandra, she thought, relieved. She rested her head against the door, gave a shaky sigh, eyes swimming. Was it redeemable after all?

“I wouldn’t be sitting here in the middle of the night pretending to work if I didn’t love her so bloody much,” Kyra sniffed. “I’ve never felt this before. I’ve never wanted a child before. Phoibe was enough child for me I thought. I couldn’t love her more if I’d carried her, but now, for some reason, I can’t stop wondering what it would be like to feel Kassandra’s baby quickening in my belly, to suckle it at my breast, to see what her eyes must have looked like when she was young, to see those powerful arms cradling our child, and I know how foolish it is to dream of the impossible, boy, and I try to stop but....?”

She and Orion both turned to look towards the door. Kassandra had sniffed a little too loudly she
realised, a moment too late.

“Who’s there? Show yourself,” Kyra’s voice was stern suddenly. “Go check, Orion.”

Kassandra admitted defeat, opened the door, stepped inside, face wet with tears. Orion stopped halfway, looked from Kassandra back to Kyra, confused.

“Leave her, boy,” Kyra patted her leg, he gave Kassandra a final, puzzled look, returned to his mistress.

“So, is this your attempt to wheedle your way back into my good graces?” Kyra sighed. “Snooping on me in the middle of the night after I distinctly asked you to leave me alone?”

Kassandra walked forward, stopping a half dozen steps from Kyra, not trying to hide her tears. She dropped onto her knees so hard and fast that Kyra winced and Orion gave a startled little “boof”.

Kassandra sank down onto her heels, shoulders slumped, a picture of dejection. She lay her hands limply between her knees and gazed tearfully at Kyra.

“I don’t know how to tell you how sorry I am,” she began hesitantly. “Just that I am sorry Kyra. So sorry. And I will say it and mean it every day of my life if you will only let me stay. Tell me how to earn your forgiveness, please? If it takes the rest of my life, I’ll do it. If it takes longer than that I will camp at the banks of the Styx and continue to do it, in the hope that you’ll eventually cast a glance my way as you pass.”

She took a breath, expecting Kyra to stop her at any moment, tell her to leave.

“I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” she sighed. “But, pity me please? I have never loved anyone the way I love you. I fell in love with you the day you threw that knife at me, but it wasn’t one one-hundredth of the love I feel for you now, and this is just one one-hundredth of the love I will feel for you five years from now, and five years from then and every day till the day I die, I swear. I can’t tell you how ashamed I feel for what I said. I’m a stupid, blundering idiot and Phoibe is right. I’m not fit for polite company. I’m not fit to be an Archon’s wife.”

She slumped weakly, looked down at her hands.

“It’s not foolish to imagine having a child,” she shook her head. “Our baby would be the most, beautiful, brave, clever, kind child that ever lived. And I could teach it to run fast...and hit things, I suppose. And I wish. I wish more than anything that I could do that for you Kyra. If my love for you could do it alone that baby would be in your belly already I swear, and I will always be sorry that I cannot give you that, always. But anything else, anything at all that is within my power, I will give it to you,” she looked up, face a mask of nervous hope. “I don’t deserve your forgiveness Kyra, but please, tell me how to become deserving”

“Stop,” Kyra said, quietly. Kassandra was inclined to ramble on, fearful of what she was about to say, but she obeyed.

“You are forgiven,” Kyra sighed, tilting her head, smiling slightly. “Come here,” she held out her hands.

Kassandra hesitated for a moment, processing what she’d said, then scrambled forward on her knees, until she was right up against Kyra’s legs. She bent, rested her head on Kyra’s lap, where Orion’s
had been minutes earlier.

“I’m so sorry.” she breathed. “I love you so much.”

“You are full of surprises tonight, Kassandra,” Kyra stroked her hair. “Alkibiades? Really?”

“Oh don’t,” Kassandra buried her face in Kyra’s lap, shamed.

“Really,” Kyra smiled, “Because I thought I might bring it up every day for the rest of our lives.”

“Please don’t.” Kassandra murmured. “Unless it’s a condition of your forgiveness, in which case I’ll learn to bear it.”

“No,” Kyra raised Kassandra’s head, bent and kissed her gently. “It’s not really forgiveness if there are conditions to it. I forgive you. Now you can forgive yourself eh?”

“Not quite yet,” Kassandra sat back on her heels, took Kyra’s hands in hers, pressed them to her lips. “I hurt you and I’m so sorry.”

“You did, yes,” Kyra agreed. “But by accident. People hurt each other by accident all the time, Kassandra.” She sat back in her chair and looked long and hard at Kassandra before reaching out to wipe the drying tears from her cheeks.

“By the way, do I want to know what you kept saying Phoibe was right about?” she absently scratched Orion’s head as he nudged his muzzle under her free hand.

“What?” Kassandra joined her in rubbing Orion’s ear softly, smiling as he pushed into her hand, clearly also having forgiven her. “Phoibe? Oh...yes. She said I was useless outside of the bedroom half the time,” she smiled, glanced at Kyra. “I don’t think she’s wrong exactly.”

Kyra laughed softly, eased forward in her chair a little and cradled Kassandra’s face in her hands, “I think it’s a little unfair all the same,” she leaned forward and kissed Kassandra softly, chastely, caressing the line of her jaw.

Minutes earlier Kassandra had been wondering if she would ever get to kiss Kyra again, but here she was, naked at her feet, Kyra’s hands drifting now to the back of her neck, pulling her a little closer.

She broke the kiss, began to apologise again but Kyra stopped her with a finger to her lips.

“No more sorries tonight Kassandra,” she breathed. “It’s done. Let’s move on, forget about it.”

“But I don’t want to forget,” Kassandra shook her head. “I meant it Kyra, I do want to change. I know it will be difficult and I know I’ll mess up, but I’m going to try. I swear.”

“Well,” Kyra smiled, slid to the very edge of her chair and began to pull up the hem of her chiton before slipping off the chair to straddle Kassandra’s thighs. “Look at you,” she stroked her face, “being thoroughly useful outside of the bedroom.”

Kassandra swallowed hard, Kyra was naked under her chiton, her skin soft and warm against Kassandra’s thighs. She could feel her own pulse beginning to quicken, her hands shaking a little as she ran them up Kyra’s legs, to her hips. Kyra was kissing her neck now, nibbling softly below her ear, making Kassandra shudder.

“We...” she licked her dry lips, tried to control her breathing. “We don’t have to do this Kyra, really.” she said, while she still could.
Kyra drew back, looked into Kassandra’s eyes assessingly.

“Don’t you want to?” she asked softly. “If you don’t want to …”

“No, gods, I want to so much,” Kassandra closed her eyes, took a breath. “But I don’t want you to think that…”

“Don’t second guess me Kassandra,” Kyra whispered, catching one of Kassandra’s hands in hers. “I have never wanted you more than I do right now, believe me,” she urged Kassandra’s hand beneath her chiton, up along her thigh, pressed it to her sex. “Believe me,” she breathed.

Kassandra groaned, encountering wet heat, bent her head, rested it on Kyra’s shoulder.

“I love you so much Kyra,” she murmured. “I don’t have the words. I don’t have the right words to tell you.”

“Then show me,” Kyra took hold of a handful of Kassandra’s hair, softly raised her head, gazed deep into her eyes. “Show me with your actions Kassandra, right here, right now.”

Kassandra took Kyra in her arms, turned her, laid her down, kissed her softly.

From under the desk Orion grumbled quietly, Kyra broke the kiss, laughed a little.

“Not now Orion,” she said firmly. “Bed. Go to bed, boy.”

He got to his feet, complaining under his breath and made his way to the door.

“Now then,” Kyra smiled, pulling Kassandra back down into her arms. “Where were you?”

“Just about here, I think,” Kassandra smiled, flooded with relief and desire. She bent her head to Kyra’s neck, kissing gently, reached down, pulled up her chiton the rest of the way.

It was a mere couple of hours since she’d made love to Kyra but it felt like a lifetime ago as she moved atop her, eased her thigh between her legs, shifted down to mouth at her breasts through the fabric of her dress.

“Stop, stop,” Kyra hissed.

Kassandra stopped instantly, darting an anxious glance up at Kyra’s face.

“I’m so..” she began, confused, but Kyra was pushing her upright, struggling to sit up

“No, just let me just get rid of this,” she was slipping off the robe, pulling up her chiton.

Kassandra laughed, relieved, helped lift her hips, tugged the chiton over her shoulders, tossed it aside, dragged away the robe, threw it under the desk, bent back to her task.

Kyra pulled her head down to her breast, moaning as Kassandra took a nipple in her mouth, suckled desperately, shifted back atop her, grinding slowly between Kyra’s thighs. The wet heat of her sex blazed against Kassandra’s hip. Kyra raised her thigh, flexed the muscle, giving Kassandra something firm to rut against.

The room was filled with the increasingly urgent sounds of their fucking, Kassandra’s wet, greedy suckling, the soft slap of skin on slippery skin. Kyra gripped Kassandra’s hips hard, her nails digging into her flesh, urging her on.
Kassandra released Kyra’s breast, provoking a low moan of frustration. She cradled her wife’s head in one strong hand, held it firm, locked her gaze onto Kyra’s as she recognised the sounds of her approaching orgasm, felt her own racing to meet it.

“I love you Kyra,” she managed while she could still form words. “I love you so much, I swear,” she felt the hot flow of Kyra’s release against her thigh as her own orgasm hit and she sank against Kyra’s body, feeling the bite of nails into the skin of her hips, the sobbing sounds of Kyra’s climax against her neck.

Minutes passed as they lay in a tangle of limbs, breath slowing, sweat drying. Kyra stroked Kassandra’s hair gently, pressed soft kisses to her temple.

“Kass,” she murmured at last. “Let’s not do this anymore eh?” she felt Kassandra start to raise her head. “No, not the fucking,” she chuckled, “We can do lots of that. The arguing. We’ve had enough arguing for one lifetime don’t you think?”
Chapter 6

When Phoibe and Orion had returned it was quickly apparent that Kyra and Kassandra had retired to bed.

“Let’s go get something to eat boy,” Phoibe patted her thigh, leading him down to the kitchen where Cymone the cook had left out enough plates for Phoibe to assemble a decent meal for herself and an evening treat for Orion.

They ate together. Not in silence, it was impossible for Orion to eat anything silently Phoibe thought, laughing fondly and watching him urgently licking every last scrap from his bowl, nosing it across the floor in his enthusiasm.

She stifled a yawn before taking a long swallow of heavily watered wine and rubbed her eyes. She was exhausted she realised, it had been a long day, but not a bad one. She had brought down her first lynx after all. The baby would have a fur in his cradle that Phoibe had provided, she felt a glow of pride at that.

Kassandra had seemed pleased as well. Phoibe knew that she had fluffed her kill a little, released too soon, given in to her nerves and it could have gone badly. She was a little disappointed about that but Kassandra had said not one word about it, congratulating her on the kill and showing her how to most efficiently skin the animal.

But she would still have to ride out again tomorrow Phoibe thought guiltily. If she’d held her nerve a moment or two longer perhaps Kassandra would have been able to take down the third cat before it had disappeared into the brush. Tomorrow was a new day though, Kassandra had said it herself. Tomorrow Phoibe would track the final lynx, bring it down cleanly, make Kassandra proud.

As she cleaned up after herself, Phoibe’s thoughts drifted to Kassandra. She’d been a little...odd...today somehow. Not angry. Not sad exactly. Just a little off somehow. Something was bothering her and Phoibe knew from long experience that she wasn’t very good at expressing when things were preying on her mind. You had to sit back, watch and wait.

It was a bit like hunting in its way Phoibe realised. Waiting for just the right moment to ask your question so as not to scare her off. Maybe Kyra would be able to get it out of her? That was a part of what being married was, surely? Being able to talk about things that were difficult.

“Come on Orion,” she called, “Let’s go to bed. Maybe Kyra will let you come hunting with us tomorrow. That will be good, eh boy?”

As they passed the main bedroom Phoibe heard the familiar sounds of lovemaking and smiled. Perhaps that was Kyra’s way of getting to whatever was bothering Kassandra, she thought. Phoibe didn’t really understand it properly but Kassandra usually seemed happier, more relaxed afterwards, she thought, climbing into bed. She’d probably be back to herself tomorrow.

There was a heavy flump as Orion dropped to the floor at the foot of Phoibe’s bed and heaved a great weary sigh.

Phoibe drifted into sleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. She didn’t know how long she’d
been asleep when something woke her, a noise? Was it in the room? She sat up a little, rubbed sleepy eyes.

“Orion?” she ventured. Glancing over she saw that her door was open a little way, it must have been the sound of him scratching it open that had woken her she thought, rolling over and pulling the warm blanket up to her neck, snuggling down comfortably.  

Then she heard it again. It wasn’t Orion, it was raised voices. More accurately it was Kyra’s raised voice. She sounded furious. Furious and tearful. There was the lower, deeper sound of Kassandra’s voice, an uncharacteristic pleading edge to it.

Phoibe felt chilled suddenly, even though she was tucked under the blanket still. She’d heard Kyra raise her voice before, but generally about Archon business and she never cried about that.

The hairs at Phoibe’s nape began to bristle, she slid out of bed, padded silently to her door, leaned against it, peeping just around the edge she looked down the hallway. There was Orion, standing outside the main bedroom, his head cocked, whining , pawing softly at the foot of the door.

Kyra’s voice was louder now, the door flew open, Orion, jumped back, startled.

“...such an utter idiot in the blink of an eye? And don’t follow me. I’ve got work to do.” she slammed the door shut with such force that Phoibe could feel the reverberation in her bare feet.

Kyra spotted Orion standing anxiously by the wall and bent to him.

“I’m sorry boy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” she rubbed his ears. “Come on, come with me boy,” she straightened up, brushing roughly at her eyes, striding off towards the stairs. “Stupid, insensitive, idiot…” Phoibe heard as she disappeared around the corner.

Damn, Phoibe sighed. Kassandra had said something clumsy and ill considered, obviously. She opened the door a little wider, poked her head out. She could hear Kassandra pacing about in the bedroom, muttering to herself.

Phoibe loved Kassandra with every fibre of her being, but sometimes she was infuriating. She would brood silently about things she would be much better talking through and then the next day would open her damn fool mouth and the first idiot thing that occurred to her would come pouring out.

She was always either thinking when she should be talking, or talking when she should be thinking, Phoibe reflected bitterly. She was prepared to bet a pocket full of drachmae that it was the latter that had caused this.

The door opened again, and Phoibe withdrew quickly. Kassandra emerged, stood outside the room, shifting slightly from heels to toes, fingers twitching by her thighs, full of the tense energy she sometimes displayed before hunting or sparring. Not the sort of energy she needed right now, Phoibe suspected.

She needed to go and apologise, surely, but not full of anxious tension. She was likely to make things even worse if she wasn’t careful. She clearly wasn’t thinking right, she hadn’t even stopped to put on a robe, Phoibe doubted that she even realised she was naked. She needed to go back inside. Calm down a little, think about what she was going to say. Hadn’t Kyra’s last words been to not follow her?

Kassandra turned back to the door, looked like she was about to go back in, Phoibe relaxed a little and then they both heard Kyra’s voice drifting from downstairs, Kassandra clearly pricked up her ears, waited a moment and then set off for the stairs.
Trembling with anxiety Phoibe followed at a safe distance. Ordinarily it was very difficult to sneak up on Kassandra, near impossible in fact. But she was obviously distracted, muttering to herself as she padded downstairs, more concerned with not being detected herself than wondering if she was being followed.

Phoibe took up a position at the bend in the stairs. She knew from experience that this was an ideal place to remain unseen while observing the door to Kyra’s meeting room. On days when she knew that Kyra was expecting a particularly difficult, or potentially entertaining meeting Phoibe would often sit here nibbling on a barley cake, to watch the fireworks.

Kassandra was standing by the door, listening intently. Phoibe could hear odd snatches of sentences. Kyra was clearly talking to Orion, thinking aloud.

“...back to Kephallonia for all I care,” “...fucking breeding program with bloody Alkibiades” “go back to bloody Sparta!”

She saw Kassandra flinch, her shoulders slumped, her head sank. She’d done something bad this time, Phoibe thought, something really bad. She’d never heard them argue like this. The odd spat of course, here and there, nothing that Kassandra hadn’t been able to flirt her way out of after an appropriate cooling off period. This though. She’d never heard Kyra sound so distraught. What had Kassandra done?

Slight movement made her glance over at Kassandra. Phoibe, frowned, looked more closely, her shoulders were shaking, her hands clasped to her face, she was weeping Phoibe realised, shocked.

She’d seen Kassandra shed the odd tear here and there over their time together, she remembered her crying with Phoibe a little the night of her parent’s funeral pyre, but not like this. Shaking, bowed, trying to muffle the sobs with her hands.

Phoibe didn’t want to see this. She didn’t want to see this. Kassandra wouldn’t want her to see this. She clamped her own hands to her mouth, struggled to her feet, not even trying to be particularly quiet. Kassandra wasn’t listening to anything any more. Phoibe went back to her room, numb with shock.

She crawled into bed, backed herself into the corner, hugged her knees tightly, rocked back and forth a little. She wished she hadn’t followed. She wished she’d stayed in bed. Wished she hadn’t seen or heard any of that. Would Kyra really make Kassandra leave? Where would they go? What would happen to Phoibe? She wished Orion was here. Wished he was here to clamber clumsily into bed and cuddle up against her.

Phoibe bowed her head onto her knees, rocked, begged silently to whichever god would listen, that things would be all right, that Kassandra would be able to make things better, that Kyra would forgive her.

She had no idea how long she sat like that, it seemed like an eternity. The room was a little chilly but nowhere near enough to account for the terrible cold she felt. She dragged the blanket about her shoulders, huddled up in it, head on her knees. She had actually dozed off a little when she was woken by Orion lumbering into the room.

“Orion?” she whispered. “Here boy, please come here boy,” she called softly.

He tilted his head, gave a low “boof” of recognition, and hauled himself up onto the bed, making it creak as he struggled to arrange himself half on Phoibe’s lap, half curled around her. His weight was about at the limit of what was comfortable for her and it was just what she needed.
“What’s happening boy?” she buried her face in the distinctly doggy smelling hair of his powerful shoulders. “Is Kyra still cross? Is it good that you’re here? It’s good right? If you were worried about her you’d still be with her, right?”

She was momentarily comforted until it dawned on her that Orion not being concerned about Kyra didn’t really tell her how things were going from Kassandra’s point of view. But there was no more shouting, she thought. At least they weren’t shouting. That must mean they were talking surely? And talking was good. If they talked about it they could sort it out, that was the way things worked, no?.

Phoibe rubbed Orion’s ear as much to soothe herself as him.

“It’s going to be all right, boy,” she whispered. “Kassandra will make it be all right. I know she will. She always does in the end. She loves Kyra, I know she does. Kyra loves her. They’ll make it better. They’ll make it better, I know they will,” she murmured over and over again into his soft warm neck, listening to his steady breath, using it to calm herself.

The sound of quiet voices roused her a little while later. She jolted upright, startling Orion. He turned his head, pushing against her, nosing at her cheek, evidently concerned.

“Ssh, ssh,” she hissed, holding him close, straining her ears. That was Kyra. That was Kyra sounding normal. Not angry. Not upset. And Kassandra, deep, calm, perfectly normal Kassandra.

“Wait, wait here Orion,” she slid out from beneath him, sidled to the door, peered through the gap.

There they were! Kyra was naked, her chiton clutched loosely in her hand, dragging behind her, Kassandra’s arm solidly about her shoulders holding her close as they made their way along the hallway to their room. They were smiling. Smiling at each other. Kyra was resting her head against Kassandra’s upper chest as they walked, her arm about her wife’s hips.

Phoibe realised that she was shaking, on the verge of tears, her hands were trembling and her throat was tight. She rested her head against the door as Kyra and Kassandra went into their room, closing the door softly behind them. Phoibe sank to her knees, let out a shuddering breath. It was all right. It was going to be all right.

She knelt there for so long that Orion lumbered off the bed, made his way over, snuffling in concern, nosing at her arm, angling to be petted. Phoibe threw her arms about his neck and began to cry.

“It’s okay boy,” she whispered against his neck, “it’s going to be all right. I knew it.”

As they climbed into bed together, Orion daintily placing his huge paws as he arranged himself across Phoibe’s legs, snuffling and grunting as he settled down to sleep, she began to make plans for the morning.

She would let them lie in. She and Orion would set out first thing, they would get up early, ride out together and find that final lynx. Phoibe would track, kill it, skin it.

They would have time she figured. There was only one reason for Kyra to be coming out of her office with her chiton in her hand after all, so there was every likelihood that they’d be “making up” again first thing in the morning.

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She and Orion could be back before the day had even properly started. Kassandra wouldn’t need to ride out, she could spend the whole day doing nice things for Kyra. It was the perfect plan.
Chapter 7

Amazingly, given her disturbed night, Phoibe actually did rise before the sun. Orion grumbled a little at being asked to join her but by the time they were in the kitchen finishing off the previous evening’s leftovers he was enthusiastic enough and Phoibe had to hiss at him a couple of times to be quiet as they made their way through the silent house and out to the stable.

They were well on their way by the time the sun rose. It looked set to be a lovely day, Phoibe thought, soon the sun would burn the dew from the grass, the air would warm, Orion would catch the scent of the big cat, all would be well.

She hitched her horse to a sapling near where she and Kassandra had stopped to eat the previous day. Maybe if she hadn’t insisted on eating they would have had enough daylight to track the third cat yesterday she thought, shouldering her bow and giving her arrows a final check. She touched the skinning knife at her belt, gave Orion a gentle slap on the neck and pulled a small scrap of lynx pelt from her pouch, holding it out to him to sniff.

He immediately tried to eat it, but fortunately she’d kept a tight hold.

“No, no,” she dragged it out of his slobbery jowls. “Smell it boy, smell it! This is what we’re looking for right? Seek yes? Seek?”

Orion was clearly a little put out at being denied an impromptu snack, but he forgot about it as Phoibe set off up the ridge at a run. This looked like huge fun, he decided.

Phoibe jogged along in the direction she had seen the lynx escape the previous day. She’d been running for a while, Orion lolloping along happily beside her, and was beginning to think that maybe she’d mistaken the direction. She was getting out of breath and was going to have to stop in a minute. She should have brought the waterskin with her she realised glumly. That had been short sighted, she wouldn’t tell Kassandra about that bit.

Suddenly Orion halted, lifted his big head, sniffed the air, barked happily.

“No, no, quiet, Orion,” Phoibe said, stopping and watching as he swung his head from side to side, taking in the air, before lowering his nose to the ground and setting off at a run. This looked like huge fun, he decided.

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“No, no, quiet, Orion,” Phoibe said, stopping and watching as he swung his head from side to side, taking in the air, before lowering his nose to the ground and setting off at a run.

This looked promising Phoibe thought, immediately getting her second wind, jogging after him, taking her bow from her back in readiness. They ran on for quite a while and Phoibe was beginning to get a little concerned, she was tired, thirsty and they were getting further and further from where she’d tethered her horse.

“Orion, I hope we don’t have…” she began, then suddenly found herself bumping into his muscular rump as he slammed to a halt. “What is…” she followed his gaze.

There it was. Bigger than she remembered, lighter, more silvery, absolutely beautiful. It sat atop the tallest of a haphazard scattering of rocks, licking its paw, washing behind its ear, for all the world like a huge house cat. Phoibe felt a moment’s guilt at what she was about to do. It clearly had no idea they were even there yet. Kassandra would say it was too stupid to live though she thought, sitting there in the early morning sun, washing itself without a care in the world as a dangerous predator stalked up on it.

She crept as close as she dared. Orion knew his work was done, sank down into a lying position, head on his front paws to watch Phoibe take over. She plucked an arrow from her quiver, raised her
bow, prepared herself.

Still the lynx remained oblivious, raising its hind leg now, licking along the full length of it, giving Phoibe a perfect shot at its big silvery head. She drew the bow string fully, kissed it softly as she inhaled, held it, slowly steadily exhaled, offered a silent prayer to Artemis, relaxed her fingers, let the arrow fly.

It was perfect. Perfect. If only Kassandra could have been here to see it she thought as the arrow hit home, swift, straight, sudden. It sank deep into the cat’s skull. It didn’t even twitch, just slumped down, going limp, sliding down off the rock and out of sight.

“Did you see that Orion?” she grinned excitedly. “Did you see? Gods, I wish Kassandra could have seen. It was perfect. Let’s go get it, boy. We just need to skin it and then we can head home. We’ll be back in time to have breakfast with Kassandra and Kyra.”

She ran towards the pile of rocks, dropping her bow as she approached, climbing hurriedly over the lower rocks, up to the tallest where the lynx had sat, she vaulted lightly over the top and right down into a deep, yawning hole hidden behind it.

It took her a minute or two to realise what had happened. She was dazed and winded and pretty much in the dark. She struggled up into a sitting position and began to check herself for injuries. There didn’t seem to be anything broken at least, so that was a good thing. About the only good thing, she thought miserably.

Her back hurt horribly. She shifted round to see what she’d landed on. A load of old pottery it looked like. She reached around to her back, her fingers came away smeared with blood. She flexed her shoulders experimentally, they seemed okay, no grating, she could move her arms all right.

Feeling a little better, she got to her feet, groaning as her tunic pulled at her injured back. There was a deep cut on her leg she noticed, a slow trickle of blood was running down over her knee, snaking down her shin, soaking into the straps of her sandals. She unsheathed her skinning knife, she was lucky she hadn’t somehow fallen on that she supposed, cutting a length of fabric from the hem of her tunic. She folded it as neatly as she could and bound it around her thigh, pulling it tight. It immediately felt a bit better.

She checked her head. She hadn’t lost consciousness at least, so that was good, she ran her fingers through her hair over her scalp. There was a small cut towards the back, blood matted her hair already but scalp wounds bled a lot, she doubted it was bad.

All told, she’d been lucky. Well, lucky not to be badly injured. Not so lucky to end up down here. Where was “down here” anyway? She began to look around. Enough light came in through the hole to make out clusters of dusty pots scattered about the edges of what seemed like a large squarish chamber. There was a low stone altar or something to one end, scattered about the base of it were some small pottery figures, what looked like some animal bones, the ubiquitous pots...and her lynx!

She grinned happily, forgetting her predicament for a moment. She had her knife, there was enough light to skin it. Enough light for now, she reminded herself. If she was still down here by the time the sun sank she wouldn’t be feeling so chipper.

“Orion!” she called, licking her lips and whistling for him. She heard him come wandering up to the edge of the hole, snuffling suspiciously, she called his name softly and was relieved to see his head
peer over the edge at last. He whined miserably, pawing at the grass.

“No, no, no,” Phoibe held up her hands. Gods, if he fell down here too they were going to be in for a long wait. “Stay there boy, stay!” he cocked his head, puzzled. “Orion!” Phoibe said firmly. “Go get Kyra! Find Kyra! Go find Kyra, there’s a good boy. Find your mater. Get Kyra!”

He got the message at last, “boofed” once and ran off. Phoibe suddenly felt very much alone. She had nothing to eat and, more importantly nothing to drink. How long would it take him to run back to the villa?

She couldn’t really gauge the height of the sun from down here, didn’t really know what time it was. It hadn’t been light for all that long, had it? Perhaps Kassandra and Kyra were already up, perhaps they’d already realised that Phoibe was missing.

Only they wouldn’t think she was “missing” for a while yet, even if they had noticed that she wasn’t home. It was perfectly normal for her to take a walk down to the dock, or to go for a run first thing in the morning, they’d think nothing of it for a while yet. How long had she been waiting already, she wondered. How far could Orion have run in the time since he’d left?

What if he spotted a rabbit, she thought, sitting down, hugging her knees. What if he got distracted and forgot what he was supposed to be doing? She felt a moment’s panic, but quickly chided herself. He wasn’t just going to run off! Even if Phoibe hadn’t told him to, he would have found his way back to Kyra pretty quickly. Unless told otherwise he hung at his mistress’ side. She just had to be patient and keep calm. Panic helped no one. Panic could kill you faster than an arrow, that was what Kassandra always said.

Kassandra! Shit! Phoibe’s heart sank. Ten minutes ago she’d been bursting with pride, desperate to take home the evidence of her skill and display it to her. Now if she imagined Kassandra’s face peering down over the edge of that hole, it wasn’t an expression of sisterly pride she saw on her face.

Who was she to criticize Kassandra for her occasional blundering clumsiness? Phoibe could be just as bad. She’d wanted to impress her, to show Kyra and Kassandra how much she’d learned, how self reliant she could be and she’d ended up down a bloody hole, and needed rescuing.

She was sorely tempted to just sit down, nurse her sore leg and have a little cry if she was honest. But that wouldn’t help anyone. What would Kassandra do? She wiped her nose on the back of her hand and looked around.

There was no foliage down here, no water trickling down the walls anywhere, so thinking about what she would drink should be her priority. She scanned about the place. There was nothing. Nothing except the dead lynx. She limped over to it.

She couldn’t help a little flush of pride as she pulled out her arrow. It was far bigger than it had looked to her yesterday. She’d been deceived by the distance. And she’d brought it down with a single arrow. She breathed a prayer of thanks to Artemis and placed a gentle hand on the cat’s head, stroking the soft fur.

“You were a worthy opponent,” she said quietly. Kassandra and Kyra both said it was important to respect your prey. If it wasn’t worthy of your respect, then it was not worth you hunting it, Kassandra had said to her.

“A worthy opponent, but you were in the wrong place,” she shook her head. “You should have stayed in the wilds, you had no place here.”
She sat back and looked about her. She should find something leakproof and reasonably clean. Kassandra had advised against consuming anything from a cat, claiming that all the flesh tasted vaguely of cat piss. But how would she know that if she hadn’t tried it, Phoibe reasoned, and it clearly hadn’t killed her. So while the thought of drinking its cold, thick blood made her stomach roil right now, she was sure that if she was here for any length of time it would start to look pretty good.

She should bleed it quickly, she’d nothing on her that she could use to prevent it coagulating, but she wasn’t going to be here that long anyway, she assured herself. Then she could skin the animal, get that precious pelt. As a plus, the tasks would help to keep her busy until help arrived, She almost hoped that they didn’t get there until she was sitting with the skin spread out beside her.
“Mmmm, do you have to work this morning? Really my love?” Kassandra was grinding slowly against Kyra’s ass, biting softly at her trapezius muscle, murmuring in her ear.

“While I would love to shirk my responsibilities and spend the entire morning lying here beneath you,” Kyra gave a fond laugh as Kassandra’s insinuating hand slipped between her thighs from the back, slid up, up, up, slowly. “I do have a meeting, two in fact this morn…” she gasped a little as Kassandra’s seeking fingers located their target. “That…that… I really should attend…”

“Should attend, or must attend?” Kassandra kissed along the sharp edges of her shoulder blades.

“Should and must,” Kyra found herself moving against Kassandra despite her best intentions. “It’s my duty as Archon,” it was becoming more difficult to control her voice. “And…fuck Kassandra…It…shit…What…what happened to all your talk of change? You were going to attend some of the meetings with me, I seem to recall,” she managed.

“Oh, a low blow my treasure,” Kassandra breathed, licking up the line of Kyra’s spine. “Why not let me take care of business here, and then I promise to come and watch as you take care of business downstairs later? Just postpone your meetings till this afternoon.”

“I am free this afternoon, as it…gods…oh gods, Kassandra,” she hissed. “As…as it happens. I thought we could go hunting together…damn it Kass…oh fuck…together, the three of us. I could watch Phoibe bring down that lynx.”

That was actually a pretty persuasive point Kassandra realised, but surely there was time to do both? Kyra sounded pretty close already she smiled, shifting position and easing a thigh between her legs as she lifted Kyra’s hair aside and kissed the nape of her neck.

“Kassandra, Savina will be here any moment…again!” she groaned. “It’s every morning the poor woman has to come and prise me from your arms…oh gods Kass…she…”

“You spend a surprising amount of time in our bed talking about the lovely Savina,” Kassandra teased, using her thigh to increase the pressure of her hand. “Do you want to invite her in one day?”

“Kassandra!” Kyra warned. “Do not even begin to think of…oh fuck!” she whimpered desperately as her body tensed and shuddered, trembling and melting beneath Kassandra.

“Ssh, “ Kassandra breathed, gently removing her wet hand from between Kyra’s legs, shifting off her and wrapping her in a strong, warm embrace. “There now, “ she kissed her shoulder, “that wasn’t so bad, was it? And you’re not behind schedule at all, Savina isn’t even here yet.

“You are utterly incorrigible,” Kyra sighed, pressing back against Kassandra enjoying the solid warmth of her. “And I don’t know why I put up with it,” she smiled.

Before Kassandra could respond there was the sound of Savina shouting Orion’s name, accompanied by barking, the skidding, clattering of claws on tile and a dull thud as something, presumably Orion, hit the door full tilt.

“My timing is perfect,” Kassandra grinned, rolling back and allowing Kyra to sit up, climb out of bed, rescue her chiton from the floor and pull it on as she made for the door.

“Kyra!” it sounded as though Savina was right outside the door. And it was “Kyra”, not “Archon”,

Kassandra noted. Though she had no idea why, she began to feel a little uneasy.

“I’m sorry to wake you, but I found Orion scratching to come in, he was outside the kitchen door Kyra, he seems upset, I couldn’t stop him from running up,” she jumped a little as Kyra threw open the door.

Orion barreled in, nearly knocking Kyra off her feet, barking frantically. He took hold of the skirt of Kyra’s chiton and began to pull her towards the door.

“Orion, Orion!” Kyra pulled her skirt from his mouth, “Ssh, ssh boy, be still now,” she tried to soothe him but he was heedless, dragging at her skirts again. When she wouldn’t move he shouldered her aside and leapt onto the bed, taking Kassandra’s hand in his mouth, hard enough to grip but softly enough not to break skin. He pulled insistently, hauling her out of bed, dragging her stumbling towards the door.

“Here, here!” Kyra tossed her the tunic she had been wearing the previous day and Savina tactfully pretended interest in Kyra’s feet as Kassandra pulled it over her head, squeezing past Savina and following Orion out of the room.

He turned and ran, clumsy on the slippery tiles, to Phoibe’s room, jumped onto the bed, began scratching at the blankets, nosing the pillows onto the floor before jumping back down, grabbing Kassandra’s hand and pulling her back out into the corridor.

“Okay, okay, you’re a good boy,” Kassandra crouched, took his head firmly in her hands and looked deep into his worried brown eyes, “I understand you, something’s happened to Phoibe, yes? I need to put on my sandals and then I will follow you boy, just a minute or two.”

Kyra had overheard this, instructed Savina to take her meetings for the morning, put on her own sandals and followed Kassandra down to the stables, Orion weaving in and out between them, his brow furrowed with concern. He waited impatiently for them to ready their horses, pacing in and out of the stable, whining and complaining.

As soon as they’d mounted, he set off at full speed, his huge paws kicking up dust and gravel, leading them out of the town and off in the direction of the vineyard.

Kassandra quickly realised that they were following the same path that she and Phoibe had taken the previous day and was unsurprised when they saw Phoibe’s mare hitched to a sapling near where they had stopped to eat.

“She’s after the lynx” she sighed, as Kyra untied the mare and mounted her own horse.

“Go ahead Kassandra,” she urged, “I’ll come follow you with Phoibe’s horse, hopefully she’ll be able to ride her back.”

As she galloped after Orion Kassandra tried not to think about scenarios where Phoibe wouldn’t be able to ride back to the villa. On horseback it was a matter of minutes before they approached the scattering of rocks where Phoibe had fallen.

Sliding from the saddle and racing after Orion, Kassandra could hear Phoibe calling the dog’s name.

She vaulted over the rocks, avoiding Phoibe’s fate by the skin of her teeth. She threw herself flat on the ground, and peered down into the shadowy hole.

“Phoibe!” she almost sobbed with relief seeing her sitting on a low stone table of some sort off to one side of a good sized chamber. “Phoibe, are you hurt?”
“Kassandra!” Phoibe, hopped down. She was limping Kassandra noted, concerned. “I knew you’d come!” she sounded a little weepy, but as she stepped into the light she beamed delightedly at the sight of Kassandra peering down at her.

“Your leg, Phoibe,” Kassandra noticed the bandage, the blood on her leg. She heard hoofbeats indicating Kyra’s arrival. “Over here Kyra, be careful, there’s a big hole, some kind of underground chamber.”

“Hello Phoibe,” Kyra crouched down beside Kassandra and gave Phoibe a reassuring smile. “Whatever are you doing down there?” she made sure to sound calmer than she felt.

“I got the lynx,” Phoibe gave a slightly rueful smile as she held up the large silver skin.

“It’s beautiful,” Kyra nodded, speaking soothingly. “Well done. I wish I could have seen you bring it down.”

“I did it with one shot, Kassandra,” Phoibe couldn’t keep a hint of pride out of her voice. “Just like you taught me.”

Kassandra swallowed hard, not trusting her voice for a moment. Phoibe, misinterpreted her silence.

“I’m sorry Kassandra,” her face crumpled. “I’m so sorry. I thought I could get back before you even got up. So you wouldn’t have to ride out again.”

Kyra glanced sidelong at Kassandra, gave her a nudge. “Say something,” she hissed under her breath.

“Your leg,” Kassandra managed, voice husky, “what have…”

Kyra rolled her eyes, sighing.

“I wanted you two to be able to spend the day together,” Phoibe explained.

“We could have spent the day together riding out with you,” Kyra was confused.

“I wanted the two of you to be together,” Phoibe mumbled. “I wanted you to make up… I heard you arguing…” she admitted.

“Oh…fuck…” Kassandra hissed. Kyra nudged her hard in the ribs.

“Your leg,” Kassandra managed, voice husky, “what have…”

Kyra rolled her eyes, sighing.

“I wanted you two to be able to spend the day together,” Phoibe explained.

“We could have spent the day together riding out with you,” Kyra was confused.

“I wanted the two of you to be together,” Phoibe mumbled. “I wanted you to make up… I heard you arguing…” she admitted.

“Oh…fuck…” Kassandra hissed. Kyra nudged her hard in the ribs.

“You sounded so upset,” Phoibe continued quietly. “I just wanted…” she tailed off.

Kassandra muttered something unintelligible and got to her knees.

“I’m coming down Phoibe,” she called. “I’ll lift you up to Kyra and she’ll pull you up, stand back a bit.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Kyra grabbed the back of her tunic and yanked her down. “Have you lost your mind? Who’s going to pull you up, you big ox? I’ll go down.”

Before Kassandra could protest, Kyra slid over the edge, hung by her hands for a moment then dropped lightly to land beside Phoibe. She sank to her knees and held out her arms to Phoibe, who limped gratefully into her hug.

“How are you sweetheart,” Kyra cradled Phoibe’s head against her shoulder. “Are you hurt anywhere else beside your leg?”
“My back a bit I think,” Phoibe sniffed, struggling to keep tears at bay. “There’s a cut on my head, but it’s not bad.”

Kyra decided that she would be the judge of that and gave Phoibe a careful once over. She’d done a good job of binding her leg so she didn’t disturb that. The cut on her scalp was still seeping a bit but wasn’t deep. She carefully lifted up her tunic and examined her back, there were a few small cuts from the broken pottery she’d landed on but only one was deep. All in all it could have been a lot worse.

“Is Kassandra really cross?” Phoibe murmured as Kyra helped her back on with her tunic. “I didn’t mean to cause all this fuss. I just wanted you to have some time together. Are you friends again now?”

Kyra couldn’t prevent her smile at Phoibe’s childishly naive question, she took her shoulders gently and turned her so she could look in her eyes.

“Kassandra isn’t cross at all. She was scared,” she said quietly. “She still is and Kassandra doesn’t do scared very well,” she whispered and gave Phoibe a conspiratorial wink. “It was very thoughtful of you to do that. And yes, we are friends again. We had a bad argument, and we both said some things that we didn’t mean to and hurt each other’s feelings but we’ve apologised and made up. I’m sorry we scared you Phoibe. Very sorry. None of this is your fault.”

Phoibe’s lower lip was trembling now and she rubbed her grimy face with her arm, trying not to cry.

“Come now,” Kyra patted her arm. “Let’s get you out of this dismal place, no? Do you think I can lift you up that high?”

They eyed the drop, Kassandra was fidgeting about at the edge of the hole looking impatient.

“How far down can you reach?” Kyra called. “Without falling in yourself, obviously,” she added, wryly.

“Pretty far, I think,” Kassandra edged forward, digging her toes into the soft ground and reaching down with one arm while holding onto a handful of scrubby grass with the other. Kyra put her hands on Phoibe’s waist and gave a quick experimental lift.

“Do you think you can get on my shoulders Phoibe?” she suggested. “I don’t think I can lift you high enough. Hold on Kassandra, we’re nearly there,” she bent her knees and helped Phoibe climb onto her shoulders before standing carefully to her full height.

Kassandra inched forward a little more. She could get a strong grip on Phoibe’s wrist now. Without much effort she hauled Phoibe up, helping her to scrabble out onto the grass beside her. Once she was safe Kassandra got to her knees, took hold of Phoibe’s arms and helped her stand.

“I’m sorry Kassandra,” she began quietly, not meeting her eyes.

Kassandra swallowed hard, blinked, held Phoibe at arms length and looked her right in the eyes, not bothering to hide her own tears.

“You have nothing to be sorry for Phoibe,” she said and meant it. “I’m sorry we frightened you. You were very brave. Look at the prey you felled, all on your own. I’m so proud of you, Phoibe. Every day, you make me proud. And I don’t tell you often enough. And that is my fault, not yours. I’m going to do better Phoibe. I promise.” she pulled her into a tight hug, feeling her begin to sob against her shoulder.
“I love you Phoibe.” she stroked her hair, rocking her gently in her embrace. “I love you with all my heart and I always will, you are the dearest thing to ever come into my life, and I am going to be a better...a better...sister?” she held Phoibe away from her to check her expression, “is that all right?” she asked softly. “I can’t be your mater I know. You had a very good mater, who loved you very much, I don’t want to try and take…”

“You could,” Phoibe sobbed. “You could try, Kassandra..”

Kassandra gave her a questioning look. “Is that what you would like?”

Phoibe threw her arms around Kassandra’s neck, hugged her tightly, nodded hard.

Now that she’d finally said the words Kassandra felt as though a floodgate had opened. She never wanted to stop telling Phoibe how much she loved her. She couldn’t believe that she had spent so much time trying to keep at arms length something that suddenly seemed so obvious and natural. She cradled Phoibe’s head against her shoulder, turning her head to press kisses to her hair, rocking her gently.

The tender moment was eventually broken by a polite cough from the bottom of the hole. Kassandra and Phoibe drew apart a little, looked at each other.

“Should we rescue your other mater from that hole?” Kassandra gave a teasing smile.

“I think we should,” Phoibe wiped her eyes on her forearm.

“For what it’s worth, other mater thinks you should rescue her too,” came Kyra’s wry voice from the chamber below. “I haven’t even had my breakfast.”

Getting Kyra out proved a little more problematic. She’d busied herself while she waited for Phoibe and Kassandra to finish talking, by rolling up the lynx pelt, tying it with its own tail and she managed to toss the bundle high enough for Kassandra to catch.

“It looks…” she began.

“Kassandra!” Kyra warned. “If you choose to unwrap that now to start admiring it, I am going to jump up there unaided and throttle you with my bare hands. Some of us are in a cold, dark hole remember, and I’m pretty sure there are scorpions under that altar thing. You know how I feel about scorpions.”

“She doesn’t like them” Kassandra stage whispered to Phoibe, who was laughing a little now. “All right, my treasure, jump and grab hold of my arm,” she leaned over.

No matter how high Kyra jumped, they couldn’t quite meet each other’s arms.

“Oh damn it,” Kyra sighed. “Kassandra just unwrap your perizoma and lower it down, you can haul me up with that.”

“Ah…” Kassandra realised the flaw in the plan. She looked apologetically over the edge.

Kyra looked back for a long minute. Phoibe glanced down at Kassandra’s ass, raised her eyebrows.

“Seriously?” Kyra sighed.

“We were in a hurry,” Kassandra shrugged.

“I don’t believe this,” Kyra muttered to herself, hauling up the skirt of her chiton and grumpily
unwinding her own perizoma. “Don’t think for a minute that I am ever going to let you forget this. “ she called up, looking about for something with a bit of weight to tie to one end of the cloth. “Either of you!” she heard muffled laughter from above, she shook her head smiling despite herself.

By one end of the altar she spotted a dusty scroll, wound about a surprisingly ornate wooden core. Keeping a weather eye out for scorpions, she picked it up, shook off some spider webs and tested the weight and length in her hand. Perfect. Tying one end of the cloth about the middle of it, she went back to the gradually reducing patch of sunlight below the hole.

“Right,” she swung the scroll. “Get ready to catch,” her first throw went dismally wide, hitting the edge of the hole and falling back. She heard Phoibe and Kassandra burst into helpless laughter but didn’t have the heart to begrudge them the release.


Kyra was laughing now, shaking her head, unable to be annoyed with them.

“It’s very inconvenient that I am stuck down here,” she called. “Because I don’t think I have ever loved either of you more than I do at this moment!”

“Well, we’d better get you out of there then you can show us,” Kassandra wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Don’t start that when neither of you have any underwear on, please,” Phoibe lay down next to her and peered over the edge. “Throw it Kyra, I’ll catch it, I’m good at catching, honest. Better than Kassandra!”

“Hey!” Kassandra protested as Kyra launched a perfect throw, right into Phoibe’s outstretched hand.

“Told you,” she grinned, handing it over. Kassandra untied the cloth and tossed the scroll to Phoibe, before wrapping a length of the cloth around her forearm and lowering the rest to Kyra.

“Do not drop me,” she warned with a smile, grabbing on tightly as Kassandra hauled her up, reaching out to clasp her hand the instant she was within reach.

“Never,” Kassandra breathed, slipping an arm under her shoulders and lifting her onto solid ground. “Never,” she pulled her close and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. “We should get home, no?”

“I think we should yes,” Kyra nosed at her jaw teasingly. “You’ve had a very busy morning, all this heavy lifting,” she whispered softly in her ear, “and becoming a mother.”

“What’s this then?” Phoibe interrupted.

They looked over. She was sitting with the dusty scroll unwound on her lap. “This is the weirdest writing I’ve ever seen. Can I have this Kyra? I want to show it to Dion.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Once again the awesome fishbone76 has graced the story with a perfect illustration. What a genuinely lovely day for working the very last nerve of your wife's PA
And again, check out Until We Meet Again if you haven't already, because not only is it a compelling story but...the pictures!

On returning to the villa, Kyra summoned a healer for Phoibe, and Kassandra sent the lynx pelt to the tanner.

“What will you do with it?” she asked, as she sat by Phoibe’s side, holding her hand, distracting her from the healer’s work. “Okeanos already has a pelt from you.”

“I don’t know yet,” Phoibe flinched a little, did her best to hide it. “I haven’t decided. It’s bigger than I thought it was going to be.”

“It’s magnificent Phoibe,” Kassandra gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I hope you’re proud of yourself, because you should be, There’s no hurry anyway, it isn’t going anywhere. What are you going to do this afternoon? Rest that leg?”

“Kind of,” Phoibe looked down as the healer finished and patted her leg with finality. “Show that scroll to Dion I think.”

“There you go little one,” the healer began to gather up her tools. “You will have a scar I’m afraid, but it will give you an opportunity to impress people with the tale of your bold adventures.”

“Don’t worry Phoibe,” Kassandra gave her shoulder a squeeze and got up. “Girls love scars,” she grinned. “I mean...people...people love scars. That is, I’m sure boys love them too.”

Phoibe laughed, stood up, bent and stretched her leg experimentally.

“Stop fishing, Kassandra,” she shook her head. “I haven’t decided about that yet either.”

“Who says you have to decide?” the healer gave her a wink as she tucked her bag under her arm. “I’m off to report to the archon. If that leg gets swollen or red, call me back.”

Phoibe and Kassandra watched her leave, then shared a glance.

“Well!” Phoibe shrugged. “Anyway....I’m going to see Dion. See if he can work out what this scroll is all about, it’s weird looking, no?”

Kassandra couldn’t really share her enthusiasm. It was odd certainly, strange little drawings peppered the margins and the recognisable writing was interspersed with peculiar symbols, but it was far from the strangest thing she’d ever seen. Nevertheless Phoibe was clearly intrigued, and it would take her mind off her leg she thought, as she watched her go to find her tutor, limping only slightly now.
That night they lay in bed, Kyra curled up in Kassandra’s arms, her head resting on her chest.

“How are you feeling?” she asked quietly.

“Feeling?” Kassandra glanced down, stroking Kyra’s hair. “I feel good, why do you ask?”

“I don’t mean right now,” Kyra laughed. “About today? I heard you and Phoibe talking...while I was waiting for rescue,” she teased.

Kassandra was quiet for a while and Kyra’s heart was beginning to sink at the thought that maybe her new found emotional eloquence had been a temporary side effect of the shock of finding Phoibe injured.

“I still feel good,” she said at last, voice quiet and thoughtful. “It feels...right somehow?”

“That’s because it is right,” Kyra traced lazy circles on Kassandra’s flank. “You’ve been her mater in everything but name for a long time now, you just didn’t want to accept it.”

“You’re right,” Kassandra nodded. “I’ve not been very fair to her perhaps.”

“Don’t start feeling guilty,” Kyra shook her head. “You’ve always been there for her, and she might have called you sister, but it was evident to anyone with eyes to see, how she really felt about you. And how you felt about her, for that matter. You just had to wait till it felt right.”

“Well now it does,” Kassandra agreed. “I suppose I didn’t really want to feel like I was, getting older, growing up. I never wanted any of that, the settling down, till I met you,” she raised her head from the pillow, looked down at Kyra.

“If you’d told me five years ago that I could be happy, settled in one place, with one woman, not dancing with death every day, I would have laughed in their face. But...well, it’s still scary at times, scarier than a gorgon, but the days when I feel like I ought to take the Adrestia and set out, just see where she takes me? They’re fewer and fewer all the time.”

“I’m going to pretend that you didn’t just say that I am scarier than a gorgon,” Kyra laughed fondly. “And, don’t worry Kassandra, motherhood won’t change you so much. You’re still a dashing adventurer,” she teased.

“In fact,” she raised herself on one elbow, to look at Kassandra’s face. “Today? That was perhaps the bravest thing I have seen you do. Far braver than facing a lion. And for what it’s worth, it was also very, very sexy.”

Kassandra gave a dismissive snort, but Kyra put her fingers against her lips, stopped her.

“I’m not teasing, Kassandra,” she shook her head. “You’ve never seemed more desirable to me than you did today. And, believe me,” she decided to ease Kassandra’s evident awkwardness a little, “that’s saying something because your default state is “very desirable indeed”. There’s no need to worry, settling down hasn’t neutered you,” she bent to kiss her, before sinking back down into her embrace, snuggling close and nuzzling her head against Kassandra’s chest.
The following morning Kassandra decided to follow through on her new resolution and asked Kyra if she could sit in on her morning meetings. Kyra’s surprise was immediately chased by delight.

Yesterday had thrown everything off routine but Savina had evidently stepped up and taken charge. She’d dealt with business in Kyra’s absence as well as she could but didn’t have the authority to make any final decisions about things. Consequently the morning was filled with her reporting on yesterday’s business.

Kassandra had entered the room with the best will in the world, but quite quickly found herself flagging, her attention wandering. Gods, this was worse than fighting a lion, how did Kyra do this, day in, day out?. She shook her head, forced herself to return to the moment, actually listen to what was being said.

“Send a guard,” Kyra was saying, “In fact, let’s send two, have them patrol after dark for the next couple of nights, every other night for a few days after that. A more visible presence should calm things down, I don’t want to be heavy handed about the taverna, it brings in drachmae and sailors do need somewhere to blow off steam, but not at the expense of public safety.”

Damn, thought Kassandra, that sounded as though it was something she could actually have got involved with. Maybe she would check with the guard captain later, see if he needed any extra muscle?

What was this now? Savina seemed to be producing a visual aid for the next thing. Kassandra perked up a little.
“Oh! What’s that?” Kyra’s interest also seemed piqued by the addition of a prop.

Savina was holding a small, stoppered ceramic vial.

“Nomiki left it for you,” she named a marginally dodgy local businessman. “It’s apparently a sample of some sort of exotic oil that he wishes to import.” she popped the stopper and sniffed experimentally. Her expression changed immediately from skepticism to approval. “Oh it smells lovely actually!” clearly she hadn’t been expecting much from Nomiki.

She approached closer and handed the vial to Kyra.


Kassandra knew what it was going to be before she touched the vial. The scent of it had already reached her, in fact she’d known what it was from the moment Savina popped the stopper. She had a remarkably acute sense of smell, and she’d never forget this particular scent.

She tilted the bottle, let a small amount slip onto her fingertips before handing it back. The smooth, rich scent only intensified as she rubbed her fingers slowly together, coating them with the thick oil. This was just as she remembered it, in fact if anything it was a better quality that the last she’d encountered. Thick and unctuous, even the tiny amount she’d dispensed was enough to slick her fingers and thumb, and they already felt softer. She brought them to her nose, breathed in the scent of the past.

“Gorgeous,” she whispered.

Savina and Kyra were both watching this performance. Kyra rolled her eyes a little but Savina was standing wide eyed and open mouthed, a soft blush rising.

“What is this remarkable substance?” Kyra sighed, glanced over at Savina. “Savina!” she cleared her throat.

“Ey? “ she returned to the room, flushed hotly. ”What? I mean I beg your pardon Archon, I ...I missed what you were…” she drifted again. Kassandra was massaging the oil into her hands now with evident pleasure.

Kyra followed her gaze, rolled her eyes again.

“Kassandra!” she got her attention. “Stop that!”

“But, it’s what it’s good for,” Kassandra protested. She glanced up, caught Savina’s expression, realised what she’d been doing, grinned a little.

“I mean, amongst other things,” she explained. “You can cook with it too, it tastes wonderful actually,” she licked her fingers suggestively. There was a clatter as Savina dropped the stopper and it rolled under Kyra’s desk.

“Oh, damn, I’m sorry, so sorry Archon, I do apologize, just, if you would, er, excuse me I’ll just get that,” she got to her knees and put her head and shoulders under the desk. Kyra took the opportunity to catch Kassandra’s eye.

“You stop that! Right now!” she hissed quietly.

“What?” Kassandra feigned innocence. “It is lovely, I swear,” she held out a finger for Kyra to sample.
“Don’t make me have to put you outside after I spent all this time getting you in here,” Kyra frowned. “Gods, what was that?”

Everything rattled a little as Savina gave a small exclamation and clearly banged her head quite hard getting up from below the desk.

“Savina! Are you all right?” Kyra watched as she got to her feet, rubbing the back of her head ruefully, but looking at something in her right hand. It was a fine mid blue...robe?

“Oh shit,” Kyra thought. “I didn’t pick up my robe the other night.”

Savina had shaken it out and quickly realised what it was. She looked from the robe, to the desk, from the desk back to the robe, from the robe to Kyra, from Kyra to Kassandra’s shameless grin. She’d been sitting at that desk herself just yesterday she thought, blushing hotly now, the robe slipped from her fingers, she bent quickly to retrieve it.

“So that’s where it got to,” Kassandra chuckled. “Well found Savina, ooh mind your head, sweet.”

“I, er..it..er...your...robe...Archon,” Savina held it out in a shaky hand, her gaze kept drifting to the floor by the desk. Some very distracting images were forming.

“Thank you so much Savina,” Kyra maintained perfect composure, took the robe and folded it loosely.

“If you could be so good?” she held it out towards Kassandra.

“I think we’ve already established that I can , “ she grinned wolfishly, waggled her eyebrows.

“Take it off my hands, would you, please?” Kyra sighed.

“Well it won’t be as much fun as taking it off the rest of your body, my love, but…”

There was a rattle as Savina dropped the stopper again. It was instantly followed by a rap on the door.

“Oh thank Zeus!” Kyra sighed, pushing the robe into Kassandra’s hands. “Come in! Please!”

The door opened slowly and Phoibe’s head peeped round.

“I’m so sorry to disturb you Archon,” she began politely.

“You’re not disturbing us at all,” Kyra smiled, waving in. “Unlike your mater,” she added in a low tone. “How may I help you?”

Phoibe stepped inside and closed the door.

“Good morning Savina, how nice to see you,” she smiled. “Are you well? You look a little bit flushed?”

“I’m hot,” Savina smiled weakly.

“Indeed!” Kassandra purred.

Kyra’s eye roll as she punched Kassandra’s arm, was of epic proportions.

“It’s hot,” Savina corrected. “Don’t you think it’s hot today? And how are you Phoibe? How is that leg? I understand that you killed a huge lynx yesterday? I look forward to seeing the fur when it’s
“There was a lot to be going on with there, Phoibe thought. She decided to settle for the simplest option.

“I’m quite well Savina, my leg feels a bit stiff but I’m sure it will be better in a couple of days, thank you for asking,” she looked towards Kyra who was smiling gratefully. “The priestess wants to see Kassandra, right away.”

“Priestess?” Kassandra frowned. “What priestess?”

“Which priestess?” Phoibe suggested.

“That’s what I said,” Kassandra frowned, puzzled.

“Which priestess wishes to see Kassandra?” Kyra intervened, chuckling.


“Oh yes!” Kassandra smiled, enlightened. “What does she want with me?”

“I’ve no idea,” Phoibe shrugged. “Dion came running in this morning all of a dither and said Ophelia wants to see you, and sharpish. He didn’t say “sharpish” obviously, but that’s the gist of it.”

“Perhaps she’s concerned about your eternal destination, my misthios,” Kyra smiled. “You had better go see.”

“It’s a bit late in the day to start worrying about that,” Kassandra muttered, following Phoibe to the door.

“It’s never too late,” Kyra called. “And take some wine with you, decent stuff, lubricate the wheels!”
“Ah this smells like the good stuff,” Kassandra was a little surprised at the speed with which Ophelia unstoppered the amphora she gave her. She was half expecting her to take a swig from the neck.

“Come, come, come,” the tiny, hunched woman craned her neck to look at Kassandra. “By the gods you’re a big one aren’t you? I’ve only seen you from a distance of course. Never see you in temple?” she cast a disconcertingly clear eye at her.

“Well, no...I don’t actually...attend all that frequently,” Kassandra shuffled a little.

“No, I know you don’t. I just said so, didn’t !?” Ophelia, handed the amphora back to Kassandra, who took it, confused.

“Carry it for me, I’m not as strong as I was and I was never as strong as you,” she shook the amphora encouragingly. “Come on. Bend down while you’re about it.”

“What?” Kassandra took the amphora in one hand. This had already been a long day, and it only looked like getting longer.

“Bend down,” Ophelia repeated, slowly. “It’s obvious she doesn’t keep you around for your brains eh?”

It was probably blasphemy to smack a priestess in the nose, no? Kassandra wondered. It sounded like the sort of thing that would be blasphemous.

She bent down to look Ophelia in the face. As the old woman’s head only came up to just above Kassandra’s waist, it was not a comfortable exchange from her side of things.

Ophelia eyed her sharply. It seemed to go on for ages. Certainly long enough for the muscles of Kassandra’s thighs to begin to burn, from the half squat she’d been forced to adopt.

She was right on the verge of asking her if she’d seen enough, when the priestess spoke.

“Yes, yes, I can understand it, now I’ve seen you up close, get up now, I don’t need you right in my face anymore,” she waved a knotty hand at Kassandra. “You’re a handsome specimen, if you like that kind of thing. Extraordinary eyes, extraordinary,” she said the last words almost to herself.

It was a long way from the most impressive compliment Kassandra had ever received, in fact she wasn’t entirely sure that any of that actually had been a compliment.

“Come on now,” Ophelia turned slowly. “Take me to my room,” she held out a hand. “Oh don’t look so worried! I, personally, do not like that kind of thing. You’re safe enough.”

“Well, no, I didn’t for a moment think,” Kassandra shook her head. “You are a priestess of Artemis after all.”

“I’m a what?” Ophelia cocked her head. “You’ll have to speak up you’re on my bad side.”

“I’ve been on your bad side since I walked in, I think,” Kassandra muttered. “YOU’RE A PRIESTESS OF ARTEMIS!” she half yelled.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Ophelia looked at her like she’d taken leave of her senses. “Believe me, I know. I’ve been here long enough. My time is getting shorter with every day, don’t waste it telling me
things that I already know. No, definitely not for her brains,” she said to herself.

“Would it be expecting too much to…” Kassandra began.

“Take my arm, girl,” Ophelia held out a stick thin limb. “I’m not as steady as I once was, let’s get somewhere more private for what I have to discuss.”

For half of the journey to Ophelia’s room, Kassandra was contemplating just tucking her under one arm and asking for directions.

By the time they entered, the old woman closing the door behind them with quiet finality, her lower back was aching from shuffling along half bent all the way.

“Pour me some wine, misthios,” Ophelia shuffled about lighting candles and lamps. The room was warm, it smelled of wine, candle wax and some sort of incense. It was pleasant actually Kassandra thought, looking for a cup. There was a selection, most of which had a half inch of wine in the bottom. She was loathe to pour Kyra’s good wine into any of them.

“Oh don’t be so precious,” Ophelia snatched the cup Kassandra was holding and eyeing dubiously. She tossed the dregs into the fire where they hissed and spat. “There you go, fill her up.”

Kassandra did as instructed and watched as Ophelia took a seat at a low, cluttered table. The surface was full of unwound scrolls, scraps of parchment, wax tablets and styli, along with the predictable assortment of wine cups. On top of all this lay the scroll that Phoibe had found. She walked over and gave Ophelia the cup.

“Ahh,” she raised it and gave Kassandra a gap toothed grin. “To the very good health of our beloved Archon, may the gods smile on her every endeavour. There’s some water over there if you’re thirsty, misthios. You don’t need any of this eh? I’m sure you’re sipping the Archon’s vintage at your pleasure, no?” she cackled suggestively.

What was the penalty for blasphemy again? Kassandra wondered.

“Sit down, sit down, don’t loom like that,” Ophelia indicated the tiniest stool Kassandra had ever seen.

“I think I’ll stand,” Kassandra decided.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Ophelia took a gulp from the cup, swallowed and groaned appreciatively. “Ah, that’s good. Fill me up. You’re making me nervous towering over me like that, and you’re in my light, get on the stool and stop looming, you’re impressing no one.”

Kassandra pulled out the stool, with the tip of her boot and somehow managed to fold herself up enough to perch on it, knees up to her chest.

Ophelia drained the second cup of wine and held it out for a refill.

“Do you think we should get to why I’m here now?” Kassandra withheld the amphora, a little concerned that Ophelia was going to end up under the table before she got to the point. Ophelia scowled impressively, shook her empty cup under Kassandra’s nose.

“We’ll get to it, when I say we get to it,” she pursed her lips. “Fill!”

Kassandra sighed, did as she was told. She should have brought two amphorae she realised.
Ophelia took another swig, sighed appreciatively, put the cup down with a dull clink.

“This!” she said at last, and tapped Phoibe’s scroll with a yellow fingernail. “Where did you get it?”

“The scroll?” Kassandra frowned. That was what this was all about? The damn scroll!

“Yes the scroll!” Ophelia snapped. “What did I say about wasting my time?”

“A hole in the ground!” Kassandra snapped back impulsively.

“Right. Get out,” Ophelia indicated the door. “If you’re just going to be obtuse and uncooperative you can leave. Perhaps the Archon can send me someone a little more mature to speak with.” She began to roll up the scroll.

“Look, you summoned me!” Kassandra tried to keep the edge out of her voice. “I was busy with…town business and you dragged me over here to be your cup filler and perch on a fucking toadstool!”

“Don’t curse in the temple!” Ophelia hissed. “I’m beginning to wonder just what the Archon does see in you. She’s an intelligent woman. There must be more to you than meets the eye? So why don’t you show me? Whatever you were doing and wherever you were doing it, you stumbled on something remarkable.”

Kassandra had been bracing herself to try and get up off the stool, she relaxed back down at this.

“Remarkable, how?” she watched as Ophelia began to carefully unroll it again.


“I was serious, “Kassandra did her best to lean forward and see what was on the scroll. Ophelia took another sip, Kassandra filled her cup again. “It did sort of come from a hole in the ground, a strange little room full of pots and an…an altar type thing?”

“Good girl,” Ophelia smiled, gave her an arch look. “Now we’re talking. What else was in there? Any more scrolls? You said pottery? Any little figures, totems, amulets?”

“Well,”Kassandra admitted. “I didn’t really see. I didn’t go down there, Kyra, the Archon did, and Phoibe of course.”

“Then why am I wasting my time with you, you great oaf?” Ophelia slammed down the cup, splashing a little wine on the table. “What did I say about wasting my time?!”

“Hey, look!” Kassandra had had about enough of this, the damn stool was making her leg cramp. “YOU summoned ME, remember?”

“Of course I did!” Ophelia shouted. “It never occurred to me that the Archon herself would go scrabbling about in the sort of out of the way, dangerous places you’d find something like this,” she stabbed a gnarly finger at the scroll. “That’s what she has you for surely? Why would she bark herself when she has a big fierce dog to do it for her? Leave now, you’re no use to me.”

Kassandra hadn’t come here and put up with all this nonsense to not find out what was so special about that bloody scroll. She leaned forward as well as she could.

“Listen Ophelia,” she said calmly. “If you tell me what’s so remarkable about that scroll, I will personally bring the Archon herself here to speak with you. Right here.”
This wasn’t quite such a concession as Kassandra managed to make it sound. She’d tried the other option out in her head already. Taking Ophelia to Kyra would take the best part of the day, she’d decided, not to mention the amount of wine she could consume whilst actually on the premises. It would be much quicker and cheaper to bring Kyra here.

“Hmm,” Ophelia considered, sipped more wine, Kassandra filled her cup, smiled ingratiatingly. “Here, you say? Well I suppose you can do that if anyone can. Move a bit closer then.”

Kassandra shuffled the stool closer, with more than a little difficulty. Ophelia turned the scroll so that she had a better view.

“This is old,” she began. “Very old. Yes, even older than me,” she read Kassandra’s mind and smiled. “Old as dirt! There were gods before the gods, you know,” she whispered conspiratorially.

Was that something that a priestess of Artemis really ought to be saying, Kassandra wondered? It smelt a bit sacrilegious even to her.

“When people cease to believe, gods die,” Ophelia said, running a finger along the edge of the scroll. “They die lonely deaths. girl.”

“Can they be brought back to life?” Kassandra asked quietly, after a few moments consideration.

Ophelia looked up at her sharply.

“That’s a very interesting question, misthios,” she smiled. “And not one that I would have expected from you. I’m beginning to understand what the Archon sees in you after all.”

“Do you know the answer?” Kassandra arched an eyebrow.

“Of course not,” Ophelia laughed heartily. “Isn’t it exciting?”

“So,” Kassandra sighed, she wasn’t sure what she’d expected. “You’re saying that this scroll is something to do with some “dead god”?”

“Some forgotten god, certainly,” Ophelia nodded. “A crafty god it seems, a wish granting god.”

“What’s crafty about that?” Kassandra shrugged. “Wouldn’t a wish granting god be useful?”

“Depends what you wish for, misthios,” Ophelia pointed out.

“You could wish for anything?” Kassandra frowned.

“No, not anything,” Ophelia shook her head. “See this symbol here, that’s its name, don’t ask me how to pronounce it. I doubt anyone knows any more. They grant the gift of,” she squinted at a line of strange markings, “corporeal transformation. Temporarily of course.”

“Corporeal?” Kassandra had a vague idea what it meant.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Ophelia chuckled. “Bodily change, perform the ritual, change your body.”

“That seems oddly specific,” Kassandra frowned.

“Perhaps that’s why they were forgotten,” Ophelia smiled, holding out her cup. Kassandra refilled it, and considered the options.

“So, is it like an “I wish to be two feet taller” alteration? “ she asked thoughtfully. “Or an “I wish I
had another pair of hands”, type thing?”

“I don’t see why you’d want to be any taller, you’re inconvenient as it is,” Ophelia sipped. “I understand why you might want extra hands, mind you,” she raised an eyebrow, smiled archly. “I’m not entirely clear on the details, it’s slow work translating this, you know.”

“Could you wish for a pair of wings?” Kassandra asked, curiously.

“You could wish of course,” Ophelia shrugged. “I don’t know that you’d get them. The text is a bit dense at this point, the pictures are...intriguing though. See this here,” she tapped her finger at a rough drawing of a human figure. “The general body shape of a woman, no?”

Kassandra squinted. Despite all the candles and lamps, it was still difficult to make out details. The whole thing was pretty faded also, and there were patches where the parchment had worn away, entire words were probably missing, she realised. Ophelia had a job on.

“Yes, sort of, the hips maybe, and breasts I think,” she peered harder.

“But also,” Ophelia tapped a fingernail at the drawing’s hips. “The sex organs of a man, no?”

Kassandra leaned so far forward the stool began to tip. The image was very faded and smudged.

“I don’t know?” she looked up at Ophelia.

“I know your appetites run in other directions child, but surely you…” she began.

“I know what they look like!” Kassandra snapped. “I mean I don’t know because it’s so smudged. It’s hard to make out.”

“Ah, I see,” Ophelia nodded. “See all this here?” she outlined a block of tiny text surrounded by an ornate border, clearly drawn by a more sophisticated hand than the human figure. “This is all somehow related. I suspect it’s the details of the ritual. But it’s very small, no? And many unfamiliar characters.”

“Can you translate it, do you think?” Kassandra sat back.

“I can translate anything girl,” Ophelia beamed confidently. “Given enough time...and wine,” she eyed the almost empty amphora meaningfully. “You could bring a little more, along with our beloved Archon, no?”

“I imagine so,” Kassandra rubbed the back of her neck thoughtfully. There was...something rattling around in her brain now, somehow the ridiculous scroll seemed more important than it had done previously, but she couldn’t think why just yet. Dead gods, forgotten rituals, transforming bodies. It was all nonsense surely?

“When can you have the Archon here?” Ophelia tilted her head. “Later today perhaps? Along with another amphora of this excellent vintage of course?”

“I..I could probably manage that,” Kassandra got to her feet, with some difficulty, stretched her legs, groaned. “Tomorrow if not. I assume you’ll still be here?”

“Unless I cross the Styx unexpectedly,” Ophelia chuckled. “Where else would a priestess of Artemis be?”
Chapter 11

As she strolled back to the villa, Kassandra tried to work out just why she was suddenly so interested in the contents of a scroll that she hadn’t given a second thought to until a half hour ago. Something about what Ophelia had explained was tickling at the back of her mind, but she couldn’t figure out how to scratch it yet. Perhaps when Kyra went to speak with her?

Suddenly it was very important to her that Kyra go meet with Ophelia as soon as she could. She was a little disappointed therefore to find that Kyra was still deep in consultation with Savina. Also Aegeus had returned from whatever negotiations Kyra had sent him on a few days previously, bringing Praxos with him. Kassandra was glad to see that Kyra’s friend and confidant had returned but she suspected that it also meant Kyra was going to be tied up in the details of their trip for some time.

She waited and paced. Then paced some more. Phoibe came to see if she wanted to go fish for crabs for Cymone. Kassandra declined, she wanted to be here ready when Kyra emerged.

She waited and paced. Cymone came to find her to ask if she wanted something to eat, she hadn’t been in the kitchen since breakfast, it was most unlike her. Kassandra again declined. She should be hungry by now, but she wasn’t, her stomach was in knots.

She waited and paced. Phoibe returned with a basket heaving with crabs. Kassandra admired them, made a show of enthusiasm that she didn’t really feel. She couldn’t concentrate. What was Ophelia doing now, she thought? How much further had she got in her translation? Should she have gone back with the wine when she realised how long Kyra was going to be? Should she go get the wine now? But what if Kyra finished her meeting while Kassandra was away and someone else collared her, dragged her away for another hour?

She waited and paced. The sun began to set and still she waited. She sat down and waited. She nodded off a little, and waited.

Suddenly the door burst open and Kassandra jolted awake to the sound of laughter.

“It could not have gone any better if we had planned it,” Praxos was grinning and slapping Aegeus on the shoulder. “This man ran rings around them, they still don’t know that the deal is very much in our favour, I don’t think. Kassandra!” he spotted her getting to her feet.

“How are you, my friend?” she allowed him to wrap her in an enormous bear hug. Their relationship had struggled through some rocky patches in its earlier days, Praxos’ love and loyalty would always belong to Kyra and the three of them knew that, but so long as Kassandra treated Kyra well Praxos had her back, she knew.

“Well, very well,” he grinned. “I understand young Phoibe has proven herself a mighty hunter in my absence?”

“Indeed she has,” Kassandra smiled proudly, “ and she has her first hunting scar to prove it.”

“Then I am going to find her,” he beamed. “I want to hear the tale of her exploits from her own lips. If you have no further need of me Kyra?”

“No, no,” she shook her head. “It has been a long and tiring day. Thank you all for your hard work. Till tomorrow.”
She looked over at Kassandra with a puzzled expression.

"Why are you waiting out here, my love?" she inclined her head for a kiss as the others left. "You should have come in and listened to how well Aegeus negotiated our new import taxes. We will be able to expand the school a little I am sure. Now will be the time to do it, as we are experiencing a little spike in the population, no?" she teased. "Are you all right? You seem very preoccupied? By the way that oil is from something called a co-co-nut apparently, but I suspect you already knew that?"

"We need to go see Ophelia," Kassandra waited for her to draw breath, she was often a little excitable after successful business, perhaps it would work in Kassandra’s favour now.

"Of course, my love, we can go first thing tomorrow, it’s been a very long day, and I am hungry and a little headachy, but it has cleared my schedule for tomorrow," she took Kassandra’s arm. "What did she have to tell you that was so important?"

"No, Kyra, we need to go now," Kassandra gave her a pleading look. "I know you’ve had a long, busy day and the last thing that you want to do is go see a drunken old priestess at this time of night, but please Kyra."

"All right Kassandra," Kyra soothed, stroking her arm gently. "Just what did she say to you that has you so agitated?"

"It’s that scroll," Kassandra frowned, struggling to explain. "The one that you found, she’s translating it. Well she has translated a lot of it already, it’s something about a dead god, or a forgotten god, I’m not sure which, it can grant wishes or something, there’s a drawing of…"

"Kassandra, Kassandra, my sweet, calm yourself," Kyra had never seen her like this before, so agitated and confused and eager at the same time. She was right, this was the last thing Kyra felt like. She’d been looking forward to a cup of wine, something to eat, perhaps a warm bath and then to bed in Kassandra’s arms. It didn’t look like any of those things was on the cards now. But Kassandra was clearly disturbed about something and if Kyra could help her.

"Very well, my love," she stretched up and kissed her softly. "Let us go see this priestess."

"Really?" Kassandra looked disbelieving.

"Of course," Kyra stroked her cheek. "This is clearly important to you. Something she has said seems to have upset you, and if it will help for us to go speak with her together, then let’s go."

"Thank you," Kassandra pulled her close, kissed her hard and fast. "We need some wine first."

"I thought you had already taken wine?" Kyra followed her down the hallway.

"We need more," Kassandra shook her head. "Much more!"

"What a pleasure and an honour, Archon, to see you in my humble dwelling," Ophelia led Kyra over to the table. Standing next to it was a chair with armrests Kassandra noted.

"Please, please do sit," Ophelia urged Kyra to take it. "And a gift," she looked appreciatively at the two amphorae in Kassandra’s hands.

"Should I pour?" Kassandra sighed, looking around for a second chair, there was none, just the tiny

Kyra watched with barely contained amusement as Kassandra cautiously folded herself down onto the stool and, sighing, filled the offered cup.

“This scroll,” Kyra turned her attention to the table. “You have translated it?”

“Most of it,” Ophelia nodded, unrolling it a little further, edging her chair closer to Kyra’s.

“Kassandra said something about a dead god?” she frowned.

“That’s what I thought at first,” Ophelia swallowed a mouthful of wine. “But on closer inspection I think this symbol means guardian, the guardian of the transformation. Remember that figure I showed you earlier misthios, the one you weren’t sure about? Well there’s a very similar one further down,” she tapped the scroll. “Now look at this, see this symbol here? This sort of glyph? That has different meanings, seed, sprout, man, maybe others, it’s quite complex. And this here? Woman, earth...water? I’m not sure. But look,” she indicated the figure. “See Archon, see?”

Kyra peered closely, followed the path of Ophelia’s rather grubby fingernail.

“That’s the two together? No?” she raised her eyes, frowning. “But there’s something else too isn’t there?”

“Well spotted Archon,” Ophelia held out her cup to Kassandra. “Clearly she’s the brains of the outfit,” she grinned at her. “Thank you, thank you, even more delicious than the last you brought.”

“What is this third...glyph?” Kyra edged her chair closer to the table.

“Moon,” Ophelia drank deeply, smacked her lips appreciatively. “Moon cycle, more specifically. They all combine together to form this figure, see? Whoever created this scroll believed that if you performed this ritual,” she tapped the box of tiny text, “in the right place at the right time you would be able to somehow combine the sexes into one being. Fascinating no? Such a strange idea and yet, the instructions are actually quite specific. You need a ram or a ewe, depending on whether a man or a woman is performing the rite. For example, you misthios would need a ram, a white ram. The supplicant must sacrifice the beast to the guardian and if they are found worthy they bathe in the spring of transformation and until the time of the next full moon they are a miraculous combination of the sexes. Fascinating no?”

“Remarkable,” Kyra shook her head. “I’ve never heard of such a ritual. This is a very old scroll, no?”

“Old as dirt,” Kassandra supplied, filling Ophelia’s cup again.

“Indeed, misthios, I’m glad you were paying attention,” she grinned. “Very old. Who knows what other fascinating artefacts are still awaiting discovery in that underground chamber. What a window into the past may await discovery. I beg you Archon, send some men to bring me the other contents of the chamber. I am too old to go myself I’m afraid, but if they could be brought here?”

Kyra got to her feet and paced thoughtfully back and forth.

“I don’t suppose it would take all that many hands to clear the chamber,” she said, quietly, “three guards, and Dion as well of course, to make sure that nothing was mishandled do you think?” she
glanced at Ophelia.

“Indeed, he’s a good lad,” Ophelia nodded happily.

“Lad?” thought Kassandra. Dion wasn’t quite old enough to be her grandfather. How old was Ophelia? The project was clearly going ahead though, she could see Kyra costing it out in her head already. She looked over at the scroll.

“Does it say where this mysterious guardian and it’s...what...”spring”, was it? Does it say where they are? “ she asked, curiously.

“It says quite specifically,” Ophelia smiled. “It’s a strange artefact, so vague in some respects, so very detailed in others. Recognise this?” she unrolled a little further.

Kassandra leaned over and looked at a small but surprisingly well drawn map.


“I thought you’d be familiar with it,” Ophelia winked. “X marks the spot,” she tapped the parchment. “This is a fog shrouded isle that is only visible on the night of the full moon. I said it was detailed,” she saw Kassandra’s astonished expression. “It’s all here, very easy to translate too, not like some of the rest of it. Right here, the night of the full moon, no one but the supplicant may set foot on the shore, apart from the unfortunate sheep of course. You have to take your own sheep apparently,” she laughed. “The only life on the island is the guardian.”

“Does it say who the guardian is?” Kassandra frowned.

“Oh you’ll like this misthios,” Ophelia chuckled, she unrolled another inch of scroll. She’d definitely rehearsed this Kassandra thought wryly, the crafty old goat. She leaned over to look at what she’d revealed. “Recognise that?” Ophelia drained her cup.

“It’s a sphinx!” Kassandra exclaimed. “That’s a sphinx surely?”

“Certainly looks like it, no?” Ophelia agreed.

“But I thought you said this was very, very old?” Kyra looked over Kassandra’s shoulder.

“Indeed I did,” Ophelia held out her cup, Kassandra absently refilled it, scrutinizing the illustration, That was a sphinx all right. “Do you know how old sphinxes are Archon? I certainly don’t. But that’s clearly a sphinx. So I’m guessing you’re not the ideal person to go looking for the mysterious island, misthios,” she shook her head. “Because wherever there’s a sphinx there’s a riddle, no? Tricksy buggers.”

“Er, I can answer riddles!” Kassandra protested. Ophelia raised her eyebrows. “I’ve actually encountered a sphinx, and I’m still here to tell the tale!”

“Then perhaps you are just the person to find this strange island,” Ophelia smiled as though she’d won a bet.

“No one is going island hunting!” Kyra chimed in at this. “Lesbos is a good five days away for one thing.”

“Four on the Adrestia, with the wind on our side,” Kassandra said thoughtfully.

“And imagine the secrets such a place might reveal,” Ophelia whispered seductively. “Far more than
are contained in that chamber.”

“The chamber will take three guards an afternoon to clear,” Kyra protested. “This would be a two week round trip for a full crew.”

“Nine, ten days probably,” Kassandra was already considering the logistics.

Kyra rolled her eyes, took a couple of steps away from the table.

“No, Kassandra,” she folded her arms. “I will not permit it. If you find this supposed magic island, then there is going to be a sphinx on it. A presumably hungry sphinx who has spent who knows how long, contemplating what to do should anyone be foolish enough to set foot on their island.”

“I’ve dealt with a sphinx,” Kassandra turned to look at Kyra, her face hopeful and eager. “I’ll prepare well. Ophelia can help me think about what sort of riddles it’s likely to ask.”

“Oh moon riddles for certain, moon, change, water perhaps,” Ophelia nodded, patting Kassandra’s hand. “And once the sphinx is dealt with, you can explore the island at your leisure. Look for more glyphs like these. Pottery, and totems or…”

“Absolutely not!” Kyra snapped. “That is enough. Both of you! I will not permit this ridiculous endeavour.”

“I’ll use the Adrestia and my own crew,” Kassandra struggled to her feet, shook some feeling back into her legs. “There’ll be no money from the public purse, I swear.”

“That is not what I am concerned about!” Kyra was outraged. “You are not setting off on some ridiculous treasure hunt for a…a hidden island and a…magical transformation spring! I am the Archon, and you are my misthios. I need you here, beside me. I forbid it. You may have the chamber cleared Ophelia, be content with that.”

“But Kyra,” Kassandra pleaded, reaching for her hands. “Ophelia’s right. Imagine the secrets waiting to be discovered. What if there is a spring? Couldn’t the water have say, healing properties? If it can change bodies who’s to say what else it could do?”

Ophelia looked astonished and impressed, but she quickly recovered herself.

“A very good point misthios,” she nodded. “Think of it Archon. If you were the one to authorise the trip that recovered healing waters, imagine your…”

“Enough!” Kyra shouted. “That is enough from both of you. Don’t pretend for one moment that you care about healing waters Kassandra, you are aroused by the idea of battling a sphinx, fighting a monster. Well you have responsibilities now, you cannot go wandering off to unknown parts in search of adventure any more. I will not permit it!”

“It’s not unknown parts really,” Kassandra continued unwisely. “It’s right off the coast of Lesbos, you can probably see it from the shore when the moon is full.”

“No! Do not test me further, either of you!”

“Lest you forget Archon, I am an elder priestess of the Goddess Artemis,” Ophelia said stiffly. “You would do well to remember that when you speak.”

“Then you go searching for your hidden island!” Kyra snapped. “My wife will not be doing so.”
She turned on her heel and stormed out, slamming the door after her. Kassandra blinked. That was not quite how she had imagined the evening unfolding, she had to admit.

“Well she’s a fiery one and no mistake,” Ophelia said at last. “I can see what you see in her! A cup of wine misthios?”

Kassandra looked over, a shade disbelieving but, sure enough Ophelia had produced a second, reasonably clean cup from somewhere. She poured herself a healthy cupful and took a sip. It was very good indeed.

“There’s no so glum misthios, this is nothing you can’t handle,” Ophelia persuaded. “A woman who has bested a sphinx can certainly soothe an agitated wife, who is really only scared that you will be hurt on your adventure. It’s well within your abilities. Big handsome charmer like you. Give her a few minutes to cool down, then stride in, apologetic and reassuring. You understand that she’s worried, concerned for your safety, of course she is. But the knowledge! The knowledge that could be hidden there. That was an inspired idea, the healing waters. The Archon is a lover of knowledge, she’s devoted much time and money to the education of the children of the Silver Islands. You simply need to appeal to her love of knowledge. A little sweet talk, and it wouldn’t hurt to flash those extraordinary eyes at her, flex those arms too, that’s bound to…”

“Are you trying to tell me how to seduce my wife?” Kassandra raised an eyebrow.

“Pffhh” Ophelia snorted, “the very idea. What would I know of such things, a simple priestess of Artemis.”

A couple of cups of wine and a short stroll later, Kassandra arrived back at the villa. All was quiet and dark, apart from a light in the kitchen. She realised that she was ravenous. Kyra almost certainly hadn’t eaten today, she thought. She tended to get short tempered when she was hungry. Kassandra decided she could handle this. She went into the kitchen prepared to assemble a plate of food for Kyra, only to discover that Cymone had left a covered tray with two plates and a small jug of watered wine. Kassandra took a deep breath, picked up the tray and made for their bedroom.

Stopping outside to wrangle the tray onto one arm so that she could open the door, Kassandra heard quiet sobbing from inside. She felt a little sick. Here was Kyra weeping again, and once again Kassandra had been the cause of it. She wrestled the door open a little clumsily and walked in, kicking it closed behind her.

Kyra was lying on the bed, but she jolted upright at the sound, perhaps misinterpreting the force of the door closing as anger, rather than clumsiness.

“Sorry,” Kassandra smiled, cautiously. “I didn’t mean to slam it. My hands were full.”

“Kassandra, I am so sorry,” Kyra sobbed. “I had no right to speak to you like that, least of all in front of Ophelia, oh gods I must go and apologise to her tomorrow. She’s right of course. She is an elder priestess, and I spoke with such disrespect. And you, my beloved wife, I spoke to you like a mother chastising her child, can you ever forgive me?”

This was considerably easier than Kassandra could have possibly hoped. Sure enough Kyra had been hungry and tired, she reasoned, putting the tray on the table by the wall and walking to the bed.

“Kyra my treasure,” she sat down and held out her arms, inviting Kyra into her embrace. “True you did tell me off like a child, in front of a woman old enough to be my great, great, great...great grandmother, but honestly my actual mother has said far worse things...as you know, come to think
of it,” she stroked Kyra’s hair as she wept against her chest. “And as for Ophelia she’s as old as Olympus and was on the outside of most of two amphorae of very good wine when I left her. And she was still going, so I very much doubt she’ll be able to remember a word you said by morning.”

“I’m so sorry, Kassandra,” Kyra sniffed, hugging her tightly. “I don’t know what got into me, really.”

“It’s what didn’t,” Kassandra kissed her forehead softly. “You have worked too long and too hard today. And I know that you haven’t eaten since breakfast. I shouldn’t have dragged you to see Ophelia so late. There was nothing that couldn’t have waited until morning. Now, Cymone has left us something to eat. You’ll feel much better afterwards, then we can get into bed and you can get a good night’s sleep, you’ll feel much better in the morning.”

Kyra drew back a little, looked at Kassandra wonderingly.

Kassandra smiled teasingly. “I know. I’m being useful outside of the bedroom again, right? Well, we’re inside the bedroom obviously but I’m pretty sure Phoibe wasn’t talking about the room itself when she said it, no?”

“I think you’re right,” Kyra sniffed and mustered a smile. “And yes you are ...being thoroughly useful,” she nodded. “It’s just victory after victory for you at the moment,” she hugged her again.

Kassandra shrugged and grinned. “Come on now, no more crying, ” she lifted Kyra’s chin and kissed her softly. “Let’s go eat and you can tell me all about...export taxes?” she ventured.

“Import taxes,” Kyra corrected, “but that was a very good effort.”

Kyra had been hungry and exhausted. Kassandra watched with relief as she ate and her mood lifted. Climbing into bed later, Kyra curled up against Kassandra, rested her head on her chest and fell immediately to sleep.

Kassandra, on the other hand, lay awake most of the night staring at the ceiling and running over the day’s events in her head.

When Kyra woke the next morning, feeling much better, if a little embarrassed about her outburst, she was alone in bed. Sometimes when Kassandra had trouble sleeping she would go and sit or lie on the balcony and look at the stars. Kyra sat up and peered over. She wasn’t there. Getting out of bed, she noticed a piece of papyrus on the pillow beside her. It was a note in Kassandra’s neat, blocky, handwriting.

My sweet Kyra,

I have some errands to do today.

Forgive me for leaving without saying goodbye, but you were sleeping so peacefully I did not want to wake you.

I have asked Cymone to make sure that you eat and drink properly today. So when she comes with food for you, please accept it.

I have asked Phoibe and Praxos to take you fishing this afternoon. Phoibe is becoming a very good fisher-woman and you need to relax in the fresh air.

I will return before sundown. I promise.
I love you very much. With all my heart in fact.

Your loving wife,

Kassandra

Kyra struggled to make out the last couple of lines, her eyes were swimming with tears. It occurred to her that in this, as in so much else, once Kassandra actually set her mind to do something then she was pretty much unstoppable. Here she was going from stumbling emotional inarticulacy to leaving Kyra adorably unsophisticated love notes. She placed the note carefully in a drawer and began to get ready for the day.
Further inquiries revealed that beyond making the requests that she had mentioned in the note, no one knew what Kassandra was up to or where she had gone.

Truthfully Kyra had half expected Kassandra not to return before sundown. Expected her to have become entangled in whatever she had gone to do, perhaps she was wandering the island brooding over the events of the past couple of days. Perhaps she was venting some pent up energy by hunting and would return eventually, loaded with meat and skins.

But, to her relief, Kassandra strode in while the sun still shone brightly, she seemed in good humour, hugging everyone, asking how the day had gone, exclaiming over Phoibe’s impressive haul of fish, and consuming more than her fair share of them when they all sat to eat. But she was evasive about where she had been, what she had been up to and Kyra began to suspect that she knew what her wife had been doing.

Later, Kassandra made love to Kyra with tender concentration, heedless of her own pleasure, solely preoccupied with making Kyra pulse and tremble and sob Kassandra’s name over and over again, until at last she had to call “enough”. Had to pull Kassandra’s face and fingers away from her oversensitive clit and urge her up to lie against her. When she kissed Kassandra’s cheeks, and jaw, the point of her chin, her clever,relentless mouth she tasted everywhere of Kyra, and Kyra’s heart blazed with love for her.

They lay quietly for a while, Kyra lying in Kassandra’s embrace, head against her breast as she gently carded her fingers through Kyra’s hair. At last she heard Kassandra take a great breath and readied herself to listen.

“Kyra, there’s something I would like to talk about with you,” she said quietly, still stroking her hair, steadily, regular. “But I am not sure how to begin.”

“I know you were with Ophelia,” Kyra said calmly. She felt the rhythm of Kassandra’s hands stutter on hearing this. “No one told me,” she continued. “I just.. felt that was where you went. Tell me what you discussed. I’m calm, I promise I will listen Kassandra. No raised voices.”

“Very well,” Kassandra began, after a thoughtful pause. “I went to see her to find out if she had uncovered more details about the island and the ritual. I want to go and find that island Kyra.”

Kyra gave a sigh and closed her eyes, rested her hand on Kassandra’s chest, flat between her breasts, felt the beating of her heart, more rapid than usual.

“I know, my love,” she breathed. “And I wish you didn’t, but it’s not fair of me to expect otherwise. I knew when you came to me that you were an adventurer. And you have tried so hard my sweet, but it isn’t fair of me to try and chain you to the small world of island politics. How could I expect you to sit and listen to talk of trade tariffs when there’s a sphinx to kill. Ridiculous of me.”

Kassandra let her finish, then continued.

“No, you misunderstand me,” she said quietly. “I believe the island exists. I believe an ancient sphinx dwells there. I think I even believe that there is some sort of special spring there. I have seen so many strange things Kyra, a living, breathing man with the head of a bull. A woman with a head full of writhing serpents. Huge lumbering cyclops. Things that have no right to exist in the same world as your trade tariffs, and yet they do. They lived and breathed. I stood before a great sphinx once, its
breath stank like a charnel house but its voice was soft, and I watched the life fade from its strange eyes. I believe, Kyra.”

Kyra couldn’t find words. She forgot about all this sometimes. Too often. Forgot that she shared her bed with someone who was part myth herself. She nodded, encouraging Kassandra to continue.

“I don’t want to kill this sphinx,” Kassandra said softly. “It’s done me no harm. I want to talk with it. I want to ask it for a wish.”

There was a long silence, Kyra felt a painful lump in her throat, struggled to swallow. She felt like something was expected of her, some word from her before Kassandra could continue.

“What is your wish?” she managed at last, her voice sounded thick and strange to her.

“I want to bathe in the spring,” Kassandra said simply.

Kyra had expected that to be the answer, and yet she still felt stunned. Unexpected tears burned her eyes, ran onto Kassandra’s breast. She took a deep breath and then another, forced herself to calm her breathing, slow her pulse, ask the question that Kassandra was waiting to hear.

“Why, my love?” her voice was shaky but her words were clear enough. “Why would you want to do that?”

“You know why, Kyra, don’t you?” Kassandra breathed.

“I need to hear you say it,” Kyra’s hand trembled against Kassandra’s chest.

“I want to give you a baby,” Kassandra said quietly. “And this is a way to do it.”

She held Kyra as she cried, stroked her hair, murmured soothing nonsense to her, kissed her brow, pressed her close until she calmed.

“But so many things could go wrong,” Kyra said at last when she was calm enough to speak. “Even before you reach the island. You could be sunk by pirates.”

“Pirates and I have an understanding,” Kassandra smiled, thinking of Xenia’s colours still stowed on the Adrestia.

“A storm,” Kyra continued.

“Barnabas and Poseidon have an understanding,” Kassandra laughed softly.

“Then the sphinx,” Kyra looked up at her. “Because you bested one once, that doesn’t mean you will be able to do it again.”

“I won’t know if I don’t try,” Kassandra was still smiling.

“What if it’s all a trick? What if it doesn’t work?” Kyra looked into her remarkable eyes, still Kassandra smiled.

“Then we will be no worse off than we are now,” she said reasonably. “Except that I will have faced two sphinxes, and will never have to pay for a drink in a taverna again.”

Kyra hesitated before asking her final question. Took a deep breath.

“What if you don’t change back?”
Kassandra wasn’t smiling now. She frowned thoughtfully, considering.

“Sphinx are tricky, true enough, but they aren’t cheats I don’t think,” she said quietly. “If it tells me that I will change back, then I choose to believe it.”

“I can’t believe that we’re hingeing this on the trustworthiness of a sphinx,” Kyra sighed. “If I didn’t change back, would that be the end of the world?” Kassandra asked softly. “If we got a child out of it? Would you…” she swallowed, seeming uncertain for the first time since they’d started this ridiculous conversation. “Would you no longer love me? No longer desire me?”

“No, no,” Kyra raised herself on an elbow, looked down at Kassandra’s anxious expression. “Gods no, my love,” she stroked Kassandra’s jaw with trembling fingertips. “I will love you forever, no matter how you look. I would recognise you anywhere, always. If we lived through eons and wandered forever, I would recognise the soul of you Kassandra, however you came to me, man, woman, young, old, always you Kassandra, always you,” she pressed a shivering kiss to her lips. “You are the other half of my soul, my misthios,” she breathed the words into her mouth. “Always.”

“Lesbos?” Barnabas squinted at her. “Again?”

“Does Kyra know about this?” Odessa eyed the map, looked up and gave Kassandra an arch smile. “She doesn’t strike me as the type who’s going to be on board with her wife taking a vacation on the isle of Sapphic love.”

“Odessa,” Barnabas chided. “A little respect for the commander, if you please.” He gave Kassandra a dubious glance. “All the same Kassandra, does Kyra know what you’re doing?”

“Indeed,” Kassandra laughed. “And one of the things we won’t be doing is going ashore on Lesbos.”

“Pffft,” Odessa pouted. “Well that seems like a wasted opportunity.”

“Allow me to correct myself,” Kassandra raised an eyebrow. “I will not be going ashore on Lesbos. You may all do as you wish while I am about my business… here!” she announced, dramatically. She’d had a larger scale copy of the scroll’s map drawn up. Now she tapped the location of the mysterious island with a finger.

“I will go ashore here,” she explained. “Alone. Well, alone with a ram…”

Odessa and Barnabas both gave her a suspicious look at that.

“Well that seems downright perverse when Lesbos is right there!” Odessa tapped the map. “But I’m not one to judge.”

“Odessa,” Barnabas was scandalized. “You are very fortunate that Kassandra is as easy going as she is. Your tongue runs away with you at times.”

“Oh, you don’t want to believe everything Thyia says, you know,” she smiled archly.

“If we can get back to it,” Kassandra reined them in. “Time is important here. Barnabas, I’m relying on you. We must be here, right here, on the night of the full moon. No later. I can’t tell you how important this is. We can be there early. But we cannot arrive late.”
“Very well Kassandra,” he shrugged. “If we had to arrive on the night of the full moon, that might be a little more challenging, but if we can get there a day early, that’s easy enough.”

“If I may?” Odessa cleared her throat theatrically. “Where exactly are you going ashore oh mighty commander? Because there’s nothing there, just a…fluffy smudge?”

“There’s an island there,” Kassandra realised she was going to have to share at least some of the details. “It’s only visible on the night of the full moon. That’s why we must be there on the…”

“Just a minute,” Odessa interrupted, held up a finger. “So, the rest of the time, does this “island” just cease to exist? Or is it invisible? If we sail in that direction the day after, is there nothing there, or do we bump into an invisible island? Or what? What happens if you’re still on the island the next day? Do you stay there until the next full moon? Or does it just disappear under you and you plop into the water, take your chances with the sharks?” she looked from Barnabas to Kassandra.

Kassandra could feel all three eyes looking expectantly at her as she pretended interest in the map.

“Those are all very good questions Odessa,” she nodded. “And I will get back to you with the answers when I have done a little...additional research.”

“Additional research?” Barnabas’ eyebrows shot up. “Kassandra is this a dangerous mission? What exactly is on this island? Why do you have to go alone? What happens if you take some back up with you?”

“Those are good questions as well, aren’t they?” Odessa examined a fingernail. “Good questions, Barnabas,” she nodded.

“Thank you Odessa,” he inclined his head. “Kassandra?”

“Well, because rules are rules, and those are the rules,” she explained weakly.

“Because you’re such a stickler for following the “rules” after all!” Odessa snorted.

Barnabas was about to automatically chide her for a lack of respect, but he realised that she made a very good point.

“The delivery was a little rude,” he pointed out. “But Odessa isn’t wrong. What exactly is going to happen on this island? Is it treasure? A treasure that is only there on this one night each month? Is that it?”

“Yes, sort of,” Kassandra grasped at this.


“Not that kind of treasure,” Kassandra admitted hesitantly. “It’s a treasure of…” she cast about for an explanation. “It’s knowledge. The treasure is knowledge.”

Odessa snorted. “Is knowledge going to buy me a drink, new sandals?”

Barnabas looked closely at Kassandra, examining her expression. A good minute passed in silence. He came to a decision.

“No, knowledge won’t, Odessa,” he said with finality. “But your pay will, and you know your pay is generous. Go get Gelon and Thyia, we need to begin making preparations.”

She gave a sigh, but recognised that the discussion was over. When she had closed the door after her,
Barnabas turned to Kassandra, concern etched in his weather worn face.

“Now that it’s just the two of us, tell me the truth Kassandra,” he frowned. “Is this a dangerous mission?”

“They’re all dangerous missions, no Barnabas?” She evaded, but he was having none of it.

“No, no actually they aren’t these days,” he shook his head. “We accompany Kyra’s traders, patrol the coasts, collect visiting dignitaries. Potentially dangerous but only in the way that anything can be dangerous. We haven’t been on a dangerous mission since you got married, before that even. And I don’t really mind, it makes a nice change sometimes, not dancing with death every day. But after everything we have been through together, everything I thought we were to each other, I think I deserve the truth Kassandra,” he finished, looking wounded.

“I’m sorry Barnabas,” Kassandra placed an apologetic hand on his arm. “You’re right. I can’t tell you too much because, truthfully, I don’t know what awaits me on that island. All I can say is that I don’t think it’s going to be life threatening. Not in the way we normally think about such things anyway. But it could be life changing. If I tell you that this is very important to me Barnabas,” she looked pleadingly into his good eye. “One of the most important things that I’ve ever undertaken. Will that be enough to put your mind at ease?”

There was a long silence as he clearly gave this some deep consideration. At last he gave a great sigh.

“I can’t say that it puts my mind at ease, Kassandra,” he smiled wearily. “But it’s good enough,” he patted her hand. “If it’s so important to you, then it’s important to me. Leave the details in my hands. I will work out the best route to get to your mysterious, invisible island.”

“And back Barnabas,” she added quickly. “In truth Barnabas it is even more important that we get back to Mykonos as quickly as we possibly can. The moment I step back on board we must be ready to leave and we must sail like the furies are after us. If you have to sacrifice a whole herd of goats to Poseidon for quick passage then do it, understand?”


“No, no, no,“ She quickly reassured him, “it’s nothing like that, I swear. I can’t tell you any more my friend because I don’t really know more myself.”

“But it’s important?” he sighed. “Very well Kassandra. Quickly there, swift as Atalanta back again. Leave it to me,” he walked to the door.

“Barnabas,” she said softly as he made to leave. “Thank you, old friend.”

“Ahh, you’re welcome Kassandra,” he grinned. “It’s exciting actually, no?”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she laughed. “Oh and Barnabas? I need a white ram no more than two years old.”

“We’re taking a ram with us?” he sighed. “I suppose it won’t be coming back?”

“No, Barnabas,” she shook her head. “It’s a one way trip for the ram.”
Kassandra spent a lot of the intervening time with Ophelia, picking her brains for every detail of the scroll, probing her for suggestions for dealing with riddles, until eventually the old priestess lost patience with her.

“I have told you everything I know girl,” she snapped. “I’m a priestess not an oracle. I have no idea what the riddle will be, you know what sphinxes are like, fussy, unnecessarily complicated wording, simple answer. Use your ears, and your brains. How to sacrifice the ram? I don’t know, it doesn’t give the details of how to do it, just that you must sacrifice it to the guardian. So I imagine you and your new friend find the guardian and then you slit its throat in front of them. I’m sure that if you had to do anything unusual it would say.”

“Do I need to burn it afterwards though?” Kassandra persisted. “Should I build a pyre before I do anything else perhaps? Have it rea…”

“What did I just say!” Ophelia smacked a gnarled hand down on the table, a candle fell over and went out. “Build a pyre, if it will entertain you. It says nothing here about burnt offerings. If you get peckish build a fire by all means.”

“Does it say I have to eat some of it then?” Kassandra peered at the scroll for the hundredth time.

Ophelia heaved a huge sigh, drained her wine cup, held it out for a refill.

“It says nothing,” she shook her head. “Sacrifice, that’s the word. The only word. Play it by ear girl!”

“But it says I can only do this once,” Kassandra pleaded. “One wish for each supplicant. It says that, right?”

“Yes, yes, it still says it, just like the other twenty times you asked me, “ Ophelia grumbled. “It doesn’t say you can’t send your lovely wife round for a second wish if it doesn’t take though,” she chuckled, “So you’ve always got that up your sleeve. If you ever wore sleeves. Though I suppose the womenfolk of Mykonos would consider that a disservice,” she winked. Kassandra remained unamused.

“The bathing then?” she frowned. “Are you sure it doesn’t say how long? “

“No, no and no,” Ophelia shook her head. “Make yourself naked, dip yourself in. How complicated can it be? Stay in till it works I suppose. And don’t ask me how it happens, because it doesn’t say. And don’t even think about asking me anything about what to do with your new equipment when you’ve got it. I’m a Prieste…”

“Of Artemis, yes, I know, you keep telling me,” Kassandra rubbed her eyes wearily.

“If you didn’t keep asking me foolish questions, I wouldn’t have to keep telling you,” Ophelia stretched, a couple of joints cracked noisily. “Look, child, “ she leaned forward and took Kassandra’s hands in hers.

This was a first, Kassandra thought, holding them gently, they felt like tiny bundles of knotty twigs.

“You set sail in the morning, no?” Ophelia said quietly.

“Before first light,” Kassandra nodded.
“Then why are you sitting in this tiny room with an ancient priestess, when you have a lovely wife and a warm bed waiting at home for you?” Ophelia smiled. “Go home Kassandra. Bid goodbye to your child. Be with your wife. She will be worried. Go, comfort her. Be together. All will be well. I will pray for you both. Now I can’t say fairer than that can I eh?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Kassandra struggled to her feet. By now she was sure that Ophelia made her sit on the tiny stool just for amusement’s sake. She’d stopped even the most cursory of complaints, long ago. “Thank you Ophelia,” she nodded. “For all your help.”

“Ach!” she waved a dismissive hand. “Bring the baby round to see me. Make the occasional offering to the Goddess. That will be thanks enough. And keep your eyes open on that island. For any interesting little artefacts.”

“You want me to bring you back a souvenir?” Kassandra smiled, “I’ll see what I can find. A sphinx feather perhaps?” she chuckled.

Kassandra had dealt with Phoibe’s curiosity about her upcoming trip by passing it off as a tedious fact finding mission for Ophelia. It hadn’t been immediately successful. Phoibe had wanted to come along, arguing that, as she was the one who fell down the hole in the first place she was in some way the initial discoverer of the mysterious island.

Kassandra’s next tactic was more successful. She appealed to Phoibe’s love for Kyra and Orion and her desire to help.

“I’ll miss you Kassandra,” Phoibe sighed, as she curled up in bed, Kassandra lying beside her, a strong, comforting arm about her. “But I’ll look after Kyra while you’re away, I promise.”

“I know you will, Phoibe,” Kassandra pulled her a little closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her head. “That’s the only reason I’m happy to go, because I know you’ll be here taking care of Kyra for me, taking Orion for his runs. I’ll miss you too Phoibe. But I’ll soon be back.”

“Ten days?” Phoibe checked. “I asked Barnabas and he said you should be back in ten days, if the winds were kind.”

“I bow to Barnabas’s expertise, if anyone can get us back in ten days, it’s him,” she grinned. “Don’t start to worry if it’s a day or two later though, all right?”

“Mmm,” Phoibe yawned and nodded against Kassandra’s chest.

“Tired? “ Kassandra glanced down. “Come, let’s get you tucked up.” she climbed off the bed, tucked Phoibe’s blankets about her shoulders, the girl’s eyes were already closing. “Sleep well. I will see you in a few days.” She bent and kissed her softly. “I love you, Phoibe.”

“I love you too, mater,” Phoibe mumbled sleepily.

Kassandra walked to the door and cast a glance back into the room. Orion was sleeping on a blanket on the floor at the foot of Phoibe’s bed, he looked up sleepily as Kassandra opened the door.

“Keep an eye on things while I’m away, boy,” she whispered, leaving quietly and closing the door behind her.
She made her way to her bedroom and found Kyra lying amongst the pillows, sheet up about her shoulders, waiting for her.

“Is she all right?” she asked as Kassandra entered and began to get ready for bed. “Not too worried?”

“I haven’t told her anything to worry her,” Kassandra assured her. “She’s going to look after you while I’m away,” she smiled, folding her clothes and placing them neatly on a chair. “So, let her, please?” she stood and looked at Kyra for a moment. “You look so beautiful tonight.”

“How about now?” Kyra folded aside the sheet. She was naked beneath it and Kassandra shook her head, laughing appreciatively.

“Even better,” she climbed in beside Kyra and took her in her arms. “Is this my going away present?”

“It’s your, “I wish I could make you stay but I know I can’t and I understand why”, present,” Kyra smiled.

“I have to go now, Kyra, it’s decided,” Kassandra stroked a lock of hair behind Kyra’s ear. “But I’ll miss you every moment I’m away. You know that?”

“I know,” Kyra nodded. “And I love you for what you’re doing. I can’t tell you how much, or how scared I am. Come back to me Kassandra. Whether it works or not, just come back to me safely.”

“You know that I can’t promise that,” Kassandra kissed her gently. “But I do promise that I will do everything in my power to try and make sure I come back safely to you and Phoibe. I do promise that.”

She pulled Kyra close and kissed her deeply, running a firm hand down her back to rest at her hip, push her back against the bed, lean over her, her kisses becoming hungrier. Kyra stopped her, cradled Kassandra’s face in her hands.

“Please,” she whispered. “Let me? I wish I could make you stay but I know I can’t and I understand why”, present,” Kyra smiled.

“Let me?” she made to sit up. “Give me this tonight, please? Let me love you?”

Kassandra recognised the unspoken fear behind Kyra’s eyes and nodded. She shifted back against the pillows, raised her arms above her head, lay supine, all bronzed skin and taut muscles beneath Kyra’s gaze.

And Kyra loved her.

She loved her with her eyes, with her hands, with her mouth, with the breath of her lungs and the words of her lips.

She murmured into Kassandra’s hungry mouth of how much she loved her, how much she would miss her, how she already prayed for her safe return.

She kneaded her breasts, suckled at her taut nipples, teasing with the edge of her teeth, laughing softly as Kassandra trembled and whimpered beneath her.

She traced the bones and muscles of her, running gentle fingers and greedy lips over them, nipping and sucking and licking, covering every inch.

Then she settled between Kassandra’s thighs, committed the sight and the scent and the taste of her to memory, rejoiced in the hot, wet pulsing of Kassandra around her fingers, the flood of release, the
soft breathy cries as Kyra made her come again and again, until she was weeping softly.

Then Kyra kissed her way back up Kassandra’s quivering body, wrapped her in her arms and held her, flesh against flesh, burning every sensation into her mind, armour against the coming days.

She lay awake, feeling Kassandra drift into sleep, heard her breathing slow and deepen, felt her press sleepily against her.

She gazed at the ceiling, watching the light change as the moon rose and fell and all too soon the sun began to rise and Kassandra woke.

“I’m late,” she smiled as she began to dress. “Did you get any sleep at all?” she looked down at Kyra, concerned.

“Not really,” she admitted, sitting up. “But then I didn’t really want any,” she watched Kassandra pull on her tunic, begin to fasten her sandals. Her armour and weapons were already aboard, she simply had to dress and leave, and they both knew it. “I...can we say “goodbye” here Kassandra?” Kyra slipped out of bed and walked over to her wife.

“Of course, my love,” Kassandra pulled her down onto her lap. “Undignified for the Archon to be weeping at the dock, I suppose.”

“I don’t care who sees me crying,” Kyra rested her head against Kassandra’s neck. “I just, I can’t bear to see you leave.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Kassandra breathed. “You’ll hardly notice I’m gone.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Kyra cradled her face between her hands and rested their foreheads together. “I love you.”

“As I love you,” Kassandra whispered.

They sat together like this for a minute or two, both reluctant to break the mood, to admit that the moment had come for Kassandra to actually leave.

Kyra pulled on a chiton to accompany Kassandra downstairs, walking to the door holding onto her hand as though she was afraid she might disappear before they got there. Praxos was standing by the door as they approached.

“Good bye misthios,” he slapped her on the shoulder. “I hope those stupid relics are worth all this,” he looked a little reproachfully at Kyra’s tear stained face.

“So do I, my friend,” Kassandra didn’t begrudge him the scolding, like everyone besides Ophelia he was under the impression that she was going on some speculative search for historical artefacts. Kassandra even had a couple of the smaller items from the underground chamber secreted in her cabin aboard ship, so she didn’t have to return empty handed.

“Be safe my love,” Kyra reached up, kissed Kassandra long and hard.

“You too,” Kassandra loosed her embrace, eased Kyra over towards Praxos. “Take care of my wife, Praxos. Till I can do it for myself.”

“Always have,” he wrapped a meaty arm about Kyra’s shoulders. They stood together and watched
Kassandra walk to the end of the pathway. Here she turned and raised her hand in salute, before rounding the corner and disappearing from sight.

For a moment Kyra wanted to run after her, call her back, try and convince her of the madness of her mission, but she knew that once Kassandra had truly made up her mind about anything, she was unshakable. And part of her wondered, what if she was right, what if she did find the island, the sphinx, the magical spring? What if she came back changed? She shuddered.

Praxos felt her shake and pulled her into a warm bear-hug.

“She’s a bit of an idiot at times,” he patted her back as she sobbed against his chest. “But she can look after herself all right. Pots though? Bloody fool,” he shook his head.
Kassandra bit back her tears as she strode down to the dock. Now was not the time. She needed to concentrate on the mission, not on how much she already ached to be back in Kyra’s arms, to be there when Phoibe woke. She had to treat this like any other journey.

She half expected Barnabas to be waiting at the dock, tapping his foot, annoyed with her for being late. The sun was just peeping cautiously over the horizon and they should be on their way already and here she was just rolling up.

But as she approached the dock, she heard raised voices, not directed at her and saw frantic activity by the gangway to the ship.

“Ow, you fucking fucker, I will skin you alive,” it was Odessa’s outraged voice.

“Don’t keep swearing at him,” there was Thyia, sounding soothing.

Kassandra stood and watched the scene for a moment. A huge white, massively horned ram was advancing on Odessa who was backing up, dangerously close to the edge of the dock.

“Back right up, you bastard,” Odessa drew a dagger.

“Don’t you dare!” Thyia raced forward and put herself between the ram and her girlfriend. “And stop swearing at him, no wonder he doesn’t like you.”

“Well the feeling is mutual, but you’ll notice that I didn’t bite him!” Odessa protested. “If you like him so much, you take him below decks.”

“I will,” Thyia took hold of one of his horns and stroked soothingly. “You’ll come on board for me, won’t you mister ram? You are such a handsome boy, aren’t you, yes you are, yes you are.”

“Why is that bloody ram still on the dock?” Barnabas appeared at the railing. “Get it into its pen and hurry up about it, the commander will be here any...oh there she is! Kassandra!” he waved. “Look at your ram. Isn’t he a beauty? We had a job getting him, it’s tupping time, no one wanted to part with one, he cost us an arm and a leg, but you were insistent, so here he is.”

“Isn’t he gorgeous?” Thyia turned to greet Kassandra, easing her hold on the ram’s horn.

“He’s fucking bitey, I’ll tell you that for nothing,” Odessa moved to slip past him. He shouldered out of Thyia’s ineffectual grip, lunged at Odessa and knocked her clean off the dock into the water.

“For the love of Artemis, will one of you get that animal below deck!” Barnabas sounded at his wits end. “And be careful with him, he’s worth more than Odessa.”

“Hey!” she was struggling to clamber up onto the dock. Kassandra strode over and offered her a hand.

“Are you all right?” she smiled, amused for the first time that morning.

“Do I look all right?” Odessa was shaking her feet, checking herself over. “My fucking dagger! My dagger’s at the bottom of the bay now, you stupid woolly bastard. I hope we’re eating you halfway you...”

“Stop that right now,” Thyia reproved, removing her belt and looping it around the ram’s neck like a
collar. “You’ve got other daggers.”

“But that was my favourite,” Odessa said mournfully, bending to look over the edge of the dock. The ram eyed her crouching figure beadily. Kassandra took a firm hold of his collar.

“If we just wait a little bit, I can probably find it, when it gets a bit lighter,” Odessa called up, hopefully.

“Absolutely not!” Barnabas was becoming a little frantic. “We’re already behind schedule. We don’t have time for that nonsense, get on board and get that ram below deck. The commander is here now, let’s get moving for the love of Poseidon!”

“He’s so handsome,” Thyia stroked the ram’s woolly head and he rubbed up against her touch. “What should we call him, Kassandra?” she began to urge him up the gangway.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s a good idea to name him Thyia, really,” she frowned, getting behind him in case he baulked.

“I can’t just keep calling him ram,” Thyia protested.

“How much time are you going to spend talking to him?” Odessa edged towards the gangway, leathers squeaking wetly, water running out of her boots. She and the ram eyed each other narrowly. “He has creepy eyes,” she scowled. “And you are disturbingly fond of him.”

“I’m going to call him Jason,” Thyia decided. “I know he had a golden fleece, so it’s maybe a bit tactless, but doesn’t he look like a Jason?” she was half dragging the huge beast up the planks as Kassandra pushed at his solid, meaty rump.

He really was a magnificent creature, she thought, no wonder he’d been expensive, she was surprised anyone had been prepared to sell him at breeding time. He didn’t want to go up this bloody gangway though. She took hold of the thick greasy fleece and pushed. Jason swung round and sank his teeth into her elbow.

“Ow fuck!” she jumped back and he skittered back down the gangway onto the dock and lowered his head. “You mean spirited bastard!” she rubbed her elbow ruefully, her fingers came away smeared with blood. Not even on board and wounded already. This was clearly why his owners had sold him.

“I told you!” Odessa yelled at Thyia, “He’s vicious.”

“Because you keep shouting and swearing at him!” she protested. “No wonder he’s bitey, he’s scared aren’t you sweetheart? Yes, do the bad women scare you? Poor Jason, you come on board with me and we’ll put you in your nice safe pen, and you can have some delicious hay, yes you can. You are such a good boy,” she nuzzled into the top of his woolly head, between his magnificent horns.

“Gods Thyia,” Odessa sounded justifiably concerned. “Don’t put your face near his teeth.”

“Why is that bloody ram STILL there?” Barnabas yelled red in the face. “We are going to be right here on this dock at full moon if you don’t get yourselves organised. Put it away, let’s go!”

Kassandra was still rubbing her elbow as she watched Jason glowering at Odessa as she tried to squeeze some more water out of her leathers.

“You go on ahead Odessa,” she suggested craftily. “Go get out of those wet leathers.”
“Delighted to,” she gave Kassandra a saucy wink. “You know where my cabin is. After all Thyia has Jason now,” she climbed onto the gangway half way up to avoid the ram, and began to make her way onto deck. Jason spotted her, lowered his head and charged up the gangplank after her, dragging a protesting Thyia behind him.

“Well done Kassandra, that was good thinking” Barnabas beamed approvingly, watching them go barreling across the deck, sending loitering rowers scrabbling for cover.

“Raise that gangway quickly” he bellowed. “Let’s get underway now that everyone is on board. Come on, you rowers get to your positions. Let’s act like we have a purpose, we’re not guarding olive oil now! “

Kassandra went to take her place at the helm.

“I’m sorry I’m late Barnabas,” she sighed. “It was harder to leave than I expected.” she avoided his sympathetic gaze.

“You know, Kassandra, we still don’t have to go, if you’ve changed your mind,” he said quietly. “It’s not too late. It won’t be too late until you’re setting foot on this invisible island of yours.”

“No Barnabas,” she shook her head. “There’s too much at stake for me to change my mind now. We’ll be back under a fortnight, no? And it will be worth it, if it works.”

“If it works?” Barnabas frowned, watching as the last of the crew disappeared below decks, and Odessa and Thyia stood debating how to get Jason down a ladder. “If you would only trust me with the reason behind this journey, perhaps I could be of more help?”

“You are always helpful Barnabas, “ she patted his shoulder. “I don’t think any of this would have been possible without you.”

“We didn’t really think through the whole sheep thing though,” he stroked his beard sadly, watching as Odessa got a slap for clearly suggesting they just push the ram straight down into the hold.

“He’s only got to last four, five days,” Kassandra smiled. “I’ll go give them a hand.”

“You will do no such thing!” Thyia was protesting as Kassandra approached. “You’ll break his legs! Tell her Kassandra, we can’t just drop him down there.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so precious about it,” Odessa watched as Jason loosed a great shower of droppings on deck. “And he’s your boyfriend, you can clean that up.”

“Just sweep it over the side,” Thyia rolled her eye. “And what do you mean, precious?” she frowned.

“Well it’s not like he’s coming back with us,” Odessa began to kick droppings to the side, grimacing in disgust as they stuck to her wet boots.

“What?” Thyia looked up from scratching behind Jason’s ears. “Wait, what?”

“What did you think we wanted him for?” Odessa sighed. “We were taking him sightseeing? Was that it?”

“I…”Thyia looked down into Jason’s slotted eyes. “I suppose I thought perhaps that we were taking him to Lesbos to breed, or something.”
“His breeding days are behind him, my sweet,” Odessa shook her head. “And just as well if his children are as vicious as him.”

“Why don’t you go get changed before you get a chill? Kassandra suggested. “I’ll help with the…. with Jason.”

“Very well, “ Odessa nodded. “I’m sorry Thyia, “ she said softly, pressing a brief kiss to Thya’s cheek as she passed. “It’s just a ram though, he’d have been slaughtered sooner or later.”

“I’m sorry Thya,” Kassandra sighed, putting a comforting arm about her shoulders, and withdrawing it quickly as Jason gave her an unnerving glare. “That’s why I didn’t want you to name him.” she looked about for a suitable piece of canvas and some rope.

“No, no, she’s right” Thya stroked his ears. “Of course he would get slaughtered. It’s what he’s for, I suppose.” She wiped her nose on the back of her wrist as Kassandra came back, tying lengths of rope to the eyeletted corners of a small canvas sheet. “What are we going to do with him?”

Kassandra debated silently for a moment, as to what would be the most tactful reply.

“I need him as a sacrifice,” she admitted at last.

“To which god?” Thya rummaged in her pocket and found a chunk of carrot. “Here you go, boy.”

“Honestly?” Kassandra admitted. “I don’t really know. A very old god perhaps?”

Thya gave her a curious look as Jason crunched the carrot with evident enjoyment.

Hmm? Perhaps I don’t want to know,” she shook her head. “What are you sacrificing him for? What do you want from this god?”

Kassandra was shocked to realise how much she had revealed to Thya and how quickly.

“I can’t really say,” she shook her head. “Because it’s not...well it’s not for me, really,” she frowned.

“A boon for someone else?” Thya looked at her. “Hmm, that sounds like you, I suppose. Gods know I have no reason not to trust you. It must be a harmless enough favour?”

“Not just harmless Thya,” Kassandra risked patting Jason’s rump lightly, he turned and glared at her. “A good wish, a wish that will make someone very happy.”

“Well then,” Thya sighed. “Better than being killed for the pot I suppose. I don’t want to see it though,” she frowned.

“You don’t have to,” Kassandra assured her. “No one will, I have to do it alone. And I promise you Thya,” she took her hand in hers. “I will make it quick and clean.”

“I know. I know you will,” Thya nodded.

Jason had finished his carrot and noticing their joined hands decided to take snap at Kassandra’s wrist. His yellow teeth connected loudly with her bracer and she felt the jolt in her arm.

“Odessa’s right you know,” Kassandra sighed. “He is a vicious bugger!”

She handed the canvas to Thya. “Here, put this under him, I’ll use it as a sling to lower him down.”

“He’s very heavy,” Thya busied herself sliding the canvas under his belly and pulling out the ropes
to lie over his back.

“Fortunately I’m very strong,” Kassandra grinned, flexing playfully.

“That you are, “Thyia cast her mind back to their first meeting and smiled. “I’ll go down and wait for him.”

Kassandra wrapped the ropes around her forearms and braced her legs either side of the hatch.

“All right Jason,” she muttered. “I don’t like you, and you clearly don’t like me,” she considered her wounded elbow. “But I am genuinely sorry for what I’m going to have to do. So thank you for making it as easy as possible for me by giving me one of the most embarrassing scars of my collection. Now, down the hatch with you to your girlfriend,” she gave him a hefty shove with her leg and knocked him down the hatch. He bleated in protest and wriggled violently but she braced her legs hard and gradually lowered until she heard Thyia speaking soothingly, felt her untying the sling.

He was a fine beast she thought again. It was a good start. Even the most particular of gods couldn’t fail to be impressed she decided, it had to be a good sign.

The mood aboard ship was buoyant over the next few days, the crew seemed revitalised by sailing further afield after months circling the Silver Islands. They’d learned new songs, there were crew members aboard who had never journeyed beyond relatively domestic waters, and there were new relationships to be formed, old ones to be rediscovered.

There was a little disappointment when Kassandra and Barnabas made it very clear that they were not only not here to look for trouble, but were in fact going to actively avoid it. They were to skirt around unfamiliar vessels and give skirmishes a wide berth. Barnabas managed to dilute the disappointment by couching the voyage in terms of a race. Speed was of the essence. The information that the quicker they reached Lesbos the more generous their payment would be certainly helped with motivation Kassandra noticed, and they were soon scudding over the waves as though the Anemoi themselves wanted Kassandra’s strange endeavour to succeed.
Kassandra actually enjoyed the first couple of days aboard ship, it felt like putting on a pair of comfortable old boots. Standing beside Barnabas, the wind in her face, sea songs ringing in her ears, the creak of the rigging a constant undertone. She enjoyed herself up till the third night.

The fresh air and hard work had knocked her on her back the first two nights and she’d slept deeply and seemingly dreamlessly in the cramped confines of her bunk. The third night though she tossed and turned, unable to get to sleep. The bunk seemed too small all of a sudden, too short for her to be able to stretch out comfortably. It was too warm, too stuffy, the smells of the ship suddenly oppressive.

What was she doing here? She could be at home, lying in a big comfortable bed, on soft sheets, with her beautiful wife in her arms.

She wished she’d brought something of Kyra’s with her. She missed her smell. The sound of her voice. The touch of her hands. Her knowing smile. Her bright, intelligent eyes. Even her fiery temper.

She missed Phoibe and her boundless energy and enthusiasm. What was she doing now, she wondered? Was she managing to drag Kyra away from her Archon duties for long enough to get some fresh air and exercise?

Gods, she even missed Orion, the big, slobbery creature.

And she was sick of salted fish already.

She sat up and banged her head on the top of the bunk. What was she thinking? A magic spring that would equip her to impregnate Kyra? She swung her legs over the side of the bunk and buried her head in her hands.

How was that even going to work?

And if it did, what was Kyra going to say when she strolled in magically transformed? What if she found her undesirable after all this? What if she laughed and turned away?

What if it didn’t work?

Was Kyra sitting at home now imagining Kassandra striding in, primed for action? Was she already nursing their baby in her mind? Could she still even love Kassandra if she failed her in this? She’d sworn that it wouldn’t matter. But it would.

Gods, she wasn’t getting to sleep now she sighed, hopping down and going to pour herself a cup of water. It was tepid and a little brackish. Not so long ago, she wouldn’t even have noticed. She’d go take a turn around the deck, she decided, perhaps some air would help. She looked about for her tunic, spotted it at the foot of the bunk.

Shaking it out, she looked down at herself, if things went as planned, in two nights time this could all be changed, she realised. A shiver ran down her spine. Was she making a terrible mistake? There was an outside chance she could get eaten by a sphinx at the end of the day, after all.

Then the image of Kyra holding little Okeanos to her breast swam into her vision. The tender way she had held him, her hand stroking his little head, her expression as soft as Kassandra had ever seen
She remembered the moment she had placed the child in Kassandra’s reluctant arms, had slipped her arm about her hips and leaned in against her, smiling down at the baby. It had felt...nice, Kassandra realised. Warm somehow. Comforting in a strange way. How would it feel if that child was theirs? How would it feel to sit and watch Kyra nurse Kassandra’s child?

Her chest clenched suddenly, making it hard to breathe. She gripped her tunic tightly, leaned forward against the frame of the bunk and struggled for breath. This had to work. It had to. She was not going to disappoint Kyra. She was going to give her this baby, if she had to kill the damn sphinx to do it.

She stood upright, concentrated on her breathing, relaxed her shoulders, reminded herself that she would be home in a few days, home to her wife, home to her daughter, even home to the dog. It would be all right. They would be all right. She would make this work, somehow.

She dressed and climbed up on deck. The air was fresher up here, cooler. She was only partly surprised to find Barnabas standing at the helm, nursing a cup of wine and looking at the stars.

“Do you ever sleep Barnabas?” she went over to join him.

“All the time, just not when you’re looking,” he laughed. “Join me for a drink?” he bent to pick up the jug by his feet. “You’ll have to bring up a cup though.”

When she returned, he filled her cup, refilled his own and offered a toast.

“To the success of your mysterious endeavour.”

“And our safe return home,” Kassandra added.

“Safe and swift, of course,” he smiled a little. “Can you really not tell me what we are doing here, Kassandra? What is it that you must keep such a secret?”

She took a sip and swirled the remaining wine around in the cup, sighing.

“We should be in sight of Lesbos tomorrow, no?” she asked. “We just circle around and wait?”

“Indeed,” Barnabas sighed, failing to hide his disappointment. “Your strange map is quite detailed I’ll say that for it. But as Odessa pointed out, that’s a very small smudge we’re looking for. I don’t suppose you’ve any idea how big your invisible island is?”

Kassandra surprised both of them by laughing heartily.

“It all sounds so ridiculous when you say it out loud,” she shook her head. “Invisible islands. Magic springs.”

“Magic springs?” Barnabas cocked an eyebrow. “There’s a magic spring on this invisible island?”

“Ah, shit,” Kassandra realised what she’d said. “It sounds like madness, no?” she gave him an anxious glance. “A fool’s errand?”

“Listen, Kassandra,” he refilled their cups, “the things I have seen since meeting you, if you told me that on this island there was a chicken the size of a house that lays golden eggs, I would believe you. So, this magic spring? What is so magical about it?”

“I’m not even sure Barnabas,” she smiled, shaking her head. She definitely didn’t want to get into the
awkward details with him. “But there’s supposed to be a sphinx guarding it. A wish granting sphinx?” she ventured haltingly, half expecting laughter at this point.

None came. Instead Barnabas gave her a concerned look.

“And you have to go ashore on your own?” he frowned. “I asked you before and you avoided the question, what happens if someone goes with you? If I go with you, stay out of sight? Just in case you get hurt? How will we know if anything has happened to you? How will we know Kassandra?” it suddenly seemed to occur to him, his face a picture of concern. “What if this damn sphinx attacks you? How long am I supposed to wait before I come and look for you?”

“Calm yourself Barnabas,” Kassandra patted his shoulder. “I’m not worried about the sphinx."

“Well perhaps you should be,” he grumbled. “I don’t like any of this, Kassandra. Mysterious invisible islands. Sphinxes. I wish you would tell me what it’s all about. I would like to think that you can trust me by now,” he sounded a little wounded and Kassandra felt a twinge of guilt.

“I can’t tell you the details Barnabas, because I don’t know what is going to happen when I get there,” she sighed. “Except that I have to sacrifice that damn ram to the sphinx and Thyia’s going to be the only one upset about that, quite honestly. Then I imagine there’ll be some irritating sphinx type word games. I expect to be back by morning Barnabas. If I’m not, then come looking for me. Bring Odessa, she’s good with a bow.”

He took a long draught of wine and refilled his cup, offered the jug to Kassandra. She declined, the wine was decent, but it felt sour in her stomach. If this whole thing worked, what were she and Kyra going to tell people? It sounded wonderful, having a baby with the woman she loved, and there was that tightening in her chest again at the thought of Kyra’s belly swelling with her child, but what would they say to people?

Kassandra could hide the real reason for her mysterious trip, but they wouldn’t be able to hide Kyra’s pregnancy. What would people think? That Kyra had slept with a man while Kassandra was away? With Kassandra’s knowledge? Her permission? Or behind her back? Would town gossip begin to speculate about the father?

She hadn’t been worrying about any of this when she tried to throw Kyra under Alkibiades, she realised. If it hadn’t mattered to her then, why did it suddenly matter so much now? She and Kyra would know the truth. Why should it matter to her now that everyone know Kyra’s baby was hers as well? That she was the one who had put it there? That it was as much hers as Kyra’s?

Kassandra put down the cup and rubbed her face, she could feel the tension crackling off Barnabas. He wanted to know so badly what was going on, and she didn’t blame him one bit. There was a lengthy silence broken only by the creaking of the rigging and the occasional cough or mutter from the night crew.

“Do you ever wish you’d had children, Barnabas?” she said very quietly.

“I used to,” he answered eventually. “But then I had a daughter. And she was everything I ever wanted. And I would give my good eye to make her happy, to keep her safe.”

He stood silently for a few minutes, gazing out across the dark, undulating waves, before turning to look at Kassandra. By the bright light of the gibbous moon he could see that her face was wet with tears.

She rarely cried, and never so openly. He dearly wanted to take her in his arms, but they’d never
quite developed that sort of relationship, and who could blame Kassandra for her emotional reticence he thought, sadly. Given what she’d gone through it was amazing that she was as open-hearted as she was. She was amazing and he wished he could find the words to tell her that, to make her realise it.

“Is that what this is about somehow?” he asked quietly. “Is something wrong with Phoibe? You’d tell me wouldn’t you, if it was Phoibe? You know I love that child almost as much as you do.”

Kassandra didn’t trust herself to speak for a moment. She got her breath under control at last, wiped a hand across her face.

“No, don’t worry Barnabas, Phoibe is perfectly well,” she nodded. “She’s...perfect.”

“Then…” he reached out a gentle hand, touched her arm. She didn’t flinch or recoil, so he moved a little closer, dared put his arm about her. And to his astonishment she leaned down a little into his embrace. His heart felt like it had missed its rhythm for a moment. “Then, what is it, child? There is nothing you should be afraid to tell me,” he breathed.

“I don’t know what I’m doing Barnabas,” she said so quietly that he had to strain to hear her. “Kyra wants a child of her own so much. And there’s something on this island that is supposed to be able to make that happen. But I don’t know what, or even how, not really. And I’m afraid of what’s going to happen. But I’m even more afraid that nothing will happen. That I’ll go back to her and all she will see is what I can’t give her. And that nothing will be the same again,” she was weeping silently and Barnabas found his own face wet with tears.

“Oh, my sweet child,” he held her close and let her weep on his shoulder. He didn’t know what to say to comfort her, ached inside to see her in such pain and yet a part of him felt a strange joy that she had allowed him to see her like this, to witness her vulnerability. He felt he had never loved her more, never felt more helpless than he did now in the face of her anguish.

At last she stopped crying, caught her breath, withdrew carefully from his embrace, clearly embarrassed by her loss of control.

“I’m sorry Barnabas,” she wiped her face with the brusque action of someone not used to having to perform it. “That’s why we’re here, on a fool’s errand, to do the impossible.” she smiled weakly. “Thank you for listening. I think I will try and sleep now. You should too.”

She made to leave, then to his amazement she dipped in quickly and pressed a brief, awkward kiss to his cheek. He was robbed of speech, but just as she reached the door, he managed to call her name and she stopped and turned.

“You do the impossible all the time, child” he said proudly. “Why not do it again.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

fishbone76 has been an indescribably huge help and inspiration all through this but particularly from here on out. I'm super grateful to her for giving me free rein with her characters, and Savina in particular, who I love as if she were my own
Thank you for everything buddy!

Kyra was already at her desk, again, Savina realised. Every day since Kassandra had left Kyra had been up and at work before Savina had arrived. She was sure that if Praxos and Phoibe didn’t come and insist she go take the air with them later in the afternoon, that she would just sit there until the sun sank and she could climb into bed again.

Whatever she was doing in bed, it wasn’t sleeping, Savina reflected sadly as Kyra looked up and gave her a weak smile. There were dark circles under her eyes and she looked drawn and weary.

“You look so tired Kyra,” Savina tried to appeal to her as a friend rather than an assistant. “Why not take a little time to yourself. Try to sleep. You’ve worked so hard these past days, you can certainly afford a morning off.”

“And what would I do with my morning off Savina?” Kyra applied her seal to another document, smiling wearily. “I can’t sleep,” she rested her head in her hands. “The bed is so big without that sprawling Spartan taking up more than half of it. The nights are so long, Savina. I can’t remember how I used to sleep before,” she raised her head, gazed out of the open doors to the terrace and frowned.

Badly, was the answer to that. Savina remembered all too well. These last three days had reminded her clearly of the days before Kassandra moved in. Of Kyra going to bed late, rising early, pacing the corridors throughout the night on too many occasions, dragging with her the terrible memories that haunted what sleep she could get. Savina didn’t miss those days.

“Then don’t try and sleep,” she reasoned. “Excuse Phoibe from her classes, take something to eat and go out together. Get some fresh air. Try and relax. It would be good for Phoibe,” she ventured. “She misses her too.”

Kyra looked up and Savina wondered if she had perhaps overstepped the mark. Theirs was a professional relationship before it was a friendship after all and sometimes negotiating the borders could be as tricky as anything that occurred in this room.

Kyra rubbed her eyes, gave a sigh.

“I know you’re right Savina,” she nodded, leaning back in her chair, stretching a little.”I’ll take her out this afternoon. I promise. Swimming perhaps? She loves to swim, the exercise will help her sleep.”

Savina could recognise a partial victory as well as she could a defeat.

“A good idea,” she smiled. “I will let Phoibe know.”
If she told Phoibe then the girl would come to remind Kyra, and if Phoibe asked her, Kyra would leave her desk.

“Mmm, yes, thank you Savina,” Kyra seemed distracted. “Is it the night of full moon tonight?” she asked as Savina made for the door, intending to go to the kitchen and get Cymone to make something for Kyra to eat. She hadn’t been eating properly this week. She’d ask her to make up some tempting little treats for Phoibe and Kyra to take with them this afternoon. Phoibe’s appetite at least hadn’t been diminished by Kassandra’s absence, and perhaps the sight of her eating with evident relish would encourage Kyra.

“The full moon?” Savina turned. As if Kyra didn’t know exactly what day it was. As if she hadn’t been marking the days since Kassandra had left. As if she wasn’t counting the hours till her return. “I believe so, yes,” she replied, non-committal. “How many days until Kassandra returns?” she tried to sound casual.

“Five possibly? Six realistically,” Kyra replied without hesitation. “If the seas are kind,” she added as an afterthought.

“Then I shall pray for favourable weather,” Savina assured her.

“Thank you Savina,” Kyra seemed to look at her properly for the first time since she’d entered. “Thank you. Would you ask Aegeus to come and see me at his earliest convenience please?”

“Of course Archon,” Savina dropped a brief bow from the shoulders. Another day was about to begin.

She sat for a little while in the kitchen with Cymone. She was bemoaning the fact that she had made too much grilled fish, again.

“Won’t you have some Savina?” she pushed a plate forward. “I can’t get used to that big horse of a misthios not coming in every couple of hours and filching a few pieces. Gods, she can eat when she sets her mind to it,” she laughed wistfully. “How long is it till she gets back, do you know?”

“Six days, all being well,” Savina declined the fish. “Weather permitting of course.”

“By all the gods, I pray she gets back safely,” Cymone ate a chunk of fish herself, but without much enthusiasm. “She’s loud and always under the feet, and too big by half but damned if I don’t miss her,” she shook her head. “And Artemis knows I don’t want a return to the way things were before she got here. Gods! Do you remember Savina? How sad the Archon was half the time, poor child?”

Savina thought back. Kyra had every right to wear her sadness like a cloak. She suspected that she only knew the half of what Kyra had endured, but even that was enough to break your heart. The horror of her mother’s violent death. That alone would ruin a child. But then the shock of discovering that her father was that...monster. And the dead lover? Savina was unsure of the details about that and never dared to ask. What could Kyra possibly have done to earn such disfavour from the gods?

It was no wonder that she had buried herself in her Archon duties to the exclusion of all else, devoting herself night and day to the betterment of the islands, the well-being of their peoples. But she was a beautiful, good hearted young woman and she deserved more than that. She’d earned some personal happiness after so much sorrow, surely?
And to Savina’s amazement Kassandra seemed able to provide that. She remembered when she’d first met her. She’d been astonished by the sheer magnificent physicality of the woman. She filled a room, simply by being in it. It was impossible not to be aware of her presence, her confident swagger, her languid sprawling about the place, her hearty laughter.

At first Savina, like Praxos, had viewed her with intense suspicion. There had been blazing rows when Kassandra had first begun to visit. Times when Praxos had been on the verge of intervening, concerned for Kyra’s safety. But Savina had never once worried about that.

For all the physical imbalance between them, she never even considered that Kassandra might raise a hand to Kyra. In fact she rarely raised her voice, standing, taking Kyra’s fury with wounded dignity. And always coming back.

Over the years, Savina had noticed that Kyra was not immune to the attentions of women now and again. She had no more acted upon it, though, than she had ever succumbed to the attentions of any of the besotted, ambitious or manipulative men who had set their sights on the beautiful young Archon, mistaking her inexperience for naivety. It was blindingly obvious from the start how Kassandra looked at Kyra. Even the dog could see it. But Savina also noticed how Kyra looked at Kassandra when she thought she was unobserved.

Over time the arguments had faded, they became fewer, less frequent, more trivial. And then one day Savina walked back into the office unannounced to collect a contract that she’d left on the desk and she found them in one another’s arms. She’d felt a little shocked initially, but not as much as she might have expected and had backed out silently. To this day she didn’t think they’d noticed her enter, so absorbed were they in the embrace.

Truthfully, Savina had expected it to be a brief, hot, physical fling. She certainly didn’t begrudge Kyra the release. Savina herself was not even really attracted to women, but somehow Kassandra had a way of making you forget that when you were in her presence. Why shouldn’t Kyra avail herself of the full range of the misthios’ services while she was there?

Then one day, she was about to leave for the evening. Reaching the door she saw that there was an unexpected cloudburst. It probably wouldn’t last long, but it had been a tiring day and she really wanted to get home to Kittos.

She’d gone back inside to borrow a heavier cloak and as she made her way back to the door the sound of laughter rang along the hallway. Bright, musical laughter. And suddenly Kyra came running along the corridor, turning sharply at the foot of the stairs, her face a picture of unalloyed joy. Barreling along after her came Kassandra, grinning delightedly, skidding at the foot of the stairs as she put on the brakes to turn and grab Kyra about the waist and pull her into a tight embrace.

“Got you!” she laughed, burying her face in Kyra’s damp hair, they’d clearly run in from outside.

“You must have cheated,” Kyra shook her head, beaming. “You can’t be so big and so fast. It isn’t fair.”

As they began to kiss, Savina sidled quietly to the door and out. She’d never heard Kyra laugh in all the time they’d been together. Oh a polite expedient chuckle at a dignitary’s tedious joke, an amused giggle at the antics of a child. But honest, genuine, unselfconscious laughter? No, never.

And to see her...playing? Playing with the misthios! Savina had found her eyes swimming a little. The big, bluff, charming Spartan made her mistress happy, she realised. Happy in a way Kyra thoroughly deserved after so much anguish.
Savina had looked at Kassandra differently after that. Of course she was infuriating at times. She had no patience for political negotiations. She was an incorrigible flirt, but only when Kyra was present, she began to realise. Rumour and speculation had come with her to the Silver Islands, she was something of a celebrity after all. It was impossible to avoid all the gossip when she first arrived.

She was the child of Zeus. She could speak to animals. She had slept with every woman on Kephallonia. She had a penis. She once ate an entire goat to win a bet. She had spent a night with Aphrodite herself and made the goddess weep with pleasure. She could hold her breath for fifteen minutes. She once got a woman pregnant in Phokis and had to leave in a hurry. She’d killed a shark with her bare hands. She’d once carried a bull on her shoulders up Mt Olympus.

Ridiculous, scurrilous nonsense and Savina paid it no heed. Though the goat story sounded like it might have a grain of truth in it, she thought. But she did notice that not one woman on the Silver Islands ever came forward with any accusations of impropriety. Certainly she flirted, you could hardly miss that, but quite often Savina observed she was flirting back. And at the first indication of genuine discomfort from the target of her attentions she became courtesy itself. For all her show, she had eyes only for Kyra, Savina realised at last. Kyra was safe with her. Safe and happy.

And now she’d gone traipsing off on some damn fool errand for Ophelia of all people. After magic pots or some nonsense? Hadn’t the priestess got enough stupid pots out of that hole in the ground to keep her occupied for the remainder of her life? Savina didn’t care what “ancient mystery” Kassandra uncovered on her trip. It couldn’t possibly be worth the misery her mistress was experiencing. For the first time, Savina was disappointed in Kassandra.

“Aren’t you going to swim Kyra?” Phoibe glanced over her shoulder as she stripped to her underwear, folded her tunic and placed it and her sandals in a neat pile safely out of the way of splashes and Orion’s wet paws. He had already leapt in, swum about, climbed out, leapt in, swum about, clambered out, wriggled around Phoibe, barked at Kyra, madly over excited about his afternoon by the sea.

“No, sweetheart,” Kyra sat down, placing Cymone’s cloth wrapped parcel on the rock beside Phoibe’s clothes. “I’m going to relax here and watch you swim. Find me a shell,” she smiled.

“Okay,” Phoibe grinned, diving smoothly, cutting through the small waves, disappearing from sight for a moment or two, before emerging close to Orion to ruffle his wet ears.

Kyra gave a sigh and lay back on the rock. The sun had been blazing down on it all morning and it felt deliciously warm against her back. She felt herself relax a little for the first time since Kassandra had left, closed her eyes, felt the sun on her face, the gentle breeze lifting a loose lock of hair. She could sleep here, she thought, just for a few minutes.

She woke to the sound of determined crunching, and distinctive wet slobbering. Blinking in the sun as she opened her eyes, she turned her head and saw Phoibe sitting, hugging her knees gazing out to sea, chewing vigorously while Orion lay by her side eating a chunk of fish, greedily licking stray flakes from the rock. They both seemed to have dried off so they’d had been sitting here for some time Kyra realised.

“How long was I asleep?” she struggled to a sitting position, eyed the sun.

“A while,” Phoibe glanced over. “You needed it. Want one of these biscuit things?” she held out a small package.
“I don’t think so,” Kyra laughed. “You’re making that one sound like hard work.”

“Yeah, they take a bit of chewing, I’m beginning to think that she may have put them in for Orion,” Phoibe conceded. “Nice though. Kind of...nutty and a bit salty. I hope Cymone packed something to drink.”

“By your sandals,” Kyra ran her fingers through her hair and took a deep breath.

“There’s some of those little cheesy ball things you like,” Phoibe ferreted about in the lunch bundle. “Here you go, those are for you, I don’t like them.”

“Really?” Kyra accepted the little parcel.

“No, I don’t like sesame seeds really,” Phoibe shook her head.

“More for me then,” Kyra managed a teasing tone.

She began to nibble on one of the little seed coated nuggets. Usually she loved them, sweet and savoury and creamy all at the same time. Kassandra would tease her about how many she could put away at a single sitting. But today it was dull and flavourless. She could feel Phoibe watching her though, so she made an effort to seem as if she was enjoying it.

They sat quietly for a while, watching the waves, eating, taking an occasional drink from the waterskin. Orion lay his head across Kyra’s shins eyeing the cheese hopefully.

“I’m sorry Phoibe,” Kyra sighed at last. “I’m not very good company today.”

“What do you think she’s doing right now?” Phoibe asked.

Kyra didn’t need to ask “who”.

“Wondering what we’re doing, I imagine,” Kyra smiled. “She’s always thinking of you Phoibe, you know that don’t you?”

“She loves you just as much as she loves me,” Phoibe turned to look at Kyra.

“I know,” she nodded. “We’re both very lucky.”

“I know,” Phoibe smiled, pulling apart a chunk of grilled fish, chewing it flake by flake. “There’s a lot of grilled fish in here,” she laughed. “I think Cymone’s still making it for Kassandra. Gods there used to be a grilled fish stall on Kephallonia,” she chuckled fondly. “And the woman who ran ….” she ground to an uncomfortable halt, changed tack slightly. “ran...it...used to make the...best grilled fish, so good, I mean this is good, but…”

“Not quite the same eh?” Kyra smiled and arched an eyebrow. “Did she have some special technique or something?”

Phoibe’s eyebrows went on a bit of a journey as she remembered the day she’d blundered into the storeroom and found the woman in question demonstrating her “special technique” with Kassandra.

“I...er...you know, I don’t really know,” she shook the image out of her head. Kyra was not one to be amused by tales of Kassandra’s past conquests. “I don’t think so….maybe...herbs? Yeah maybe herbs,” she settled.

“Well if you can find out which herb,” Kyra inclined her head, gave Phoibe a soft smile, held out her hand for a chunk of fish to feed to Orion. “We could try and get hold of some. I know Cymone
would love to try and give you a taste of home.”

“This is home now,” Phoibe smiled, chewed thoughtfully. “This is just fine. Cymone’s a good cook. Don’t say anything to her please? I don’t want her to think I don’t like her fish.” she gave Kyra an anxious glance, best to steer well clear of any potential conversations about Kephallonian grilled fish she decided.

“All right Phoibe, if you’re sure?” Kyra nodded. “I promise. You’re a very thoughtful girl.”

“When do you thinks she’ll be back, Kyra?” Phoibe wiped her fingers on a piece of flatbread, folded it and tossed it to Orion before reaching between her feet. “I found you a shell by the way. I think it’s a nice one,” she handed it over.

The inside glowed with an iridescent shimmer. Kyra ran her thumb across its glassy surface.

“It’s beautiful Phoibe, thank you,” she breathed. “You’re such a good diver.”

“Kassandra’s a good teacher,” Phoibe turned to her, waited for an answer to her earlier question.

“The weather has been kind I think, at least no one at the docks had heard any tales of storms or bad weather,” Kyra pulled her handkerchief out of her belt and carefully wrapped the shell. “I hope five or six days. Let’s think it’s going to be six shall we? Then if she comes home in five, it will be a nice surprise.”

Phoibe nodded silently, hugged her knees tightly. Orion clambered off Kyra’s legs, ambled off to cock his leg against a bush and then came back, yawned widely and flopped onto the warm rock between Phoibe and Kyra for a nap.

“I don’t get why she had to go looking for pots,” Phoibe muttered at last. I mean I know Ophelia and Dion are obsessed with old stuff but surely Ophelia got enough out of that creepy room?”

“They think there may be something...important on this island,” Kyra said cautiously. She and Kassandra had discussed what to tell Phoibe, obviously they wouldn’t be able to keep it from her for very long, and neither of them wanted to. But at the back of both of their minds was the idea that it might all be a hideous mistranslation, that Kassandra would travel all that way and find nothing, no island, no sphinx, no spring, nothing.

“Not more important than you,” Phoibe protested, glancing up at her. Her wounded tone was enough to make Orion raise his sleepy head, gaze at her concerned.

“It’s okay boy,” Kyra soothed, patted his head back down. “No Phoibe, not more important than us. Of course not. Nothing is more important to Kassandra than us, you know that. But you know that she likes to help people too, no? And we think that there could be something on this island that could help make our lives...better..” she struggled, concerned she was saying too much, that she was going to talk herself into a corner.

“Healing water?” Phoibe glanced over.

Kyra was surprised and a little worried. They had maintained the artefacts cover story with anyone who had asked, so where had Phoibe heard that? And had she heard anything else?

“Where did you hear that?” she tried to sound casual.

“Dion was talking to Cymone,” Phoibe shivered a little, the sun was going down. The heat had dissipated from the rock and a light breeze was blowing from the sea. She got to her feet, began to
“That would be a good reason to go,” she sat down to fasten her sandals. “I wouldn’t blame Kassandra for going to find that. That could really help people, but...pots?” she turned to look at Kyra. “I thought she’d stopped all this traipsing about all over the Aegean when she settled down with you,” she shook her head. “Got it all out of her system. But if she’d go sailing off to find some stupid pots for a crazy old priestess...”

“That is something important. Not healing water perhaps, but important all the same. Or she wouldn’t have gone, she wouldn’t have left us for something trivial.”

“She used to though,” Phoibe said thoughtfully, looking out over the darkening sea. “All the time. Someone would want something finding or delivering or destroying or hunting and off she’d go. Days at a time. Longer sometimes. Half the time it was something they could have done themselves, if they hadn’t been lazy or scared or stupid. But sometimes it was stuff that only Kassandra could do. Those were the scary ones. She was never going to get killed delivering a bunch of stupid herbs for some healer with a bad memory, but she’d go and clear whole forts Kyra, by herself, all those soldier and guards. We’d all pretend we weren’t scared, that nothing bad was going to happen. But we were. I was. Sometimes it was like she did all this stuff because she...it was like she didn’t really care if she got killed almost, like it wouldn’t matter somehow?” she looked desperately at Kyra.

She eased around Orion’s sleeping bulk and sat close by Phoibe, put a comforting arm about her.

“I don’t mean she wanted to die,” Phoibe frowned, looking at the smooth rock between her feet. “Just that...she didn’t really care all that much if she did? As though it wouldn’t have killed us all. I don’t think she really did care properly until she met you Kyra,” she shook her head.

“No, Phoibe,” Kyra began, soothingly.

“Oh I know she cared about me, I’m not saying that, but she knew that Selene and the others would always look after me. She left them money in case anything happened. She doesn’t know that I know that,” she glanced up at Kyra, a little shamefaced. “Don’t tell her?”

“She didn’t want me to find out. I overheard Selene and Clio talking one night when they thought I was asleep. That was what she did when she came back from these crazy errands loaded down with skins and teeth and weird old armour. She was bringing bags of drachmae for them in case she didn’t come back one day. They still have it,” she sniffed. “So if anything...”

“Stop that right now,” Kyra said sharply. “This is your home. Here with me. With Kassandra and me. Whatever happens. And nothing has happened. She is coming back.”

She turned Phoibe in her arms, looked at her, intently. “Nothing bad has happened to her because I would know, Phoibe, I would feel it, here!” she took Phoibe’s hand and pressed it flat between her breasts, over her heart. “I would feel it! And so would you Phoibe. We would feel it, because we are family, because we would feel broken and incomplete without her, you hear me?” she rested her forehead against Phoibe’s.

Orion whimpered softly, disturbed by their agitation. Kyra gave a sigh, eased back from Phoibe, reached out and patted his head, soothing the corrugations of concern from his brow.

“I think she was looking for you all the time,” Phoibe said quietly as she and Kyra began to pack up the scant remains of their lunch tossing any suitable scraps in Orion’s direction.
“What?” Kyra frowned, shaking crumbs off the cloth, turning to glance at Phoibe.

“Even before she knew what she was looking for, she was looking for you,” Phoibe took a final mouthful of water, poured some into Kyra’s cupped hands to allow Orion to drink messily. “All the hunting and the fighting and even the… I know you don’t like to hear about it, but even the women, she was looking for you. Most of them, they didn’t...I’m not saying she didn’t... that...” she blushed a little, “with women she didn’t like, but she didn’t love them, not the way she loves you...I’m sorry…”

“Not even the woman from the grilled fish stall in Kephallonia?” Kyra teased, raising Phoibe’s chin to meet her gaze.

Phoibe’s blush intensified, she tried to look away, but Kyra held her chin gently.

“Phoibe, I don’t want to hear all the details about Kassandra’s past experiences,” she mustered a smile. “But I know there must have been... a lot...” she ventured, drawing her answer from Phoibe’s awkward avoidance. “And a lot of them were before she even met me. So, no, I don’t want to hear about the how and the why, but, I don’t want you to feel like you have to lie to me to spare my feelings all right?”

Phoibe nodded. “It doesn’t even matter really,” she wiped her nose on the back of her hand, Kyra reached for her handkerchief and remembered she’d wrapped it around Phoibe’s shell. She unwrapped it, handed the handkerchief to Phoibe, tucked her shell into the cloth wrapped bundle.

“It doesn’t matter, because none of them were you,” Phoibe dried her eyes and blew her nose. “It’s always been you, Kyra.”
“When you say morning?” Barnabas was asking for the umpteenth time. “Do you mean when the sun is actually in the sky, or as soon as the sky starts to become light? How long should we wait before we come to look for you?”

Kassandra heaved a sigh.

“Leave it for as long as you can Barnabas, all right?” she watched as Thyia fashioned a rough halter for Jason out of a length of thin rope.

“And if this stinking island disappears in a puff of smoke?” Odessa asked crisply.

“Then rescue me from the fucking sharks, obviously,” Kassandra took hold of the ram’s halter.

“No one is swimming with sharks while I’m here,” Barnabas protested. “I will not let you fall to the sharks Kassandra, definitely not.”

“Just as a matter of interest though,” Odessa watched disapprovingly as Thyia kissed Jason’s woolly head. “If you do get eaten by a sphinx? What are we supposed to tell people? More specifically, what are we supposed to tell your wife? Because she already hates me.”

“She hates you because you shove your tits in Kassandra’s face every time you see her,” Thyia sighed. “And it probably doesn’t help that you’ve fucked her wife.”

Barnabas gave a scandalized gasp.

“So have you!,” Odessa pointed out, reasonably enough, provoking another gasp from Barnabas. “I happen to have very nice tits actually. I like to give people a chance to appreciate them.”

Kassandra and Thyia both gave this some consideration before shrugging and nodding.

“I suppose there’s nothing to stop Kyra admiring them too,” Thyia decided.

“Exactly!” Odessa smiled. “All the same, what do we say if you get eaten by a sphinx?”

“Well…” Kassandra hadn’t seriously considered that option, not really. Standing just feet from the sulphurous beach of this dismal mist shrouded island, however, it was beginning to seem like a more realistic possibility somehow. “Then I suppose you tell them that I was...eaten by a sphinx? But that I fought bravely!” she added more brightly.

“Yeah, well I’m not telling her that,” Odessa crossed her arms.

“Don’t look at me,” Thyia held up her hands. “I barely know the woman.”

“Looks like it’s you Barnabas,” Odessa nodded at him. “Probably just as well, she likes you and you have a good face for delivering sad news.”

“What do you mean I have a sad face?” he protested.

“I didn’t say you…”

“Enough!” Kassandra barked, frustrated, shout muted by the dense mist. “I am not getting eaten by a sphinx tonight! No one is getting eaten by a sphinx tonight!” Jason bleated mournfully. “And you
can be quiet too,” she scowled at him.

She had the most important mission of her life behind her, shrouded in these stinking tendrils and here they were bickering. They turned, looked guiltily at her.

“Moonlight is burning,” she frowned. “I need to move. If the sun is high in the sky and I’m not feeding the sharks, come find me. If I’ve fed a sphinx, tell my wife and daughter I love them. Come on, sheep.”

She turned her back, Jason rather spoiled her dramatic exit by digging his heels in both literally and metaphorically, bracing himself against the cross spars of the gangway.

“If you could all go below deck,” she looked over her shoulder with a sigh. “Especially you Thyia, I think you’re distracting him.”

“Be a good sacrifice for Kassandra,” Thyia patted his head, reached up, kissed Kassandra on the cheek. “See you tomorrow.”

Odessa put her arm around Thyia’s waist and said with unexpected tenderness. “Let’s go back to our cabin my sweet. I can take your mind off it if you like? Don’t get eaten Kassandra, at least not till you get back,” she winked. “The world is a lot more interesting with you in it.”

“You too Barnabas,” Kassandra nodded. If she had to get involved in an undignified tussle with Jason to get him up the looming slope, that was surely their destination, then she’d rather not have an audience for it. “I’ll see you in the morning old friend.”

“Yes, you will,” he said solemnly, firmly. “First thing,” he turned slowly and left the deck without looking back.

“Well sheep,” Kassandra sighed, “looks like it’s you and me now.”

Deprived of his audience Jason proved only too willing to leave the swaying ship in favour of the relatively solid ground of the beach. But having reached it, he decided that was as far as he wished to go.

Considering that he was about to get his throat slit in a hour or so, Kassandra couldn’t bear him too much ill will over his reluctance. She looked about her, with an eye to describing the place to Ophelia when she returned home.

There was little to remark on she realised. The island had initially loomed up, seemingly out of nowhere, cloudy and ghost-like in the moonlight. On shore the milky mist was yellowish and stank of sulphur. It was so thick Kassandra could make out nothing further away than a dozen paces.

Nothing was visible to left or right along the coast line, so turning her back on the Adrestia she looked ahead to the looming slope before them. The mist seemed to come rolling down from there cloying and thick, great roiling, stinking tendrils of it, burning her eyes and lungs. It must be a volcano she decided. Just her luck. Of all the fates she had considered, falling into the reeking mouth of an active volcano had not figured.

They would just have to step carefully. She bent and took a small sample of the black sand in her hand, rubbed it between her fingers, instantly regretted it. The grains were sharp and abrasive, she didn’t fancy taking a tumble in it.

Jason seemed reluctant to walk in it at all. Kassandra wrapped the rope of his halter about her forearm and pulled. For all his resistance he slid steadily through the thick black sand and very
quickly decided that walking was preferable to having his feet rubbed raw. He plodded alongside her, up the slope, grumbling under his breath the whole time.

It was a hellish exercise, the sand was thick and shifting. For every two steps Kassandra climbed, she slid a good half a step back. Soon her thighs were burning as badly as her eyes and lungs. It was difficult to breathe at all, much less take a deep breath, her eyes were running incessantly and along with the thick mist this rendered her nearly blind.

She stopped for a moment to try and catch her breath, turned to look back. The Adrestia was almost invisible now, only the faintest glimmer of the lamps flickering like glowflies in the distance. Soon she wouldn’t even be able to see them, the only guide as to which way to go would be the angle of the slope.

It would be terrifyingly easy to lose your bearings here, to wander up and down this undulating slope until...until what? Odessa’s questions lurked spider-like in the back of her mind. What would happen come sunrise? If the island ceased to exist, what would happen to Kassandra?

Now was most definitely not the time to start considering that, she told herself. She had no time to waste. The island had been here after all and right where the map said it would be. Where there was a mysterious island there was a wish granting sphinx, surely?

She reminded herself why she was here in this gods forsaken place at all. She conjured up the image of Kyra. Her smile, her voice, the touch of her hands, and began to walk. One foot in front of the other, climbing upwards, slowly but steadily, lungs burning, eyes streaming, legs trembling with exertion.

With every step she thought of Kyra. Kyra laughing in the rain, Kyra naked in her arms, Kyra cradling their child to her breast and still she climbed. And the peak seemed no nearer. She had lost track of time, there was nothing visible behind her or before her now.

Jason was beginning to flag, he must be suffering too she thought, the poor beast. Unlike her he didn’t even have a reason to be there beyond his role as an unwitting participant in someone else’s drama.

What if this was some terrible trick of the gods she thought? What if she had stumbled into some Sisyphean punishment for her...what? Hubris, ingratitude, lust? What if she and this poor bloody ram were doomed to stagger choking up this horror-scape for the rest of eternity?

What if time passed differently here? It seemed as though they had been climbing for hours, but it couldn’t have been, if it was merely minutes. What if Odessa was still leading her tender hearted lover to her cabin? What if Barnabas was still just climbing the steps to the helm, what if…

Suddenly the foggy air was split by a terrifying sound, ear splitting, rattling Kassandra’s teeth in her skull. Screeching metal and screaming women, the wailing of widows and the clash of armies condensed into one horrifying cacophony.

Jason gave a terrible scream of his own. A sound Kassandra had never heard from a sheep before. He lurched back, flailed his head from side to side, ripped free of Thyia’s halter and set off full tilt up the slope. Kassandra couldn’t even grab for him. Her first instinct had been to clamp her hands over her ears to try and muffle the terrible cry somehow. She squinted up through tears and mist and just made out for a moment Jason’s woolly rump disappearing up ahead.

The noise died away, though the aftershocks of it still reverberated in Kassandra’s skull. What in Hades had that been? And what was she going to do now...her bloody sacrifice had just hightailed it,
who knew where?

She stood peering miserably at the length of limp rope in her hands. For a moment she considered offering a prayer to Artemis that she would be able to find him again. He’d set off in roughly the right direction after all. From what she remembered of sheep they were inclined to flee uphill.

She quickly decided against involving the goddess however. After all, she had no real idea what kind of “god” she was intending to sacrifice to. Tactless to ask the virgin huntress to help her find a sacrifice for a competitor, no doubt.

She wiped her eyes with her gritty hands and immediately regretted it. There was nothing for it now. It would be as miserable to try and turn back as to go on. If she didn’t find the ram perhaps she could bargain. Bargain or fight. One or the other. But turning back was not an option. She was not returning to Kyra without having done everything in her power to see this through to the bitter end.

It would be one thing to return home having failed if she knew that she had tried with every breath in her body, but she would not be able to face Kyra and Phoibe if she had just given up. She spat out a mouthful of grit, lowered her head, carried on.

She plodded steadily upwards, breathing Kyra’s name with every step of her right foot, Phoibe’s with every step of her left.

“Kyra, Phoibe, Kyra, Phoibe, Kyra”...on and on until it became as natural as breathing, until she could imagine doing this for the rest of eternity if it came to it. On and on until...

She gagged suddenly, the warm stench of sulphur was suddenly shouldered aside by the sharp, acrid stink of...cat piss? Kassandra frowned, sniffed, immediately regretted it as her eyes stang and her stomach rebelled. She bent forward just in time to avoid vomiting on herself, a gout of sour wine spattered to the black grit between her feet.

Gods, it was vile. Kassandra had been in many a big cat den and they smelled something awful but this was a whole new level. The only thing in its favour was that the stink was making her eyes water so copiously that the grit was washing away and her vision was clearing a little.

She squinted ahead. The mist was thinning and a great dark wall loomed up. Kassandra struggled up towards it. The slope leveled out and walking became easier. The stench increased. The wall loomed higher and higher. Now she was close enough to reach out and touch it. She extended her hand and hesitated.

It was so impossibly black that all light seemed to disappear into its surface. Was it a solid wall or a great sucking void? If Kassandra reached out, would she encounter rock or be drawn into the next horrifying stage of this nightmare?

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course it’s a fucking wall,” she hissed at herself, conjured up an image of Phoibe rolling her eyes at Kassandra’s dramatic imaginings.

She reached out, and encountered warm, sharp edged, open pored rock. It seemed very like pumice, apart from its unnatural blackness, and was no doubt mother to the abrasive sand. On impulse she pulled her dagger and pried loose a small chuck, stowing it in the pouch at her belt.

“There’s your souvenir, Ophelia,” she smiled grimly.

The mist had disappeared now. The wall stretched out to left and right, far further than was possible, Kassandra frowned, the island hadn’t seemed all that big when they’d approached.
She spat a mouthful of grit and looked more critically. There off to her right a short distance was, not such much a light area, but a patch where the rock was less black. It was the only anomaly she could see, so she made for it, breathing through her mouth to try and make the stink more tolerable.

It wasn’t very successful because the closer she got to the light patch the worse the smell became. By the time she was close enough to see that it was a narrow opening in the rock, curtained with hanging creepers the smell was all consuming. She could taste it in the back of her throat as though all the lions in Greece had been coming to spray these particular creepers since the dawn of time. Despite her best efforts she recoiled.

One thing was for sure, she thought, that damn ram certainly hadn’t come this way. She wasn’t even a prey animal and she wanted to get as far away as possible. Or was she a prey animal? She had no real idea what lurked beyond that crack in the wall. But she hadn’t come this far, gone through everything she had, wasn’t putting Kyra and Phoibe through the uncertainty of her absence for her to turn tail at a bit of cat piss, she frowned.

Bracing herself, holding her breath, she lunged forward, shouldering her way into the wet, stinking curtain of vines.

In truth she had half expected it to go on seemingly forever, another terrible nightmare test. But just three good strides and she burst through into a large, moonlit clearing.

The smell was gone, the mist was gone. She turned sharply. Sure enough, the gap through which she had entered was also gone. Kassandra took a few very welcome deep breaths. It smelt, of something bright, sharp, vaguely metallic.

The clearing was large and well lit by the full moon. Around the edges were mounds of huge, impossibly smooth rocks, like a Titan’s skipping stones. Many of them were scoured with deep white gouges. That was all. No way out, no way in. Beyond the titanic pebbles the black wall loomed. Not a gap was visible.

Kassandra spun on her heel in the centre of this bizarre arena. There had to be something here, surely. There couldn’t be just nothing at the end of this terrible journey. Was she expected to do something?

Oh shit! Was this the point where she was expected to sacrifice the ram?

That bloody ram! Wandering hopelessly about this grim place. There was nothing for him to eat. The stinking vines had been the only life Kassandra had seen in the place. The stupid beast should have stayed with her. She would have made sure his death was quick and clean, just like she’d promised Thyia. Now he was going to die a miserable death of starvation. And so was Kassandra, if she didn’t find a way out of here.

She gave a huge sigh, damned Jason to Tartarus, or the sheep equivalent, and loosed a great roar of rage, and frustration and disappointment. It echoed around the walls of the arena, reverberating back, mocking her.

Then, suddenly there was terrible laughter, like the clanging of slightly cracked bells. It rippled around the clearing, quickly followed by a deep “whoomph, whoomph,” of air, strong enough to knock Kassandra clean off her feet. She landed ass first in the sand, eyes clamped shut against the vortex of grit raised by the downdraft, and a deep, seductive, unnerving voice purred,
“My, my, what a bold little creature!”
Once again thanks are due to my co-creator fishbone76 who listened with epic patience to my ramblings about this bloody sphinx long into the night and worked hard to keep me reined in.
Thank you, buddy.

When she was sure the dust had settled Kassandra opened her eyes, blinked cautiously head down, to clear any grit from her lashes, then looked up slowly.

Across the clearing from her, crouching on the smooth rocks, folding its vast wings against its back was a huge sphinx.

Kassandra had thought she was prepared.

The first time she had encountered a sphinx, years earlier, she had felt as though she had dropped a coin and seen it fall upwards. The creature had no right to exist and yet, there it was, muscles rippling, tail twitching, breath stinking.

This though was of a different order of magnitude. The beast was vast. Its dagger clawed paws were broader than Kassandra’s chest, its tail thicker than her thigh, the bushy end twitching sharply.

It was still carefully folding wings of shiny metallic looking feathers, each as long as Kassandra’s sword. They would be big as sails when unfolded, she thought, gazing wide eyed and slack jawed at the creature.

Satisfied that its wings were safely at rest the sphinx turned its massive head to look at her. Its face was unnaturally beautiful, smooth, sexless and impassive as a statue. Great golden cat-irised eyes gazed serenely at the tiny interloper before it. It smiled revealing a grin full of needle sharp teeth.

“A visitor,” it purred. “How delightful. It’s been simply eons since I had a visitor, little….” it peered at her curiously and Kassandra had to steel herself to stand her ground. This sphinx could definitely eat her it if decided it wanted to, she realised.

“….little...misthios?” It decided.”A misthios after all this time? How audacious!”

“I mean you no harm...mighty sphinx,” Kassandra held out her open hands.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as the sphinx gazed at her. Then it threw back its head and roared with laughter. The sound clattered about the arena, forcing Kassandra to clap her hands over her ears.

“Ah.. you flatter us both little warrior,” it smiled unnervingly. “What a silver tongue you must have. How delicious. Come closer you bold little creature. Let me see you.”

Kassandra’s legs refused to move for a minute, she had to consciously will herself to take that first step towards the beautiful nightmare towering above her. It waited patiently for her to move, ran a wet, pink tongue over its smiling lips. Kassandra stopped when she was close enough to smell the
rank, raw meat stench of its breath.

The sphinx lowered its head, till its face was just feet from Kassandra. The golden eyes observed her, unblinking, undecipherable. It peered for what seemed like an eternity and Kassandra steeled herself, held her nerve, didn’t flinch, even when it eventually gave a wet snort, spattering strings of slimy mucus against her breastplate.

“You may stand back now,” it resumed its crouching position. “Your audacity amuses me. How popular you must be back in the world of men. I assume the world of men still continues? It has been such a long time since I stalked its halls. Tell me now, why do you come to visit me, if not to seek my head, or my tail, or my wings? If not to curry the favour of kings?”

There was an expectant pause before Kassandra realised that the time had come for her to supply an answer. The creature certainly loved the sound of its own voice, she thought.

“I come seeking a boon of you, mighty sphinx,” she decided to play it safe. It was certainly aware of flattery, but not, she suspected, immune to it. “Word has reached me of your extraordinary power, I come to beg a favour.”

The creature cast an amused eye in her direction, twitched its tail again, missing Kassandra’s feet by inches.

“Yes, popular indeed,” it chuckled disturbingly. “How men and women alike must fall before your seductive tongue. It’s been so long since I heard another voice. Tell me more, tiny warrior. Tell me your wish. Amuse me with your request. Entertain me.”

“I have heard tell that you guard a magical spring,” Kassandra ventured. “Waters with the power to transform human flesh,” maybe she shouldn’t have used the word flesh, she thought. She didn’t want to give it ideas. “I beg admittance to your treasure.”

There was another pause before the sphinx once again threw back its head and roared its terrifying laugh. The rocks themselves shook with it. Kassandra, grimaced, hands over ears, was on the verge of begging it to stop, when it did.

“I beg admittance to your treasure!” it chuckled with evident delight. “Tell me little one, how many women have you charmed onto their backs with that one?”

To Kassandra’s utter astonishment, the sphinx raised a paw and wiped its face, like a monstrous house-cat.

“For your barefaced flattery I will entertain your request,” it shook its shaggy head, the mane of golden curls that framed its face whispering enticingly. “Tell me more of your desires little one? Why do you request transformation? Is your body not spectacular enough among your kind already? Who do you desire that you have been unable to seduce with your clever tongue and calculated charm? You must desire them very much indeed to have come so far to woo them?”

“It’s a boon for my wife,” Kassandra said quietly.

“Your wife,” the sphinx remarked thoughtfully. “The world of men has truly changed since last I walked there. They were not always so kind to your sort, little one.”

“They’re not always kind now, but she’s my wife nonetheless,” Kassandra responded curtly.

The sphinx turned, gave her a sharp look.
“A good answer, little misthios,” it smiled. “And the first time you have been honest with me tonight I think. Why does your wife wish you to change? Are you not... sufficient for her,” it asked slyly.

“I’m more than sufficient, thank you,” Kassandra snapped, took a step back as the sphinx swiftly lowered its head.

“You may curb your honesty now, tiny one,” it hissed. “Then why does she want this change?”

“She wants a baby,” Kassandra replied simply.

The sphinx drew back, frowned thoughtfully.

“Do they still wage war in the world of men?” it asked at last.

Kassandra was puzzled but answered quickly. “All the time. Continually.”

“And one of the fruits of war is still orphans I assume?” it seemed to be thinking aloud. “Why not simply harvest one of those for her? You humans are able to bond with offspring not of your flesh I seem to recall? Is that not correct?”

“You are correct, mighty sphinx,” Kassandra nodded, “and we have a daughter who is not of our flesh, but she is our daughter all the same. But my wife wishes to carry a child within her.”

“Then why not simply find a suitable stallion for your mare?” the creature frowned, tilting its head. “Choose a handsome, virile one. Kill him afterwards if his presence concerns you. There is no shortage of breeding specimens surely?”

Kassandra swallowed hard as guilt flooded her chest, making it difficult to breathe, let alone answer. The sphinx waited. After a while it seemed to lose patience, flexed its toes, the great razor edged claws of its paws emerged, scraped gouges in the rock where it sat.

“If you do not wish to continue our conversation? “ it sighed. “I shall bid you…”

“I suggested that,” Kassandra couldn’t meet its eyes. “I said that to my wife. I hurt her very much, mighty sphinx. She does not want the child of another. She wishes me to put the baby in her.”

“I see,” the sphinx settled back on its haunches, massive muscles bunching. “Thank you for your honesty once again. You have earned another question I believe.”

“I haven’t asked you a question yet,” Kassandra was puzzled.

“Not from you, foolish one,” it huffed, amused. “So you have endured all this out of guilt? Guilt over offending her sensitivities? It hardly seems sufficient.”

“It’s not out of guilt,” Kassandra raised her head.

“Then why are you here, little one?” the sphinx lowered its head slightly, stared at her intently. “You have already endured much and if I were to grant your request there would be much yet to endure. If not guilt, then what? Consider your answer well, little warrior, you have only one more chance to satisfy my curiosity.”

Kassandra thought for a moment, thought back to Kyra’s face, the night they had fought and she’d made her stupid suggestion.

“She’s sad. I want to make her happy. She wants to carry my baby, that would make her happy. I want to make my wife happy, mighty sphinx.”
The sphinx snorted in disgust, a great blast of rank, meaty breath hit Kassandra in the face and she winced.

“A lazy, facile answer, misthios,” it got to its feet. “The spring is not for cowards, yet you give me a coward’s answer. Your path down will be easier than your journey up, that is all I am prepared to grant you...for the entertainment you have provided. Send your wife next time, perhaps?”

It turned its back on Kassandra and began to walk away, lithe muscles stretching and bunching as it began to climb the smooth rocks up to the wall.

Kassandra felt her blood turn to ice as she watched it turn to leave. After all this, all this effort and pain, after all everyone had gone through, it was just going to turn its back on her and stalk away?

No, she had not come so far to have the decision be made like this, to have it hold her future in its terrifying paw and swat it aside as though it meant nothing. No, she would not return home before she had made this arrogant, conceited creature listen to her.

“NO!” she took a step forward and grabbed hold of the only thing she could reach, the thick muscular rope of its tail. “Don’t turn your back on me,” she pulled hard.

Everything happened too quickly.

The beast whirled round with unexpected speed, claws and teeth bared, the swing of its tail knocked Kassandra off her feet to sprawl in the gritty dirt as the creature leapt at her. Its mighty paws landed either side of her shoulders, sending up clouds of dirt. Its head lowered.

It was no longer beautiful. Its face was contorted with rage, bestial with indignant fury. Jaws gaping, it snarled furiously, great ropy strands of saliva trailed down onto Kassandra’s breast plate. Its breath stank like a charnel house.

Kassandra didn’t blink. She held its gaze. If she had to die here, then so be it. But she would die trying.

“Hear me, mighty sphinx,” she breathed.

The beast stopped, still astride Kassandra, still drooling ravenously onto her chest. Then as she held her nerve, maintained her gaze, its face melted back into impassivity, then...amusement. It lifted its mighty head and laughed again, nearly deafening Kassandra, her ears hurt with the sound of it.

To her relief the creature carefully moved its paws, turned, walked away, still laughing, resumed its pose on the rocks. Kassandra struggled to her feet, ears ringing, slimy drool sliding down her armour onto her thighs.

“You bold little creature,” the sphinx said when it had regained its breath. “I cannot remember the last time I was so entertained.”

It tilted its head and peered at Kassandra as though seeing her for the first time.

“You do realise that I could have eaten you?” it smiled.

“Indeed,” Kassandra nodded a little shakily. “Thank you for not doing so, mighty sphinx.”

“You are welcome,” it nodded. “Should it happen again, however, I shall not be so amused. Do we understand each other?” It waited for Kassandra’s solemn nod.
"So, I will ask you again. And this time answer me honestly. You will not receive another “last chance”. Why are you here? Think very carefully."

Kassandra thought. Carefully.

She thought right back to the very beginning of this endeavor. To that morning in Kyra’s meeting room. To the first time she’d seen her wife take another woman’s child in her arms and hold it to her breast. She thought about the tender smile she’d see her bestow, and how it had made her heart clench in her chest, and how she’d been too shallow to understand why or even question it.

Her eyes swam at the images. The sphinx waited patiently. Licked a paw.

She thought back to that afternoon with Phoibe. How long it had taken her to grant Phoibe the small mercy of calling her “mater”. Worse still, she thought of all the times she’d woken young Phoibe from the grip of a terrible nightmare to hear her sob sleepily, and murmur “mater” against Kassandra’s neck. She thought of all the times she’d pretended that she hadn’t heard.

Tears began to roll down her cheeks. The sphinx waited patiently, blinked.

She thought back to the night of her terrible fight with Kyra. Of her lazy, insensitive suggestion. Of how she’d treated it like any other problem to be solved. How she’d asked Kyra no questions, offered no comfort. How she had totally failed to understand the real nature of the problem. Of how terrified she’d been at the thought of losing her that night and yet had still failed to really understand.

The sphinx waited patiently. Watched with polite curiosity as tears dripped off Kassandra’s chin.

She thought about how it would feel to lie in bed beside Kyra and place a protective hand on her swelling belly. Of what it would be like to feel her child, their child shifting inside. Of how it would feel to stand beside her smiling, exhausted wife and see her hold forth a wriggling, messy little body and ask Kassandra to look at the beautiful thing they had made together. Of what it would feel like to sit beside Kyra and see her bare her breast to the hungry mouth of their baby, a baby with Kassandra’s amber eyes, and Kyra’s clever smile.

She sank to her knees, dropped her head. Tears ran from her nose and chin. The sphinx waited patiently.

She thought of what it would be like to watch that child grow. To see Phoibe take it under her wing. What it would be like to watch it learn to walk, and talk. To teach it to ride and climb and swim. To see it grow into some impossibly beautiful blend of its mothers, to see it grow into its own person, but half of Kassandra nevertheless, To know that even when she had crossed the Styx there would be a part of her living on, a part of her and Kyra. Kassandra and Kyra together, making something unique.

She fell forward onto her hands, sobbing. The sphinx waited patiently. Blinked. Tilted its head, quizzically.

"I want the baby, I want Kyra’s baby,” Kassandra breathed, so low it was a wonder the sphinx heard, but it did.

A slow , satisfied smile spread across its face.

“A good answer,” it nodded. “The answer of a bold little warrior,” it got to its feet, shook itself hugely, wings clattering, golden curls swaying. “This has been the most entertaining night I have had in eons. Thank you, little one. I wish you joy of your endeavour. It is in your hands from here,” it turned and began to climb the rocks.

The sphinx climbed atop the wall of black rock, blinked. There was a shimmer below where it stood and part of the wall melted from view.

“Undress here,” it stretched out its massive wings. “Take nothing in with you but yourself and your wish.” It clenched its legs, ready to spring into the air. “Oh, how rude of me. I almost forgot to thank you for your gift.”

Kassandra frowned, puzzled.

“I brought you no gift, mighty sphinx,” she shook her head, expecting some cryptic response about honesty or truth.

“The sheep?” the sphinx licked its lips. “That was not from you?”

Oh! Jason! Kassandra nodded mutely.

“It was absolutely delicious,” the sphinx smiled contentedly. “I’d quite forgotten how much I enjoy eating.”

The downdraft of its departure would have felled Kassandra again had she not already been on her knees. She watched it whirl up into the sky, smaller and smaller, until it disappeared.
Kassandra sank onto her heels, face wet with tears, body shaking with relief. She was pretty sure that if she hadn’t already thrown up she would be doing so now. She covered her face with her hands, tried to get her breathing under control.

After a few minutes she forced herself to her feet. She didn’t have forever to do this, after all. She strode, a little shakily, towards the shimmering doorway that had appeared in the rock wall. She was going to have to climb a couple of the massive boulders to reach it she realised, taking a deep breath, and there was no time like the present.

As she climbed, she began to wish that she’d asked more questions. What was going to happen on the other side of that gateway? How long would it take? It would all change back wouldn’t it? What would happen if it didn’t change back, she thought with a shiver, halting for a moment.

“Then I guess we’ll be having more than one baby,” she found herself laughing, as she continued. The final boulder had a convenient flat, level top, and sitting off to one side was a huge, coppery feather. Not quite as long as her sword, she realised as she picked it up, but not far off. It weighed next to nothing, looked like burnished metal, but flexed and bent just like a bird feather.

“There you go, Ophelia,” she grinned. “Don’t say I didn’t bring you something amazing.” She tucked it behind her breastplate and walked to the gate. It shone like the inside of an abalone shell, but glittering and twinkling somehow.

Kassandra took a breath, steadied her nerves and stepped boldly forward. Only to be bounced right back again. She frowned, puzzled and was about to try again, more forcefully when she remembered.

“Take nothing in with you but yourself and your wish.”

She felt a little uncomfortable at the thought of leaving her armour and weapons on this side of the gate, but reminded herself that she hadn’t so much as touched the hilt of her dagger whilst she was talking with the sphinx. All would be well.

Kassandra began to undress, slowly, methodically, using the familiar routine to calm herself. She placed her weapons neatly together to one side, piled her armour beside them. It was chilly in the clearing now that the sphinx had left she thought, folding her tunic neatly, removing her underwear, placing the clothes atop the neat pile of armour.

Finally she unbraided her hair, she had no idea if the thin cord she used to bind it would count as “something” but by this stage she wasn’t prepared to take the chance. She wound it into a neat spool and tucked it into her empty boot.

Naked, she shivered a little, from the temperature drop rather than nerves now. She could feel her
nipples tautening in the chill air, gooseflesh raising on her arms. The sphinx must have been radiating an enormous amount of heat, she thought.

She took another deep breath, flexed her shoulders, took one final look around her and stepped forward.

This time the shimmering gate admitted her, her skin tingled as she entered, her loose hair waved slightly as though a breeze had caught it and then she was through.

Kassandra stood, looking about her in astonishment. She wasn’t sure what she had expected, but it hadn’t been a warm, fully enclosed cave like chamber, walls smooth and nacreous, with a large pool of milky pink water in the centre. The pool glowed somehow, illuminating the whole room.

She approached cautiously, looking about her. It wasn’t exactly a “spring”. Perhaps there’d been a translation error there, she smiled. A fine, pinkish mist was swirling at the surface. Mist, or steam, she wondered? It wouldn’t do to just go sticking your foot right in there, hadn’t the sphinx said something about there being more to “endure”?

Kassandra would endure whatever it took at this point, but she preferred to be prepared all the same. She crouched down by the side of the pool, it had a smooth, pebbled ridge around it, some sort of mineral secreted from the rock perhaps? Reaching out carefully she held her hand over the surface of the water. Rather than drifting away from the motion, the mist seemed to cling about her hand, licking up her arm towards her elbow. She flexed her fingers and the mist wound between them, warmer than her skin, tickling lightly.

Cautiously, with the back of her hand downwards, Kassandra tested the temperature of the water. It was comfortably warm, and she was suddenly irresistibly tempted to climb right in. It would feel wonderful, she thought, after the dirty, dusty journey here. She got to her feet, and the mist came with her, swirling about her entire body, drifting up around her face, flowing into her mouth and nose, till everything smelled and tasted faintly of roses.

Kassandra took a cautious step into the pool, testing the depth. Her leg sank in to mid thigh and she held onto the pebbled rim to keep her balance. This wasn’t water, surely? Water wasn’t so thick and creamy? She bent and dipped her fingers, raised them to her face, squinted curiously. The liquid clung to her skin more like a sweet smelling lotion than water. She watched in amazement as it sent out thin, inquiring tendrils up the length of her fingers, licking at the sensitive webbing, curling about her knuckles.

Feeling an odd sensation about her thighs, she looked down to see the same thing happening on a larger scale from the surface of the pool. The liquid was flowing up her legs, smooth snaking tendrils detailing the big, strap muscles of her thighs, insinuating themselves between her legs, soaking the curls of her sex, seeping between her labia, coating the hard curve of her ass, creeping up, rushing along the sharp cut of her hips, smoothing across the flat plane of her lower belly, tickling into her navel.

More and more flowed up, curtaining her flanks, rippling across the ridged muscles of her torso, sending tiny teasing tendrils out to curl around her nipples before spreading out, coating the whole of her breasts in a silky pink film. Licking across her shoulders, down her back, creeping into her armpits and over the strong muscles of her arms, right down to the tips of her fingers. Her whole body was filmed in the fragrant liquid now, and she should be panicking as it crept up her neck, over her face, soaking into her hair, flooding her mouth and nose.
But she wasn’t.

The sense of relief as she set foot on the dockside at Mykonos was almost overwhelming. She wanted to run through the dark quiet streets to the leader’s house, sweep Kyra up into her arms, bury her face in her hair, breathe deeply, kiss her for days.

She didn’t quite run, but she couldn’t help breaking out into a jog as the villa came into view. It was dark, outside and in. Clearly they weren’t expecting her back yet, she smiled.

Should she creep in silently, sneak into their bedroom, slide in beside Kyra, wake her with kisses? It was odd that Orion hadn’t heard her enter, she thought. Perhaps he was fast asleep in Phoibe’s room, the door tight closed.

Kassandra padded up the stairs. The house felt a little chilly. How long had she been away? The sun had been blazing when she left.

Here she was now. She grinned, took a breath, opened the bedroom door as quietly as she could, stepped inside and out onto a barren hill.

There was a tall figure silhouetted a little distance away from her, its back towards her. Kassandra strode forward, legs trembling a little.

“Kyra? Kyra, my heart?” she called. “Why are you standing out here in the middle of the night?”

The woman turned.

Phoibe’s face stared back at her. Hair iron grey, face lined, eyes infinitely sad.

“Where were you all these years, Kassandra?” she said softly, face wet with tears. “She waited as long as she could. She waited for you Kassandra,” she stepped to one side.

Kassandra gazed down at the grave stone she’d revealed, gazed at the marble surface, gazed at Kyra’s name carved there, sank to her knees and howled to the sky as Phoibe turned to dust beside her and the breeze carried her away.

The sound of Kassandra’s anguished howls still echoed about the chamber as she jolted upright, heart racing, chest heaving. She covered her face with her hands and shuddered. The cold terror still gripped her as she struggled to get her breathing and pulse under control.

Eventually the shaking stopped. Had that been part of the process, Kassandra wondered? The sphinx hadn’t been wrong about endurance.

She sat upright, ran her fingers through her hair, was surprised to find it was totally dry and felt soft and silky. Kassandra glanced down. For all that it had clung to her skin earlier, the pink liquid had seeped away, leaving her skin soft and clean. The pool seemed to be emptying. She could hear a faint trickling noise, and the fluid level was down around her navel now and lowering slowly.

Kassandra took a deep breath and looked down, her breasts and belly seemed unchanged. But she hadn’t been expecting anything to happen there, had she? No, Ophelia had said something about a
conjoining of the sexes. Clearly she got to keep her breasts. Kyra would be pleased. She mustered a nervous smile and tried to concentrate her mind between her legs.

Could she feel any change? Any difference in...configuration? How would she know? What would it feel like? She clenched her thighs and pressed them cautiously together. She could feel nothing. Looking down, she saw that the pool had lowered another inch or two, soon she’d catch sight of her pubic hair. Should she wait?

“Coward!” she hissed at herself, and impulsively slipped her hand below the surface, easing her fingers through the thick curls at her sex. Down an inch or two further and she encountered….her labia!

Kassandra leapt to her feet, almost slipping in her haste, splashing the remaining milky liquid over the rim of the pool. She looked down, desperate. There were the ridged muscles of her belly, the cut of her hips, the thatch of thick curls, already clean and dry of the pink fluid...then nothing.

She clapped a rough hand between her thighs, explored in panic. There was no change! There were her labia, her clitoris, totally unchanged. She slid two fingers deep inside herself and bellowed in rage.

“You lying, cheating, CAT!”

The room echoed with her fury. She clambered out of the pool, paced angrily back and forth. She wanted to kick down the walls. She wanted to sit and weep. She wanted to find that lying sphinx and strangle it with its own tail. She wanted to drag its corpse home and throw it at her wife’s feet. She wanted Kyra.

Kassandra sank down onto her heels and rocked. All this way. All this effort. All this money. All the suffering she’d put everyone through and nothing had changed. She wanted to go home to her wife and daughter. Wanted Kyra to take her in her arms and try and convince Kassandra that it didn’t matter. That she could still love her just the same as she did before. She wanted Kyra.

Suddenly she felt utterly defeated. She had done everything she could. She’d dragged herself through every challenge presented and still she had failed. There was nothing else she could do now. It was time to go home. She wanted Kyra.

As she dressed, Kassandra wondered what the “lesson” was that the sphinx had wanted her to learn. The smug, self righteous creature!

Presumably she was supposed to learn not to challenge nature, or the fates, or the gods, to be satisfied with her lot, to learn to be content with what she had.

It would say that it had taught her self reflection, no doubt. The cheating bastard! It could have just told her that, could have just said no to her request, instead of leading her on like this.

Outside the sun was rising. As soon as she stepped outside the chamber, tucking the sphinx feather into her breastplate, everything disappeared. The rocks, the walls, the mist, everything. There was no volcano, no sulphurous vapours, nothing.

It was just a big black hill on a barren rock. Everything had been a fraud, she’d been cheated about everything, it was all a lie.

And it had eaten her fucking sheep! Made her a liar to Thyia. She would tell her that she’d killed him quickly and cleanly, that he’d been calm and felt no pain. No need for her to know he’d been eaten by a monster.
She began the dismal journey back down the slippery slope. Way off in the distance she could see the tiny shape of the Adrestia. She had to trek back all that way to tell them all it had been a waste of time. A fool’s errand, she scowled bitterly, sliding a little in the black grit.

And now there was a cramping in her belly, she grimaced. To add insult to the multitude of injuries she’d been subjected to, here was her period nearly a fortnight early.

“Damn you to Tartarus, you lying cheat!” she yelled at the sky, convinced that this was also somehow that bloody sphinx’s fault. She stretched her back, took another step.

And doubled over.

It felt as though a great hand had plunged deep into her pelvis grabbed everything it found and twisted. She managed to gather her hair together and drape it over her shoulder just in time as she spewed about a cupful of thin pinkish fluid into the dirt. Bizarrely, it still smelled of roses. She spat angrily and struggled to her feet, slipping in the sand.

Ordinarily her bleeding was of little concern to her. Three days of minimal blood and very little pain. She knew that Kyra suffered more, that Phoibe’s were uncomfortable for her, that Savina had a couple of very painful days every month and she’d thought she was sufficiently sympathetic. She’d been wrong she realised, so wrong. It was all very well bringing them tempting little tidbits to cheer them up and filling the odd stone bottle with hot water, but when she got home she must try harder.

How in Hades, did Kyra and Savina work through this? She gasped as the wrenching pain hit her again and she lost her footing, sliding in the rough grit, feeling it rip her knee raw. The pain of that was inconsequential compared to the next twisting spasm.

She fell to her knees again, the breath driven out of her, clutching her belly, sweat breaking out on her brow. To her horror she felt something actually twist deep inside her, heard a soft wet stretching sound.

No, no, no, this wasn’t right, she shuddered. This was very wrong. The sphinx’s punishment for whatever it perceived her transgression to be wasn’t disappointment, it was an agonizing death.

This wasn’t some monthly bleed. She slipped a shaking hand under her tunic, beneath her perizoma. Sweating and trembling, she slid her fingers down between her legs.

Oh, there was something very wrong here. A chill ran through her body. She withdrew her hand. No blood. There was no blood, but something was very wrong. She wanted Kyra. If she was going to die she wanted to see Kyra one last time.

Barnabas, she thought. He would get her home. He would get her back to Kyra. she needed Barnabas. Kassandra struggled to her feet, began to stagger and slide down the hill.
“Here you go,” Odessa walked over, cups of watered wine and a large oil-smeared flat bread in her hands. She leaned on the rail beside Barnabas, handed him a cup and tore the bread in two.

He demurred but she pushed it into his hand.

“Eat,” she said. “You’ll need it when our beloved commander comes swaggering out of that mist with some dead thing over her shoulder and an unbelievable tale on her lips.”

“I wish I could be so sure,” he muttered quietly, peering into the swirling fog as he had done for most of the night.

Odessa snorted. “She always comes back Barnabas,” she said reassuringly.

“People always do,” he sighed, “till the day they don’t.”

“Whoa!” she drew back theatrically. “You definitely need some food inside you,” she encouraged. “Have you been standing here worrying all night?”

“I don’t like this place,” he shuddered, hunching his shoulders inside his shawl. “It gives me a bad feeling.”

“I’m not surprised,” Odessa took the bread from him, tore off a smaller piece, folded it, offered it to him. He took it reluctantly, chewed without any enthusiasm. “It smells like a Minotaur’s asshole and you can’t see your hand in front of your….whoa!” she gaped, wide eyed.

The mist had gone. It hadn’t shifted, or drifted, or lifted. It had simply ceased to be.

“Well,” she said quietly. “That’s a...good...thing...right?” She sounded neither convinced nor convincing.

“There’s nothing here,” Barnabas looked about. “It’s just a big barren rock!”

“Yeah, Odessa squinted off into the distance, peering up the hill. “Where’s she supposed to find these magic pots, or whatever the fuck it is the daft old priestess has sent her for? Is she supposed to dig for them? Though apparently that’s not as ridiculous an idea as it sounds,” she said, amused. “Young Phoibe told me this story about one time...she...she was…” she tailed off, peering hard across the rocky beach and up the slope.

Suddenly a grin spread across her face.

“There she is!” she slapped Barnabas’s shoulder and pointed off to the ridge-line.

Being possessed of both eyes Odessa’s vision was somewhat better than Barnabas’s but if he squinted hard he could just make out a tiny figure, beginning to make its way down the slope. It had to be Kassandra, there was no other indication of any life in this godforsaken place.

“I knew she’d be back,” Odessa sounded more relieved than her words would suggest. “Drink up Barnabas, we’ll be out of this stinking hole in an hour right?”

“Yes, yes,” he realised. “Go, get everyone ready, we need to be ready to move, as soon as Kassandra gets here.”
“Will do!” Odessa grinned, draining her cup and finishing the last of her bread.

Watching her go, and hearing her happy yelling below decks, Barnabas felt a huge weight lift off his shoulders. He had been here all night, dozing occasionally where he stood, jolting awake each time he lost his balance, hoping against hope that Kassandra would materialise from the mist at any minute. At some point he had been woken by faint, but terrible noises, like nothing he had ever heard and had felt a shiver of fear run through him.

Now though, all was well, there was the faint glint of sunlight on bronze as Kassandra began to make her way down the hill. He strained his eye trying to make out more than a tiny figure, dark against dark, the occasional glint of bronze, flash of deep red.

The sounds of the ship jumping to life cheered him further still, the grim mood of the island had descended over the whole crew last night. But now, hearing that their beloved commander was returning and that they would soon be turning their backs on this dreadful place he could feel the mood lift. There was shouting and laughing below decks as the rowers roused themselves, readied for another day’s labour.

“Well everyone is going to be glad to see the back of this fucking place,” Odessa returned, joined Barnabas at the rail. “What an absolute shithole,” she shook her head. “I hope she’s at least found something spectacular to make it worthwhile,” she squinted off up the hill, looked a little concerned.

“She’s taking her sweet time,” she frowned. “What is she doing?” she peered hard. Kassandra seemed to have stopped, be kneeling down. Was she picking up something from the ground? Was the place full of small artefacts that they couldn’t suspect from here?

Whatever she’d found, she was taking her time over it. Odessa was about to become concerned when Kassandra seemed to get to her feet again, set off down the slope once more.

“What is it Odessa?” Barnabas noticed her puzzled expression, he couldn’t see as clearly as she could, just the vague outline of Kassandra creeping down the slope.

“Nothing, nothing,” Odessa shook her head, mustered a smile. “She’s picking up some crap off the ground I think. Bloody pottery pieces no doubt,” she sighed. “Here she comes now, she getting a bit of a move on…” she watched carefully.

“Oh shit!” she gasped. Kassandra wasn’t running down the slope, she’d lost her footing, was stumbling, falling, sliding down the gritty incline. “Something’s wrong Barnabas!” she grabbed his arm.

Kassandra had slid far enough down the slope now that she was within Barnabas’s range of vision. He watched in horror as she tried to struggle to her feet, took a couple of doubled over paces, collapsed in the sand, apparently face first.

“We need to go get her,” he shook off Odessa’s arm. “She’s hurt, we need to get her.”

“Wait, wait,” Odessa called. “We can’t carry her back. We need Basileos,” she named one of their beefiest rowers, one of only a few she considered capable of carrying Kassandra down that treacherous looking incline.

“Get him,” Barnabas called over his shoulder, he was already half way down the gangplank. “Send him after me. Tell Theis to be ready. I don’t know what’s wrong but Kassandra is definitely hurt,” he was yelling over his shoulder now as he set off across the beach. “Odessa! Be ready to move as soon as we get aboard, you hear? As soon as!”
He ran across the beach and began his ascent of the steep incline. The faster he tried to run, the slower and more arduous it became. His feet became buried in the gritty sand, it crept into his boots, scratching his feet.

Soon his legs and his lungs were burning but he couldn’t slow down, Kassandra was gradually growing closer. He could see her struggling to get to her feet, failing, decided to crawl through the black grit.

“Slow down, old man, you’ll go faster,” it was Basileos’ gruff voice at his shoulder. “Take longer, slower strides, you won’t sink in so much,” he advised, coming up beside him.

Barnabas knew it made sense but he couldn’t control his legs. They wanted to skate him over the surface of the sand to Kassandra’s side. He wanted to drop to his knees in the unforgiving dirt and take her in his arms. Tell her she was going to be all right. Tell her how sorry he was for not being there to protect her, how he never should have let her go.

Basileos realised his advice was falling on deaf ears. He slipped a brawny arm under Barnabas’ shoulders and hauled him into his side, where he could control the old man’s speed himself, half drag him up this treacherous hill.

With every one of Basileos’ mighty strides they drew closer and closer to Kassandra. She wasn’t even trying to get up now, opting instead for crawling through the sand, head down, still occasionally dropping prone and convulsing around her belly.

When they were close enough to hear her agonised groans, Basileos released Barnabas from his grip, allowed him to scrabble through the dirt, fall to his knees, bend down next to Kassandra.

“Kassandra, Kassandra,” Barnabas put a gentle hand on the back of her head. “My sweet girl, what has happened? Please? Where are you hurt? Who did this to you?” he would kill whoever was responsible himself, with his bare hands if he had to.

“Barnabas?” she flopped onto her side and peered up at him, managed the weakest excuse for a smile he had ever seen. One side of her face was coated in a thin layer of the black grit, small blood droplets seeping through here and there where it had grazed her skin.

Barnabas took a clean corner of his shawl and began to carefully dust away the sand, leaning forward to blow it gently from her eyelashes.

“Yes, pup, it’s Barnabas,” he nodded. “What happened? How are you hurt?”

“I don’t know, Barnabas,” she whispered hoarsely. “Something’s wrong. I...gods!” she hissed, curling up, hugging herself about her lower belly, clutching at her groin. “Something’s very wrong,” she blinked tearfully at him. “I want Kyra,” she breathed. “Will you get me to Kyra? Please? Whatever happens,” tears were tracking down through the grime of her face. “Please Barnabas?”

He bent low and pressed his forehead to hers, fighting back his own tears.

“If I have to carry you to her myself,” he promised.

She whispered in his ear, so low he could barely hear her.

“I’m afraid.”

He took a great hitching breath and got to his feet, turned to Basileos. The huge man was standing to one side, concern etched on his usually impassive face.
“Pick up the commander Basileos,” Barnabas instructed. “Carefully as you can. We need to get her back to the ship as quickly as possible, don’t wait for me if I can’t keep up with you, I’ll catch up, just get her to Theis as quickly as you can, understand?”

Barnabas’ orders seemed to jolt the big man back to his senses.

“Is it poison, do you think?” he knelt beside Kassandra. Her face was grayish and sweaty now, and her eyes seemed far away. “Has someone given you poison, commander?” he asked as he slipped an arm under her shoulders, another under her knees and braced himself to lift. If she heard, she was beyond answering.

He got to his feet with a slight grunt of effort that was drowned by Kassandra’s low groan of pain as he settled her against his chest for the short trip.

“I’m sorry, commander,” he tried to get her into a position that might be more comfortable for her, but she was quiet now, seemed barely conscious. “It seems like poison, no?” he looked anxiously at Barnabas, as if he expected the old man to be able to give him some reassurance.

“I have no idea, Basileos,” Barnabas shook his head. “That’s why you need to get her to Theis as quickly as you can. Don’t waste time talking, go. And don’t slow down for me, I mean it, fast as you can now.”

For the first dozen or so steps Barnabas kept stride with them, but he quickly fell behind. As he sensed it, Basileos hesitated, glanced back.

“Go, you heedless bear,” Barnabas snapped, “what did I tell you? Don’t make me put you ashore here,” he waved him off.

Basileos swallowed, looked down at Kassandra’s pale, sweaty face, hitched her a little closer to his chest and set off at full stride.

As he watched them draw away from him Barnabas’s throat tightened painfully. He wished he could carry her himself, wished he could keep up with them, wished for fleet footed Hermes to bless Basileos with the gift of speed, even if just for the next few minutes.

Struggling through the sand, forcing himself to take slower, more controlled strides, struggling for breath, he peered ahead, saw Basileos walking up the gangplank, made out the tall, slender figure of Theis rushing to meet him. Watched a brief conversation take place, and saw Theis raise her head, look past Basileos towards Barnabas.

“Never mind me, woman,” he hissed. “Look after Kassandra.”

Theis clearly had every intention of doing so, she grabbed Basileos’ arm and pulled him in the direction of Kassandra’s cabin, and out of sight.

A couple of minutes later, Basileos reappeared, ran down the gangway, strode full stretch across the beach and up the slope towards Barnabas.

“She’s got her now,” he told him. “Let me help you, old man,” he slipped an arm under his shoulders, pulled him in so tight and close he was almost carrying him against side and set off back down towards the ship.

“Stop calling me old man,” Barnabas made a perfunctory protest. But he was glad of the help all the same, he needed to be there, needed to see Theis’s every expression as she examined his girl. Needed to read the healer’s face for anything her voice might not say.
At the top of the gangway Odessa and Thyia were hovering around anxiously.

“Barnabas,” Odessa began, uncharacteristically solemn. “Are you all right? What’s happened to Ka…”

“What did I say Odessa?” he tried to catch his breath as he made his way across deck towards Kassandra’s cabin. “Be ready to leave, the instant we’re all on board. We’re all on board. So get us out of here!”

She nodded and turned, raised her voice to a surprisingly loud bellow for such a petite figure.

“You heard the man! Let’s get the fuck away from this godforsaken place, and may we never catch sight of it again!”

Barnabas stopped outside Kassandra’s cabin door, tried to steady his breath, control his trembling hands, prepare himself for what he might be about to see and hear.
Chapter 21

The instant he rapped on the door, he heard Theis’ calm, warm voice calling him in.

Kassandra was lying on her bunk, moaning and whimpering, as Theis first looked into her eyes then gently but firmly eased open her mouth and looked inside. She frowned and turned to Barnabas.

“Do you have any idea what happened out there?” she asked while running strong, exploratory fingers down Kassandra’s neck, stopping to check her pulse, frowning.

“No,” he shook his head, held his hands clasped together at his breast to try and hide how much they were shaking. “Do you know what it is?”

“Not yet,” Theis shook her head. “She’s so pale,” she placed the back of her hand to Kassandra’s sweating forehead. “Pale but so hot,” she frowned, puzzled. “Get some more lamps would you Barnabas, please? Let’s get some light in here, see what we’re doing.”

She sat up, rolled up her sleeves and unclipped a key from her belt.

“Go to my cabin please,” she handed it to him. “Bring my tools, they’re on the table by my bed, in a brown bag. And this,” she handed over a much smaller key. “Is for the wooden box next to them. Open it and bring me the small blue pottery bottle. Do you have all that?” she waited for confirmation.

“Lamps, your toolbag, and the small blue bottle from the wooden box by your bed,” Barnabas nodded, calmed a little by the combination of being given something to do and Theis’ warm, steady voice.

He raced out, found Thyia hovering anxiously near the helm and instructed her to gather some extra lamps, take them in to Theis. Then he set off for the healer’s cabin and by the time he returned with her tools and the bottle, Thyia, and Odessa no doubt, had illuminated the room so it was bright as day.

“Better, no?” Theis pulled over a stool and lay her toolbag on it, slipped the small bottle into her belt. “Things often seem better with a little light on them.”

“Do you know what it is yet?” Barnabas hung at her shoulder, gazing anxiously down at Kassandra.

She didn’t seem fully conscious, sweat was running down her face, trickling into her hair, occasionally her eyes would open and she would make a grumbling protest, twitching her hands away as Theis tried to examine them.

“Not yet Barnabas,” Theis gave a soft, humourless smile. “I’m good, but even I need a bit more information to go on. Help me get her undressed would you? I’m worried she’s going to fight a bit.”

Together they removed Kassandra’s armour and piled it neatly in the corner of her cabin. Barnabas frowned as he untangled a knotted strap.

“What is it?” Theis cocked her head, seeing his puzzled expression.

“She would never put her armour on in such a slapdash way,” he shook his head, looking at the clumsy knot. “All fastened up wrong and her boots loose, bracer slipping down like that.”
“So she took it off at some point and put it back on in a hurry,” she glanced over her shoulder at her patient, she looked a little smaller lying there in just her tunic, she thought, but not much.

Theis spotted something on the floor at her feet and bent to pick it up, it looked like a huge, fine metal feather. She held it up before Barnabas.

“What in the name of Hermes is this? Do you know?”

Barnabas took it from her with trembling fingers.

“Oh sweet Hera,” he breathed. “There was a sphinx!”

“A sphinx?” Theis frowned. “I think there’s something you need to tell me Barnabas,” she saw his reluctant expression.”You know me well enough by now, my friend, to know that anything that is said to me in the sickroom goes no further,” she perched on the edge of Kassandra’s bunk and caught one of her flailing hands in her own, stroked it soothingly.

“It’s going to sound unbelievable,” he shook his head, placed the feather reverently on the table behind him.

“And yet here she lies,” Theis nodded at Kassandra. “And there lies that,” she looked at the sphinx feather, it seemed to glow in the lamp light. “So try me Barnabas, you’d be surprised at some of the things people tell me. She wasn’t looking for old pots in that terrible place, was she?”

Barnabas shook his head, moved over to the bed and stroked Kassandra’s sweaty brow slowly.

“That was just a cover story,” he admitted.

“And a pretty weak one if you don’t mind me saying so,” Theis smiled. “Long way to come for some old pots for an equally old priestess. I assume those,” she nodded towards a poorly wrapped bundle in the corner of the room, half hidden behind a chair, “are “cover” pots?”

Barnabas followed her gaze and nodded miserably.

“Well the commander is a remarkable woman in many ways,” Theis patted Kassandra’s clammy hand. “But I don’t think anyone could accuse her of being a criminal mastermind. And, honestly, thank goodness she didn’t drag us out here on some fool’s errand for Ophelia. She was hunting a sphinx?”

“I don’t think that was actually the purpose of the trip,” Barnabas sighed. “The sphinx was...incidental.”

“An incidental sphinx,” Theis gave a brief laugh. “Now I am intrigued. However I do wish you’d get to the point Barnabas, there might be some clue to what ails her in your story.”

She got to her feet.

“Come, help me take off her tunic,” she sighed, covering Kassandra with a sheet. “Let me look for...well for sphinx wounds, I suppose. Though they might be a little out of my sphere of experience,” she got hold of Kassandra’s arms and dragged her to sit up in a half embrace. “Talk as you work, Barnabas.”

He grabbed hold of the back of Kassandra’s tunic, it was soaked with sweat, and tugged hard. She moaned and struggled a little in Theis’ arms.
“Oh, you didn’t like that, did you sweetheart,” she took the opportunity to examine Kassandra’s back, there were a few grazes to her shoulders where she’d fallen in the dirt but nothing significant. Laying her back down she began to examine her chest. Kassandra groaned and protested a little but didn’t seem in any real pain here. “Carry on Barnabas,” she sighed.

“I’m dithering because I don’t know much,” he flung out his arms in frustration. “She wouldn’t tell me the details,” he said, watching as Theis carefully examined Kassandra’s arms, taking in the scrapes to her elbows, rolling her eyes a little at the sheep bite, peering closely at any visible veins.

“Then just tell me what she did say, “ she didn’t look round. “However vague or ridiculous.”

Barnabas heaved a great sigh.

“She said there was a sphinx on this island...and some sort of...magic spring. She was going to ask the sphinx for a wish or something.”

“Well,” Theis placed Kassandra’s arm down gently at her side. “I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest that her wish wasn’t for a lingering, agonising death?”

“What?!” the blood drained from Barnabas’ face and he reached out to touch Kassandra’s head again.

“I’m using humour as a coping mechanism,” Theis sighed. “Calm yourself. Do you know what she did wish for?”

“Not exactly,” he shook his head, pushed a damp tendril of hair back from Kassandra’s forehead. “Her wife...Kyra?” he glanced nervously over to Theis.

“Yes, yes, I know the wife, go on,” she said dryly.

“She wants a baby,” Barnabas murmured guiltily, feeling as though he was betraying a confidence somehow.

“And Kassandra decided to ask a sphinx for one? Rather than any of the other more prosaic solutions that might suggest themselves?” Theis shook her head. “However ridiculous the rest of this tale might sound, that part at least seems totally in character,” she sighed.

“Ohhh,” Barnabas clapped a hand to his mouth, wide eyed. “You don’t think? Do you think? The sphinx hasn’t put the baby….in…” he pointed in the general direction of Kassandra’s belly with a trembling finger.

Theis turned, smoothed the sheet about Kassandra’s waist and gave the suggestion some consideration.

No, no, I don’t think so,” she said at last. “You generally only get this much pain when it’s coming out Barnabas, not when it’s going in, unless you’re doing something very wrong indeed. You said that Kyra wanted a baby? I honestly can’t see the commander wanting to deal with swollen ankles and morning sickness. No one wants that of course, but I can see Kyra enduring it for the sake of the baby.”

Kassandra was moaning quietly and clawing a little under the sheet. Theis slapped her hands to her knees and got to her feet.

“I’m going to give her a little milk of poppy,” she went to the table and poured an inch of water into a clean cup, took the blue bottle from her belt, unstoppered it and added a few drops of a milky
looking liquid. She glanced over her shoulder, eyed Kassandra up and down and then added a few more drops, stirring the mixture with her finger.

“Milk of poppy?” Barnabas frowned, “Why? What are you going to do to her?” he turned to stand between Theis and the bunk.

“Calm yourself, old man,” Theis laughed. “I’m not going to hurt your pup. Quite the opposite. She’s in pain and sleep will help her. Also I want to fully examine her and I’m afraid that she’ll break my nose if I try at the moment.”

She came to stand by the bunk. “Lift her head a little would you, help me get this down.”

Barnabas sat by Kassandra’s head, lifted her shoulders so she was lying against him.

“Here we go,” Theis said brightly as Kassandra opened her bleary eyes, and squinted suspiciously at her. “A little milk of poppy to help you sleep, child.”

“I don’t want any milk of poppy,” she grumbled.

“The first intelligible thing you say all morning and its uncooperative,” Theis shook her head. “Of course you want some milk of poppy, everyone loves this stuff, that’s why I have to keep it in my cabin, under lock and key.”

Barnabas gave her a slightly scandalized look.

“It’s true,” Theis shrugged. “They’d be in it like rats the minute my back was turned otherwise. Come on now, open wide, it’s just a little drink.”

Kassandra frowned, pursed her lips together and rested her face against Barnabas’ chest.

“Such a baby,” Theis sighed. “Do I have to get Barnabas to pinch your nose? Or are you going to open up like a good girl?” she adopted a soothing tone. To her utter astonishment Kassandra turned and looked up, eyes a little less pained and fearful.

“There we go,” Theis smiled. “Just take this little drink for me and everything will stop hurting and you can have a sleep. When you wake up, everything will seem much better, you see if it doesn’t.”

Kassandra opened her mouth and Theis took immediate advantage of what could after all be temporary compliance, to pour the mixture in quickly.

“Good girl,” she breathed as Kassandra grimaced. She reached out with a gentle finger and stroked her jaw. “You swallow that down for me now. There we go,” she smiled fondly, watching her gulp and shudder a little. "Good girl,” she whispered, patting her hand and getting to her feet. “Well that just goes to show;” she smiled at Barnabas’ astonished expression. “You never can tell.”

“Never can tell what?” he frowned, puzzled.

“Eh? Oh..er..what sort of...technique is going to work with a patient,” Theis settled. “That will take a minute or two to take effect. She doesn’t normally use it though so she should feel it quite quickly. When she’s calmed I’m going to examine her properly Barnabas, and you aren’t going to want to be there for that, and she probably wouldn’t want you to be.”

He frowned and then realised what she was talking about.

“You could do something for me while I do that, if you would?” she watched as Kassandra’s face
began to relax a little. “I may as well give her a wash, and change these wet sheets, while I’m doing it. Could you manage to get some warm water and a couple of clean sheets do you think? It doesn’t have to be hot, just take the chill off it.”

“Yes, yes, I can do that,” He nodded, eager to be distracted. He gently lowered Kassandra back onto the damp pillow, she made no protest this time he noticed, she seemed to be drifting into sleep.

“Warm water, clean sheets,” he made his way to the door. “What shall I tell the crew? ” he stopped and frowned.

Theis thought for a moment.

“Tell them it’s poison,” she smiled without much humour. “Half of them already think that. They think everything is bloody poison,” she sighed.

She waited until he had left and then turned to face Kassandra. Her face was calm and relaxed, her breathing steady. She looked much younger suddenly, Theis realised with a sad smile. She reached out and pinched the soft flesh at the back of Kassandra’s upper arm. She didn’t flinch.

“All right,” Theis gave a sigh. “Let’s see if we can find out what ails you,” she reached out and began to fold back the damp, crumpled sheet that covered Kassandra to the waist.
Okay, notice the change in the tags.

If the body transformation tag wasn't enough warning and the latest development isn't your cup of tea and you're going to stop here...we'll miss you, but we understand. Does it help if we tell you Kassandra keeps it tucked in her perizoma most of the time? And we are going to make a note of the chapters where she enthusiastically doesn't, so you could just skip those?

For everyone else, you've been really patient and the eagle has finally landed.

As she pulled it back to mid thigh, Theis stopped, dropped the sheet and placed a hand to her mouth. She stood for a good minute, saying nothing, not moving, just staring, wide eyed. Then she took a couple of deep breaths to steady herself, unknotted Kassandra’s perizoma and began to cautiously unwind it. It was a bit of a struggle removing it unaided, Kassandra was heavy for her to move on her own, and she knew her hands were shaking a little.

Eventually she managed, a little inelegantly, to pull and drag it off her. Kassandra had been totally uncomplaining throughout, to her relief, she didn’t want to have to deal with this and an ornery misthios on top of it.

There was no real point in neatly rolling the cloth, she knew that. It was soaked with sweat and covered with grit. She rolled it all the same, breathing steadily while she did so. By the time she put it aside she felt more in control of herself. She turned to look at Kassandra, shaking her head slowly.

“Well this is a hell of a thing,” she breathed. “I don’t know what your wife is expecting, but I’m sure it’s not this.”

A couple of years previously a young boar had made an ambitious, if misguided, attempt to disembowel Kassandra while she was out hunting. He’d been roasted for his troubles, but he did manage to catch her a glancing blow along the line of her groin. Kassandra had limped back to the ship annoyed, with the boar over her shoulders and her leg curtained with blood.

Given where the wound was Theis had taken enormous care stitching it up, using the finest sutures she could manage. It had taken forever, and as a result Theis was probably as familiar with the usual configuration of Kassandra’s crotch as anyone, outside of her lovers.

Consequently she could say with total confidence that there had not been a penis there before. She was sure she’d have noticed. And she was absolutely certain she’d have noticed one that looked like this.

For a moment she wondered if it could be a trick of the light, but she moved one of the lamps closer, lowered her head, squinted hard, shifted her head to look from different angles. No, it wasn’t a illusion. She put down the lamp and reached out a tentative hand.
“Forgive me, child,” she whispered and lowered her hand to touch Kassandra’s lower belly. From just below her navel running down to her crotch was an iridescent trail of what looked like mother of pearl.

She ran her fingers along it slowly. Theis was not sure what she’d expected to encounter, but it felt just like skin. She ran the flat of her hand across Kassandra’s belly, it felt just like the rest of her skin, just as warm, perhaps a little bit smoother, but that could be her imagination.

She followed it down with the flat of her fingers, it grew a little wider as it reached a thick nest of pale pinkish-white curls. Curls that felt just like soft human hair, a little damp with sweat, gritty here and there, where that damned sand had crept inside her clothing. Impulsively Theis brushed her hand quickly back and forth to dislodge the grit, it seemed ugly amongst so much beauty.

Because all this was beautiful she realised. But...not... right? This wasn’t right, surely? Theis could not have felt more unnerved if the sphinx itself had materialized in the cabin.

“Pardon me please, Kassandra,” she whispered, reaching up to touch her hand briefly by way of apology.

The nacreous skin extended into Kassandra’s groin and a little way down her inner thighs, and even in this bizarre situation Theis couldn’t help a feeling of satisfaction at her previous handiwork. She stretched the skin of Kassandra’s groin where she had been wounded. You’d have to be in a very intimate position indeed to notice there was a scar there at all, she smiled proudly.

“Now,” she eyed the pearlescent flesh nestling at the juncture of her muscular thighs, “What have we here?”

It was quite obvious at first glance what she had there. A good sized, decently girthed penis lay limply against one thigh. Theis slipped a hand beneath and with professional detachment, quickly checked for testicles. Everything seemed perfectly normal.

Apart from the fact that her new genitals and the surrounding skin looked as though they were filmed with abalone shell.

Apart from the fact that none of this had been there this time yesterday.

She got to her feet, took a couple of steps backwards and eyed the whole length of Kassandra. Theis hadn’t removed her strophion yet having been distracted by the curious skin discolouration.

She moved back, hauled Kassandra’s limp, unprotesting form half upright and unfastened her last piece of clothing. More of that damned sand fell out. Theis frowned and tossed aside the grubby cloth.

Nothing had changed here she observed, she’d seen Kassandra’s breasts often enough while patching her up. Totally unchanged, no nacreous embellishments here. Mother of pearl nipples might have been a nice addition she thought, a little facetiously.

She stepped back from the bunk again to take in the whole picture. She’d only discovered it a few minutes ago, but already, it was beginning to seem, less disturbing somehow.

As a healer she was relieved that everything seemed intact and functional, but more than that, it all looked as though it belonged somehow, sitting there prettily just above the juncture of her thighs.

Theis rubbed the back of her neck and shook her head a little.
“Well I’m not sure many people could carry it off Kassandra,” she laughed softly. “But somehow you’re making it work, I think.”

There was a light tapping at the door, Barnabas was back with the water and sheets, she realised. Carefully draping the sheet back over Kassandra, tucking it neatly under her arms and folding it a little at her crotch to disguise the suspicious bulge there Theis went to the door.

Barnabas was there, bucket in one hand, sheets, cloths and a fresh tunic under the other arm, face a picture of anxious hopefulness.

“Do you know what’s wrong with her?” he bustled in, dropping the linens by the bed and putting down the bucket. “Can you do something for her? Is she going to be all right? What do we need to do?”

Theis held up a hand in the hope of derailing him. When he stopped she took a deep breath.

“There’s nothing actually wrong with her Barnabas,” she began, holding up a hand to stop him when he began to protest. “I know that we thought she was dying when you brought her on board and, honestly, she probably felt like she was, poor girl,” she cast a sympathetic glance over at Kassandra’s now peacefully sleeping form. “But I really think all she needs now is rest.”

“I don’t understand,” he shook his head and went to sit on the bunk by Kassandra’s hips, taking her hand in his.

Theis eyed the shift in the sheet nervously, edged behind him, casually re-folded it a little.

“She was in so much pain,” he hadn’t noticed, too preoccupied with looking at Kassandra’s face.

“And no wonder,” Theis sighed. “But I think it’s all done now. She’s tired. I imagine she’ll be sore when she wakes, but I don’t think there’s anything else to worry about. I’ll get her washed, put that fresh tunic on her, you can help me change the sheets if you would, and then we should just let her sleep it off. She has the constitution of an ox, she’ll be fine.”

“If you’re sure,” he got to his feet, still looking a little unsure. “Do you need help?”

“There comes a point Barnabas when every girl is too big to bathe in front of her pater,” Theis laughed at his shock.

“I absolutely did not mean that!” he was outraged, “I was going to send in one of the women to help you.”

“Odessa?” Theis laughed heartily, beginning to feel a little relieved after the earlier tension. “We’d be better off with you.”

“Well I probably wouldn’t have chosen Odessa,” he said primly.

“No, no, Barnabas,” she patted his shoulder. “It won’t be as easy as it would be with two, and I probably won’t do as good a job, but the fewer people who see her the better. Kassandra needs to be in charge of who knows about this,” she finished thoughtfully.

“They all already know she’s ill,” Barnabas stopped on his way to the door and turned to look suspiciously at Theis. “There’s something you’re not telling me?” He took a couple of steps towards her, stared her in the eye. “What is wrong with my girl, Theis?”
She held his gaze for a few moments, then looked down at Kassandra.

“Ah, Barnabas,” she sighed, rubbing her hands over her face. “I… I shouldn’t tell you…”

“That girl is like a daughter to me,” he said, voice tightly controlled. “She’s the only family I have. If there is something wrong, you need to tell me. If there is something, anything that she needs…”

“Shush, shush now Barnabas,” Theis shook her head. “I know what she means to you. And she’s probably going to need a man to talk to when she wakes up,” she said thoughtfully, to herself as much as him. “And you’re the most appropriate one.”

“Why would she need a man?” he frowned, looking round Theis’ shoulder towards the bunk.

“It’s not what you think,” she took him by the shoulder and walked him up to the bedside.

“You have no idea what I’m thinking,” he said tightly.

“No, but I’m damn sure you’re not thinking this,” she gave him a humorless smile. “The Pythia herself couldn’t have seen this coming. You told me that her wife wants a child?” she waited for his nod, to confirm that he was listening.

“And that Kassandra had come to ask the sphinx for help in some way? Well the sphinx has kept its side of the deal. It has given her something that she will be able to… give to her wife, in order to give her that child.”

She watched his face as he struggled to make sense of what she was saying. Eventually he shook his head.

“No, no, I saw her laying in the dirt on that terrible rock, she had no bag, nothing in her hands, if the sphinx gave her something, it was very small, enough for her to tuck in her belt. And we found nothing… except for the feather? Is it the feather?” he spun to look at the table.

“No no,” Theis took his arm, turned him back to the bunk. “Not the feather. And to be quite frank with you, it’s not particularly small either. She won’t need to be embarrassed at the bath house,” she smiled wryly. “Though I don’t suppose she’ll be doing much public bathing for the foreseeable future,” she thought aloud.

“You aren’t making any sense, Theis, just come out with it, tell me what has happened,” he was beginning to sound frustrated with her cryptic hints.

“The sphinx has given her the ability to impregnate her wife I believe,” she leaned forward and pulled the sheet taut enough across Kassandra’s hips to reveal the outline of her penis against her thigh.

Barnabas watched what she was doing, gradually realised what he was seeing, stared open mouthed, wide eyed, took a couple of stumbling steps back and nearly fell over the stool.

“There’s more,” Theis began to fold the sheet down.

Barnabas sprang into action, grabbing her wrist.

“No, no, no,” he shook his head. “I don’t want to see it, that’s not right. She’s not even awake to cover herself.”

“I’m not going to show it to you, Barnabas,” Theis soothed. “But you should see this,” she took one
of the cloths from the pile he’d placed by the bed, folded it, and slipped it under the sheet to cover Kassandra’s breasts before easing the sheet down right to the very edge of the nest of pink-white curls, revealing the line of shimmering iridescent skin running down from below Kassandra’s navel.

“Merciful Hera!” he breathed, reaching out towards it impulsively, before drawing his hand back with a jerk as he realised what he’d been about to do. “What is it? What’s on her? What is that stuff?”

“It feels like her skin,” Theis shrugged. “It feels clean, soft, smooth, warm, just like her skin, but if her skin were made out of abalone shell somehow. It’s all like that, all the skin around there, but quite distinct edges. I don’t think it’s anything spreading, not an infection, nothing like that. It’s just like pearlescent skin.” She replaced the sheet.

“And her...the er...” he nodded awkwardly in the general direction of Kassandra’s crotch.

Theis took pity on him and didn’t tease.

“Just the same,” she folded her arms. “I checked everything. It all seems structurally sound, everything is where it should be, feels like it should, just this pretty pinkish shimmer.”

“Oh Kassandra!” Barnabas sighed, rubbing his face wearily. “What have you done now, girl?”

“A very sweet thing I think,” Theis smiled at the sleeping figure. “I don’t know if it’s what she was expecting. I’m going to guess that the shimmery pink might be a surprise. But imagine Barnabas, all so she can give her wife a baby. And some men won’t even spend fewer nights at the taverna,” she gave him a wry look.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he drew back, “I’m rarely at the taverna these days!”
When Kassandra woke the next morning her first thought was that she’d been kicked in the crotch by a horse. Her second thought was that something much smaller had crawled in her mouth and died overnight.

She struggled to sit and looked about her for water. Seeing none, she decided to get up and go look, she couldn’t remember ever feeling so thirsty. As she made to swing her legs over the side of the bunk the cabin door burst open and Barnabas came striding in with a jug in one hand and a cup in the other.

“Kassandra!” he exclaimed, his voice shooting up the scale in his excitement. “You’re awake, oh thank the gods. Thank the gods,” he rushed over, as she swung her legs down. “Oh, perhaps not eh?” he tucked the cup under his arm and dithered about, hitching down the hem of her tunic towards her knees.

“What are you doing, man!” Kassandra slapped his hands away. “Stop fussing. Is that water?” she eyed the jug thirstily.

“Indeed,” he made to pour her a cup, but she grabbed the jug from him and began to gulp it down gratefully, splashing a little down her chin and the front of her tunic, stopping only when she needed to breathe and the jug was half empty.

“Yes, I thought you might be thirsty,” he blinked. “And how...how...er how are you feeling?”

“Barnabas,” she rubbed the back of her neck, frowning at her slight headache. “Did I get kicked by a horse? I’m asking seriously,” she glanced over at him, reached down to rub her belly.

“Ah, eh, let’s not do that just yet,” he reached out and grabbed her hand. “No, not a horse, no. Well I mean I can’t say for certain, obviously, I wasn’t there, but I don’t get the impression there were any horses there. You had to take your own sheep after all.”

“Sheep?” she frowned, puzzled.

“Yes,” he nodded. “Jason, you remember?”

“Jason!” Yes! Kassandra remembered Jason, that black hearted, slot eyed, son of a gorgon. He’d bitten her fucking elbow, she thought ruefully. Had he head butted her as well, the evil bastard? She was glad the bloody sphinx had eaten him!

Sphinx?

Sphinx!

Suddenly it all came rushing back to her.
The interminable climb up that treacherous hill, dragging that bloody ram. The stinking mist. The
sphinx. That great, beautiful, terrifying creature. Pushing and probing her for the truth and then
sneering at her answers. But she’d won hadn’t she? The pool! The strange seashell cave with that
weird pool, warm and thick, like bathing in pink honey. The awful dream, waking howling in grief
and despair.

She remembered her rage too. That fucking sphinx had lied to her, for all its talk of honesty, it had
lied. She’d woken expecting change and reached down to find her cunt. And for the first time in her
life, she’d actually been disappointed to feel it there. And that feeling of disappointment, about
something that had only ever given her pleasure, hurt almost more than her perceived failure.

Kassandra dropped an apologetic hand to her crotch, and encountered a handful of soft, yielding
flesh!

She was stunned for a moment, squeezed cautiously and gave a brief gasping snort of astonishment.
Barnabas could see the water jug drooping in her other hand. He reached out to take it from her and
was about to speak.

Kassandra grinned slowly. The sphinx hadn’t lied after all! It had teased and tortured but in the end it
hadn’t lied. And she’d called it so many terrible names.

“I’m sorry sphinx,” she said under her breath. “I’m really sorry for calling you a cat.”

Barnabas took a breath, he wasn’t sure what he’d expected her to say, but it hadn’t been that.

For her part Kassandra had completely forgotten he was there. Stunned by her discovery she pulled
up the hem of her tunic before Barnabas could stop her. He gave a startled little squeak and put an
astonished hand to his mouth.

Kassandra stared down, a horror struck expression creeping steadily across her face.

“That cheating bloody sphinx!” she growled. “Lying, deceiving bastard animal! May it rot in
Hades.”

For his part Barnabas had politely turned, was looking at the wall.

“I’ll kill it,” Kassandra snarled. “I will hunt it down and kill it. I will make sails out of its fucking
wings, I swear to Artemis!”

“No, now, Kassandra, let’s not bring the goddess into it,” Barnabas soothed. “I’m sure it’s all
going to be all right in the end. Admittedly it’s probably not quite what you were expecting but…”

“Barnabas,” Kassandra took a deep, slow breath and said quietly. “I wonder if I might have a few
minutes alone to consider this development,” she lowered the hem of her tunic with studied
precision.

“Ah...have you? Are you er..” he waved vaguely behind himself.

“Covered myself? Yes. Indeed I have. I’m sorry about that Barnabas. I wasn’t thinking, I do
apologise,” she said stiffly.

“No, no, nothing I haven’t seen before, well not like that of course. Oh...no...I mean just not yours .
There’s nothing wrong with it at all, it’s very...sparkly...no, not sparkly...what’s the word?” He
catched the withering look she was giving him, and assumed what he hoped was suitably placatory
body language.
“I imagine this has been something of a surprise to you after all. Are you sure you’ll be all right? You don’t need a hand at all? I don’t mean a “hand” hand, obviously,” he course corrected quickly. “Just in the sense of “assistance”, at all. This is very new to you, I understand that you might…”

“I am sure that I will be able to manage for a little while,” Kassandra was still suspiciously calm he thought. “I would just like a few minutes to...be alone with my...thoughts.”

“Of course,” Barnabas conceded. “If you need me, “ he edged towards the door. “I will just be…” he opened it carefully and sidled around. “Just be out at the helm,” he poked his head back round one final time.”You just need to call? Don’t sit here worrying on your own. Right, then. I’ll see you...in a little while.”

Kassandra waited until she was sure he was well away from the door before she threw back her head and yelled.

“Fuuuuuuuck!”

She leaned forward, buried her face in her hands. A large part of her hadn’t believed this would work at all. Had expected to go back home unchanged and have to deal with Kyra’s disappointment at that.

The smaller part of her though? The part that had secretly thought from the beginning that it would work had just wanted a nice, functional, hopefully not too unattractive cock that Kyra would have been happy enough to deal with for the three weeks or so till it disappeared again.

What in Hades was Kyra going to say when she unveiled this?

There was a sharp knock at the door and Theis called in.

“Are you all right Kassandra, we heard a shout?”

Kassandra was on the verge of sounding off, but reminded herself, just in time, that it was generally considered very foolish indeed to get on the wrong side of the ship’s healer.

“Yes, thank you,” she settled.

“Good,” Theis said brightly. “I’m going to pretend that I completely misunderstood you and come in anyway,” she opened the door and walked in, eyeing Kassandra assessingly.

She was sitting slumped on the edge of the bunk, hands on knees, looking gloomy.

“How are you feeling today?” Theis asked, closing the door behind her.

“How do you think I feel?” Kassandra replied snippily

“I don’t know, that’s why I asked,” Theis was resolute. She picked up the water jug, poured a cup and offered it to Kassandra. “Drink up, you probably have a bit of a headache. You’ve been asleep for over twenty four hours. I bet you’re hungry too, right?”

Kassandra hadn’t considered this. She was starving, she realised, taking the cup and draining it.

“Anything hurting?” Theis refilled the cup, eyed Kassandra sympathetically.

“Only everything below the waist,” she muttered, drinking this next cup more slowly. Her thirst was abating now, and her headache was a little less. In fact now that she understood why her pelvis was aching even that seemed manageable.
She slid off the bed and stood a little shakily, testing her legs.


“What?” Kassandra sighed. “Do you mean my...the er...”

“You can say “cock”, Kassandra,” Theis grinned. “I work on a ship. I won’t faint. Is there any pain there?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” she grumbled, “I’m not sure how I’d know. It’s not hurting right now though, so there’s that at least.”

“At least?” Theis put down the nearly empty jug. “Were you not expecting this?” she frowned.

“This!” Kassandra gestured towards her crotch. “I was expecting a regular human cock, not this...this... this ridiculous, shimmery magic seashell cock of Poseidon, or whatever the fuck I’ve been landed with! “ she raged.

“I can see how it might be a bit of a surprise at first,” Theis nodded serenely. “I was a little taken aback initially, but quite quickly...”

“You mean, you...?” Kassandra tailed off.

Of course Theis had seen it. Someone had cared for her overnight. There was a dressing on her knee and ointment on her various cuts and grazes, a bandage on that bloody sheep bite and someone had bathed and changed her.

“I’m sorry Theis,” she bowed her head a little. “Thank you for caring for me last night.”

“Not at all, and Barnabas deserves as much thanks as me, he sat by your side all night,” Theis took a step closer, touched her arm gently.

“It’s going to be all right Kassandra. I can imagine...well no, I can’t actually,” she realised, shaking her head,” but it must be a bit of a shock right now. Give it a few days though and you’ll be pissing up trees with the best of them,” she grinned in what she hoped was a reassuring fashion.

Kassandra seemed unamused.

“Theis,” she sighed quietly. “What’s my wife going to say?”

“About you pissing against trees? “Don’t do it”, I imagine,” Theis teased, and received a withering look for her trouble. “All right, all right. I imagine the first thing she’s going to say will be something along the lines of “welcome home beloved wife. I have missed you so much and prayed for your safe return”...that kind of thing.”

“And when I unveil this?” Kassandra said bitterly.

“Honestly, I imagine her first exclamation may well be one of surprise,” Theis said, thoughtfully. “Because it is unusual after all. But then I expect the next thing she says will be “oh, how pretty” or something like that.”

Kassandra snorted dismissively.

“Why would she not?” Theis asked seriously, tilting her head to meet Kassandra’s eyes, she looked shamed and fearful. “It’s a rather handsome one actually and believe me, I’ve seen all sorts. Absolutely conventional, apart from the colour. And actually I think it’s far prettier than a regular one
if you ask me,” she smiled.

“Your hair is lovely too. Though I’m sure it delighted her before of course,” she soothed. “She will be charmed. You did all this for her after all. What wife could fail to be won over?” she stroked Kassandra’s arm gently. “Now, have you used it at all yet?”


“Have you peed yet?” Theis looked about the room for the chamber pot. “Because believe me if it doesn’t work for that, then worrying about the aesthetics will all be moot because there’s a reasonable chance you’ll be dead before we reach Mykonos...unless I can work something out,” she frowned thoughtfully.

Kassandra silently digested this rather sobering piece of information.

“I take it that’s a “no, Theis”, ” she smiled. “Let’s not panic yet. You’ve just drunk an entire jug of water. Any minute now eh?” she grinned. “Here we go!” she located the pot. “Let’s be prepared. Imagine, you’ll be able to pee off the side of the ship!” she nudged Kassandra’s arm excitedly. “The convenience!”

“Yeah, well I won’t be pissing off the side of the ship any time soon, Theis,” Kassandra looked dubious. “I’d rather no one knew about this really.”

“And no one does so far, besides Barnabas,” Theis assured her.”We’ve told the crew you were poisoned, you’ll be a bit off-colour for a couple of days but then you’ll be fine, so you’re covered really. Stay in your cabin for today, rest, get some sleep. You’re probably still feeling the effects of the milk of poppy. I gave you enough to fell a horse to be quite honest. I’ve never had to put you out before. I’ll bring you some food and more water. Tomorrow you can make your triumphant return, to the relief of your devoted crew, no? All will be well, no one will suspect a thing. So long as you don’t give yourself away.”

“What? By accidentally pissing off the bow?” Kassandra snorted.

“Well that would be one way I suppose,” Theis laughed. “Is this a permanent feature now by the way?” she waved a hand in the general direction of Kassandra’s pelvis.

“I, well, no, I hope not, “ she crossed her hands a little awkwardly over her crotch. “Till the next full moon if Ophelia is to be believed.”

Theis gave her a look that could best be described as dubious.

“Really? You’re relying on Ophelia?” she raised her eyebrows.

“She’s been right so far,” Kassandra shrugged. “Admittedly she didn’t warn me that it was going to be some weird sea nymph type deal, but the island was there, the sphinx was there, and it is a cock,” she looked down. “Even if it’s a strange one,” she shifted a little awkwardly.

“Strange and beautiful,” Theis patted her arm reassuringly. “The Naiads themselves would covet you. Don’t worry about the shimmer so much.”

There was a light tap at the door and Barnabas’ head peeped round.

“Is everything well?” he asked hopefully, sidling in and closing the door behind him. “I heard raised voices?”
“You heard a raised voice,” Theis corrected. “I’ve been perfectly calm throughout. Kassandra here is experiencing a little “wisher’s remorse” I think,” she smiled, picking up the empty water jug.

“What? Why-ever would you think that?” Barnabas bustled over, stroked Kassandra’s arm soothingly.

“She’s worried her wife won’t like it.”

“Oh pffft,” he snorted. “She’ll love it! I mean assuming she enjoys….” he decided, just in the nick of time, to abandon that line of thought, Kassandra was eyeing him warningly.

“She loves you!” he deflected. “With all her heart, anyone can see that. And look what you’ve done so you can have a baby! A little baby,” he smiled wistfully. “Imagine. I can teach it to sail, and swim, and tell it my sea stories. Some of my sea stories,” he amended thoughtfully. “Just the kiddy safe ones of course. It’s going to be so exciting. I’m excited already,” he grinned happily.

“I wonder what you’ll have? A little girl or a little boy? Do twins run in Kyra’s family do you know? Will it look like you or Kyra, I wonder? Oh it’s going to be the most beautiful baby the world has ever seen,” he was clearly lost in a world where he was already bouncing the child on his knee.

“Calm yourself Barnabas,” Theis patted his arm. “She’s not even taken a leak yet. Don’t have her running before she can walk. I’m going to get you some food and water, let people know you’re improving, Kassandra. You think about running water, trickling streams, that kind of thing.”

As Theis closed the door behind her she could hear Barnabas’ very business like tones.

“Peeing, ha! Nothing to it, anyone can do that. You, my girl, are going to piss like a champion! Where’s the pot, let’s give it a try. Don’t look so worried, it’s easy as falling off a horse…or a log…is it a log?”

When she returned a little while later, Kassandra was sitting at the table looking a good deal more relieved than she had when Theis left. Barnabas was standing holding the chamber pot as though it was a prize winning piglet, beaming like a proud father.

“Success, I take it?” Theis laughed, putting down a tray filled with a large bowl of steaming stew, two big flatbreads, a dish of oil and a plate of olives and salted fish along with a jug of wine.

“Success? “Barnabas laughed. “Victory Theis! Kassandra can piss like a racehorse. I never doubted it. Look!”

Theis eyed the contents of the pot with interest, leaning over, sniffing a little.

“Really?” Kassandra was about to start on the stew, her mouth was already full of bread. “Can you not?” she mumbled, chewing, pouring herself a cup of wine. Half an hour ago she’d felt utterly despondent, but Barnabas’ enthusiasm and Theis’ calm reassurance were starting to work. The empty bladder helped a lot as well she thought. And she was ravenous she realised, shovelling down the stew and feeling a little more positive with every mouthful.

“It’s important Kassandra,” Theis nodded, satisfied. “We know that part of it works now. We’d have been in real trouble if it didn’t function properly.”

“What do you mean “we” would?” Kassandra looked up, eyebrows raised.

“Well yes, obviously you’d have been the one dying a painful and undignified death,” Theis agreed. “But I’d have taken it as a professional failure.”
“And I’d have been heartbroken,” Barnabas reminded her. “But now we know you can pee, we can all relax.”

“And it seems to be just perfectly normal urine,” Theis said, sounding content, but looking just a shade let down.

“What in Hades were you expecting?” Kassandra queried round a mouthful of bread and fish.

“Honestly? I wasn’t entirely sure,” Theis frowned thoughtfully. “I thought it might...shimmer somehow. But of course your bladder hasn’t changed.”

“You sound a little disappointed actually,” Kassandra took a mouthful of wine.

“No, no, of course not” Theis protested. “It would have been fun though eh?” she grinned at Barnabas. “Well we can almost give you a clean bill of health,” she looked at Kassandra who was tearing a piece of bread to dip in what remained of her stew. She looked much more like her old self Theis thought, relieved.

“Almost?” Barnabas was making for the door to empty the chamber pot.

“Yes, we just need to know that she’s...ready for action…” Theis glanced at Kassandra.

She licked her thumb clean and took a swallow of wine.

“Action?” Barnabas frowned. “But she’s just…” he nodded at the pot.

“The other sort of action, Barnabas,” Theis smiled. “After all Kassandra, you didn’t go through all this just so you could pee standing up I assume? Though I do think that will be convenient. But anyway, it would be a good idea to...have a trial run eh? Before you try it out with your wife?”

“A trial run!” Kassandra missed her mouth slightly with the cup, brushed the spill from her tunic. “Have you taken leave of your senses? My wife would kill me. And then you!”

“What?” Theis put her hands on her hips. “Not with me, you bloody fool! Or anyone! A solo run I meant. You big idiot!”

“Oh yes!” Barnabas nodded. “That is a very good idea. You don’t want your first time out of the gate to be the night you get back. Don’t want any performance anxiety spoiling the homecoming.”

“If you’ve only got this till next full moon then time is of the essence,” Theis reminded her. “You can’t afford many failed runs. None of your strange sphinx magic will have affected Kyra’s fertility I don’t imagine.”

“Ohh!” Barnabas gasped. “Now I understand why we need to be home so quickly. Gods! I need to tell this lot to put their backs into it. I’ll pray,” he nodded. “As soon as I’ve emptied this. Lots of prayer, strong winds, calm waters. Unless you need me for anything?”

“No, no Barnabas, I think I can manage this on my own,” Kassandra swallowed. She hadn’t even considered that aspect of it. How many days did they have? When were women most likely to get pregnant? Why did she not know anything about any of this? She shook her head.

“Don’t start worrying now,” Theis correctly interpreted her expression. “You’ve enough time, though I’m beginning to think you didn’t try and time this to match her cycle? Never mind!” she patted Kassandra’s shoulder firmly.
“You’re young! She’s even younger, no?” she waited for Kassandra’s weak nod. “Excellent. You’re both healthy I assume. I mean I know you are. I assume the Archon is? She bleeds regularly? No issues that you know of? Good. Let’s not worry about that then. I’m sure once you get this up and running you two will be like newly wed again,” she smiled reassuringly. “Besides, you got a magic cock out of the sphinx, perhaps you got magic seed too! Eh?”

Kassandra looked a little less confident than she had whilst shoveling down food Theis sighed.

“Some more stew? “ she offered. The door opened and Barnabas returned with the empty pot, put it by the bunk.

“Thank you,” Kassandra nodded. “No, no more stew thank you Theis.”

“Oh don’t look so glum Kassandra” Barnabas gave her shoulders a brief hug. “You look tired. You’ve had a very stressful few days and you’ve just made new family jewels out of thin air..well not actual thin air, obviously, but you know what I mean. Rest up now. Get some sleep, spend the evening thinking happy thoughts. Happy thoughts about your wife perhaps?” he waggled his bushy eyebrows suggestively.

“Excellent idea!” Theis agreed. “Finish your wine, get into your bunk, think about what it’s going to be like when you see her again, get to grips with things,” she winked.

“Exactly!“ Barnabas nodded enthusiastically. “Gods I remember when I was a young man,” he laughed reminiscing. “I could spend whole aftern….”

“Why don’t we go and make a little offering to Poseidon or something?” Theis grabbed his arm and led him towards the door before he could expand on his thoughts. “I’ll come with you. Two prayers are better than one eh? Give Kassandra a bit of private time.”
Chapter Notes

Definitely sex adjacent, more low humour, more over-sharing boat-dad, more Barnabas and Theis.

And anyone who reads this needs to offer a silent prayer of thanks to fishbone76 for rescuing this chapter when it nearly went somewhere *very wrong indeed*, totally due to my inept writing!

Still working off the after effects of Theis’ healthy dose of milk of poppy and with a full stomach Kassandra realised that the idea of retiring early to her bunk, suddenly seemed like a very good idea.

She poured herself another cup of wine and smoothed out her rumpled sheets before clambering in. Gods it had been a strange day, she sat back, sipping her wine and reflecting on the events of the past couple of days.

Frowning a little, she glanced down at her crotch. What was Kyra going to say, she wondered? Theis was right, everything did look totally human, just….pearlescent. Maybe it would be all right?

Perhaps Kassandra could arrange it so that the first time Kyra saw her naked it would be in the dark?

She couldn’t stay in the dark for three weeks, obviously, but after a couple of days, when Kyra had become accustomed to Kassandra’s new physique she could introduce a couple of lamps, perhaps?

It would be fine, she told herself. The baby was the important thing, Kyra would turn a blind eye to the unusual colour scheme so long as Kassandra could give her the baby she wanted. The baby they wanted, she thought, swallowing hard.

That was the aspect to concentrate on she decided. The end, not the means. After all Theis was right, Kassandra had faced down a huge monster to win this chance, Kyra would be proud of her.

In a few more nights she would see Kyra again, would walk up the path to the Archon’s villa and take her beautiful wife in her arms at last. Gods, she missed her so badly she realised suddenly.

She wanted Kyra here, now, wanted to curl up in her arms and tell her about all the strange, wonderful, awful things that had happened. She noticed that her cup was empty and getting off her bunk she weaved over to the table to refill it before returning, a little unsteadily, to bed.

Nevertheless it still seemed like an eternity till she would see her again, she sighed, taking a huge mouthful of wine. How long had it been now? How many days since she’d seen Phoibe? How was she spending her afternoons in Kassandra’s absence?

How many days had passed since Orion had bounded onto the bed and clambered heedlessly over Kassandra to wake up his mistress? Big, dumb, slobbery beast, she grinned wistfully.

How many nights had passed since that last night in Kyra’s arms. Kassandra drained her cup as she thought back to it. To Kyra’s tireless tenderness. Her clever fingers and insatiable mouth. To how she’d made Kassandra weep and quiver, breathing Kyra’s name as she came, again and again.
She realised that her hand had automatically slipped to her crotch. Why not? Theis was right, it would be a good idea to find out what this felt like before she got home, before she had Kyra breathless and expectant in her arms.

She conjured up the image of her wife, her bright, intelligent eyes, her clever smile, the way her hair curled softly in front of her ears, that little thing she did with her lip when she was concentrating hard. She stroked herself absently, concentrating on Kyra, the curve of her lips, the arch of her eyebrows, her strong, elegant fingers.

After a little while however she was dragged out of her romantic reverie by the realisation that nothing was happening. She looked down, puzzled. Shouldn’t something be happening by now? It felt pleasant enough surely, but... shouldn’t she be just a little bit hard, at least? How long was this supposed to take?

Had Barnabas said anything about that? Should she go give him a shout and check? No! No! Gods, what was she thinking?

She was being too romantic that was it. Different anatomy, different approach, she decided. She moved her mind from Kyra’s face to her body, the deep tan of her skin, how soft it felt beneath her fingers and lips, the strong lines of her archer’s shoulders, the lean muscles of her arms, her dark nipple breasts that fit so perfectly in Kassandra’s hands, the firm smooth curve of her belly leading down to the fragrant mystery of her sex. Yes, this was better, Kassandra thought, this would get her there.

She conjured up the soft, warm, neatly trimmed hair of Kyra’s sex, how soft it felt against her lips, how it would tickle gently against her nose as Kassandra moved down to nestle between her thighs, diving into the taste, the feel, the scent of her.

She could feel something now, she smiled drowsily, a tingling swelling as she stroked slowly and firmly. Yes this was going to work, she just needed to stay here in her mind, in the safe haven between Kyra’s legs with Kyra’s fingers carding lazily through Kassandra’s hair, as she drew whimpering cries of pleasure from her.

What the hell! She scowled down at herself, it had been working! She’d definitely felt it, why was she suddenly soft and limp again? Kassandra gave a frustrated groan. This was a lot more difficult than she’d imagined, she frowned. Wasn’t she supposed to just think sexy thoughts and stand to attention? Was that not how it worked? Was she not thinking sexy enough? Perhaps she needed something a bit more... urgent?

Kassandra cast her mind back for something suitable, settling on the time the Adrestia had been caught in bad weather on the way back from returning a visiting dignitary to Kos.

They had been delayed for three days and when Kassandra finally returned, apologetic, weary, hungry and frankly a bit grubby after an extended stay on board, Kyra’s reaction had betrayed that she had been frantic with worry.

She’d asked Savina to cancel her final meeting for the day, something Kassandra had known her do on very few occasions and had dragged her wife upstairs, pushing her into the bedroom, kicking the door closed behind her, tearing at Kassandra’s armour, tangling the fastenings into knots in her haste, tossing the pieces heedlessly to the floor, devouring her as she uncovered her, pushing her down, mounting her hungrily.

Kassandra had initially protested, she smelt of salt and sweat and pitch, she knew, and not in a good way. But Kyra hadn’t wanted to listen, raking her fingers through Kassandra’s hair, tugging her
braid loose, driving a rough thigh between her legs, rutting hard against her, biting her shoulder hard enough to bruise, scratching desperately at her flanks, breaking the skin, making Kassandra hiss with pain just the wrong side of pleasure, before thrusting three fingers deep inside her. Kassandra had been wet despite herself, on the verge of an astonished orgasm almost immediately.

Gods, yes, she grinned, this would do it. She could feel a growing weight in her hand. Feel herself thickening, stiffening, feel everything beginning to tighten. She clasped her increasingly rigid shaft firmly, stroked slowly along its length.

Oh yes, that felt good, this was working. She called up Kyra’s growls of pleasure as she’d fucked Kassandra so hard that her forearm had felt it the next day, how she’d locked her thigh behind her arm to increase the force, sliding them a little across the floor with every rough thrust.

Oh for fucks sake! Kassandra gazed down in disgust. What had happened there?

“Stupid bloody thing,” she dropped her limp cock and raised her hands in despair. “What in Hades is going on?” she ranted. Ridiculous contrary organ, what did it take to make the damn thing work properly.

“If I still had my clit I’d have come three times by now,” she growled at it. “Why the hell do folk go on about you like you’re the greatest things on earth!” she snarled.

She would have another drink she decided, getting to her feet.

She staggered a couple of steps, the cabin began to spin and suddenly she was falling, landing face down on the planked floor and moments later began to snore.

When she awoke the following morning she was lying on her back, wincing up at the cabin ceiling. Why was she on the floor? Oh yeah. Stupid bloody….

She looked down. Oh! You have got to be fucking kidding! This was beyond a joke now she decided. All last night the recalcitrant thing had refused to cooperate and now look at it!

She raised herself up on her elbows and glowered at her very first erection.

“Where were you last night, when I wanted you?” she snarled, eyeing it with suspicion. “I’m not even thinking sexy thoughts now!” and if anything, now that it was standing proudly to attention, skin taut, it was even more shimmery than usual she realised gloomily.

“I absolutely don’t need you now, you damn thing,” she rubbed her bleary eyes and struggled to her feet. She needed a drink of water. And to pee she realised suddenly. Gods, she really, really needed to pee.

“Kassandra!” It was Barnabas tapping at the door.

“Shit!” Kassandra slid quickly and a little uncomfortably onto the bunk and draped the sheet over her lap. It didn’t do much to disguise things she realised miserably, looking about her.

“Are you up?” he called.

“Ey? What? No!” Kassandra grabbed her pillow and lay it over her lap as the door creaked open and
Barnabas’ cheerful face peeped around, and over his shoulder Theis, smiling hopefully.

“So, how are you this morning?” she asked, bustling in.

“When did my cabin become a thoroughfare?” Kassandra frowned, shifting awkwardly and hunching forward a bit.

“It’s not really a thoroughfare, it’s only got one door,” Theis considered. “Anyway, how did things go?”

“Did you have a pleasant night?” Barnabas waggled his eyebrows hopefully.

“More importantly... did you drink all this wine?” Theis eyed the practically empty jug, with a frown. “That won’t have helped you know. Let’s get you some water.” she opened the door and leaned out. “Thyia fetch the commander a jug of water would you? A big one. And something to eat. Is there porridge? Some porridge then. Yes, yes she is.”

“Oh this is my fault, I should have told you,” Barnabas was shaking his head remorsefully. “Too much wine will do you no favours in the bedroom department. It’s tempting of course if you’re feeling a little nervous. I remember one time. I was a very young man. There was this beautiful woman worked at the taverna in one of the ports, flaming red hair, great big…”

“You know!” Kassandra interrupted. “When you..invited yourselves in I was just about to..”

“Kassandra!” Thyia’s excited voice rang out across the cabin as she burst in with a jug of water. “You’re up!”

Kassandra clutched her pillow a little more tightly.

“Good morning Thyia,” she managed a smile. “Nice to see you.”

“Oh gods, it’s good to see you and looking so well,” she poured Kassandra a cup of water, and put the jug on the table. “There you go, I bet you’re parched aren’t you?”

“Sort of, a little, not so much right now, but yeah,” Kassandra took a reluctant sip, she really didn’t want to take more fluid on board till she’d managed to drain some. “Well this is lovely,” she sighed. “But if you could all…”

“Kassandra! You’re up!” Odessa strode in, bearing a bowl of steaming oatmeal. “Oh gods, it’s good to see you. You looked like death the other morning. Look at you now! Large as life, twice as handsome. Come and get some oatmeal, you’ll feel better with something warm inside you,” she gave a saucy wink.

“Yes, I’m sure I will, in just a few minutes perhaps,” Kassandra was sweating a little now. “I don’t want to be rude, but I wonder if you could all just…”

“Is that the commander?! Basileos’s gruff voice rang out, tinged with relief and a little excitement. He bent his head under the door, squeezed his way into the cramped cabin. “Oh praise the gods, you’re up!” he beamed.

“Would you all stop saying that!” Kassandra snapped, quickly stopped herself. “I’m sorry, sorry. Really, forgive me. Basileos thank you so much. Barnabas tells me that I may owe you my life. I really can’t thank you enough, I’m just feeling a little...tired and could really do with answering nature’s call,” she shot a desperate look at Barnabas, glanced meaningfully down at her lap. He raised his eyebrows quizzically, she glanced down again, even more meaningfully.
“Ah!” he clapped his hands as realisation dawned. “I see! Yes, the commander is quite right. She’s barely out of bed and here we all are barging into her bedroom, not giving her room to move, let’s all go about our business now,” he shepherded them to the door.

"I’m sure she’ll be up…. I mean about, she’ll be out and about later and you can all tell her how pleased you are to see her. Go, go, tell the rest of the crew the good news, say a few prayers. She’ll be out to see everyone later. Bye for now. Bye. Bye,” he closed the door.

“Oh thank the gods Barnabas,” she bowed her head.

“You too Theis,” Barnabas opened the door again. “Let Kassandra take a leak in peace.”

“Is there something wrong?” Theis frowned, concerned.

“No, no, nothing wrong,” Barnabas ushered her out. “All perfectly normal, nothing to worry about, simple early morning inconvenience, let’s get her comfortable and then we can see about getting her up and about, I mean out and about” he clapped the door shut behind her.

Theis stood patiently outside listening to the muffled conversation as Barnabas talked Kassandra through whatever technique he was recommending for the first pee of the day. A disgruntled exclamation from Kassandra suggested that it hadn’t gone quite as smoothly as she’d hoped.

“There we go,” Barnabas appeared at the door. “All’s well. I’m just going to find a mop. Nothing to worry about, you’ll get better with practise;” he called soothingly over his shoulder into the cabin. “Happens to the best of us. Eat some breakfast now, that’ll make you feel better. It’s not easy to aim first thing in the morning,” he shook his head at Theis as he passed. “You women don’t know the half of it.”

“I know I didn’t hear you say that, old man!” she frowned after him.

Kassandra was sitting eating oatmeal and looking a good deal more comfortable now she’d managed to empty her bladder.

“Well if that’s going to happen every damn morning I’m not drinking anything after sundown,” she remarked sourly. “This thing is so bloody contrary. Last night I couldn’t get it up and this morning I couldn’t get it down. What happens if its like that with Kyra?” she frowned.

“Oh I don’t think you need worry about that, I’m sure when your wife is in your arms again,” Theis sat down, poured a cup of water. “And you aren’t on the outside of a full jug of wine,” she remarked meaningfully.

“Don’t panic,” Barnabas bustled in, catching the tail end of the conversation.” You’ve only had it a day, you’re still breaking it in.”

“Well it’s not winning me over just now,” Kassandra licked her spoon and accepted the water from Theis. “Are they always so uncooperative?”

“Ha! Just wait till you get to my age,” Barnabas laughed expansively, propping the mop up outside the door. “Why sometimes…”

“I won’t have it when I’m your age!” Kassandra protested. “This is just a one month rental.”

“You’ll just be getting used to it and then you won’t have it any more,” he laughed. “You’ll miss being able to pee anywhere you want, I’ll bet you fifty drachmae.”

“Oh that’s just first thing in the morning, you’ll get used to it,” he patted her shoulder. “It’s like when you were first learning to use a bow, I bet you didn’t hit anything then either?”

“And if you want it to be more cooperative at night, don’t drink an entire jug of wine, you idiot,” Theis reproved.”Now, you should get dressed and come and take some fresh air on deck, it will clear your head, do you good, you’ve been cooped up in here for long enough now.”

“Exactly,”Barnabas nodded. “Fresh air, bit of exercise, do you the world of good. Just fasten your perizoma nice and firm, it's breezy out there today.”

Now that her bladder was empty and her belly was full Kassandra felt much more positive about the world in general, not unlike young Okeanos she remembered with a smile. Perhaps that was going to be the pattern for now she decided. She could learn to deal with that she supposed.

Theis was right, she thought, Kassandra had been a fool last night. She’d heard enough chatter about vintner’s droop from Selene and the others while she was growing up and yet she’d waded right into it like an idiot, she shook her head and smiled. No more swilling wine like it was water. She had a serious job waiting for her back home.

Gods it felt good to be out of that airless cabin and cramped bunk. She stretched hugely, relishing the feel of her muscles coming back to life. Her belly and pelvis felt fine this morning, no more mystery aches and pains.

Kassandra made a round of the ship, greeting everyone, thanking them for their work, receiving their relieved congratulations with a smile, dispensing hugs and slaps on the back. By the time everyone was reassured that their commander was back to her normal hearty self she genuinely felt like she was.

Around mid day she sat with a group of crew-mates, eating and chatting. The wind was filling the sails, the rigging was creaking, the deck heaving rhythmically. Whatever prayer or promise Barnabas had offered to Poseidon seemed to have worked, they were making incredible time.

When she went to stand in the bow later, to watch the dolphins diving and leaping beside the swaying prow, the wind in her face blew her braid back over her shoulder, taking with it any doubts she might have felt last night.

Tonight would be more successful, she grinned. It would have worked last night if she hadn't got drunk on top of all that poppy juice, like a damned idiot. She glanced down at herself, still grinning,

“Tonight, you and I make friends!” she nodded. “But first!”

There was rigging to adjust and ropes to be coiled and Kassandra’s muscles were screaming for some physical activity.

By the time the sun set Kassandra was exhausted and aching pleasantly. It felt good to be tired from fresh air and hard work, she smiled, rather than the terrible weariness of the sickroom.

“Goodnight Kassandra” Barnabas slapped her shoulder as she bid him goodnight. “Feeling better about everything now?” he smiled fondly.
“Very much, old friend,” she grinned. “I think I just needed to be out of that cabin.”

“Good, good,” he folded his arms, regarded her proudly. “If the winds remain as kind as this we should reach Mykonos day after tomorrow, and you will see Phoibe and your lovely wife again. You can start working on your future,” he winked. “That beautiful little baby you’re going to make together, no? Gods it’s going to be a beautiful baby!”

“Indeed,” she grinned happily. “And Barnabas, thank you for all your help. I know this has been strange and awkward for you. You’ve been...well it would have been much worse without you.”

“Oh you’re welcome,” he laughed. “There’s nothing to it really. As for the rest of it. You’ll get home, get back on familiar ground, see Phoibe again, decent food, your own bed, the lovely Kyra in your arms and you'll remember why you did all this in the first place. It will all come together...in a manner of speaking,” he grinned. “Go now, get some rest. You’ve worked hard today.”

Kassandra had been determined to take things out for a trial run when she got into bed, but the fresh air and vigorous activity knocked her out as soon as her head hit the pillow.

“Oh Kassandra, my love, how I have missed you,” Kyra breathed, kissing her way down Kassandra’s bared torso. “The days have seemed like years,” she circled a nipple with a flat, warm tongue, gazing seductively up through lowered lashes.

Kassandra could feel her cock, hot and hard, caught between their bellies as Kyra suckled hard at her breast, tugging lightly at her equally erect nipple, biting just hard enough to draw a gasp from Kassandra, before sucking it softly into her mouth again, soothing with her tongue.

“I thought you would never come back,” Kyra kissed wetly down the clenched muscles of Kassandra’s belly, traced the opalescent trail from her navel to her sex. “I have waited so long, for you,” she could feel Kyra’s breath hot against her cock now, feel herself twitching urgently, every muscle in her body taut.

“For this,” Kyra breathed.

As she felt the wet heat of Kyra’s mouth engulf her, Kassandra startled out of her half sleep, found herself staring up at the dark ceiling of her bunk, stroking firmly at her rigid length, her entire body tense with anticipation, every muscle clenched.

She refused to second guess, refused to allow herself to doubt, locked her mind back on Kyra’s seductive gaze, her greedy mouth, pumped hard and fast until everything melted, every muscle eased, relief flooded out of her and she came, hot and hard, soaking the sheet, drenching her fingers, groaning Kyra’s name.

She lay, breathless and weak for a few minutes, waiting for her heart to slow again, then a broad grin slowly spread across her face. She laughed softly, relieved and delighted. She felt a little softer in her hand, but not much she realised, a little smugly, beginning to stroke again.

“Oh, okay,” she smiled, as she grew fully hard again. “You and I can be friends, after all.”

The next morning when Barnabas and Theis came to check on Kassandra the door to her cabin was propped open. Her breakfast dishes were stacked, she was fully dressed, one foot propped on a stool as she fastened her sandal.

“Good morning Barnabas, Theis,” she beamed. “I’m all ready, bladder empty, no splashing this
morning Barnabas, “she grinned proudly, indicating the floor with an expansive gesture. “Belly full,” she patted her stomach. “Just need to wash my dishes, and then I’m ready to haul some sail,” she flung her arms wide.

“I..I take it you slept well?” Theis raised her eyebrows and watched as Kassandra gathered up her dishes and cups and the empty jug.

“No! I didn’t get a wink!” she laughed, striding past an astonished Theis and Barnabas, humming contentedly.
As Barnabas had hoped, the wind stayed fair for them. The next day they made good time, eating up the miles towards home, and the following day, by the time Mykonos became visible in the far distance Kassandra was feeling much more at home with her new anatomy.

Apart from a couple of awkward occasions where she’d had to make for her cabin quickly and discreetly, when the sight of half naked crew-women hauling ropes had raised more than sails, all had been well.

As they grew closer and closer though she was aware of her nerves building. On the one hand she was alive with anticipation at the thought of seeing Kyra again, but along with this thought came the less comfortable realisation that the moment of revelation was quickly approaching.

By now, after a few days of waking, walking, washing and working with her new body Kassandra was pretty well accustomed to the more unusual aspects. The iridescent skin seemed like it had always been there and she’d more or less forgotten that humans didn’t generally have shimmery, opalescent body parts.

She was well aware of it as they approached the dock though, pacing nervously up and down the deck, trying unsuccessfully to not get under the crew’s feet. Eventually Barnabas hauled her up to the helm where she would be out of harm's way.

“Excited to be home?” he patted her hand.

“Sort of...I mean yes, of course,” Kassandra bit her lip. “But I’m a bit nervous as well,” she sighed, exhaling slowly to try and calm herself.

“Natural enough,” Barnabas nodded, stroking the back of her hand soothingly. “All will be well. Don’t try and rush things. And for the love of Hera don’t try and drown your nerves with wine!” he warned.

“No, no,” Kassandra gave a humourless laugh. “I think I’ve learned my lesson about that.”

There was the usual last minute flurry of noisy activity as the ship tied up and the gangplank was lowered.

“Right,” Barnabas took a deep breath. “Don’t worry about anything at this end. I’ll have your things brought up to the villa later. You just get yourself there, your family is waiting,” he smiled fondly.

“Right,” Kassandra nodded, gave a brave smile. “You’re right. Thank you Barnabas. For everything,” she straightened up, threw back her shoulders and prepared to disembark.

Halfway to the villa Kassandra was pulled up short by the excited yelling of her name. Turning, she saw Phoibe racing down the road towards her, Orion bounding along after her barking madly. They both reached her at the same time, almost knocking her off her feet.

Kassandra’s nerves were forgotten as she swept Phoibe up in her arms, holding her tight, burying her face in the girl’s hair, she smelt of fresh sweat and lavender and something uniquely Phoibe, and Kassandra felt her heart lift.
“I’ve missed you so much, Phoibe,” she breathed. “Have you been well?” she reluctantly lowered her to the ground, cradled her face in her hands, drank in every detail of her.

“Well-ish” Phoibe grinned, placing her hands over Kassandra’s and leaning into her touch. “We’ve missed you so much. All of us, even Praxos,” she grinned. "It’s no fun round here without you. Kyra has missed you so badly Kassandra, thank the gods you’re back.”

“Is she not well?” Kassandra was suddenly anxious, lowering her hands, looking up to the leader house.

“No, no, no,” Phoibe, took her hand and began to lead her along the road, towards home. “Nothing like that, we’ve done our best, honestly, but she’s been working too hard and not sleeping well or eating properly. She’s done a donkey load of work mind you, so there’s that. But she is going to be so glad to see you...brace yourself,” she grinned saucily.

“Hey,” Kassandra gave her a half hearted warning. Don’t talk about your mater like that,” she smiled, ruffling Phoibe’s hair.

Orion, feeling that he had not been sufficiently welcomed was snuffling at Kassandra’s free hand. She stopped and crouched down to take his grinning, slobbery face in her hands.

“Sorry boy” she bowed her head to his wrinkled brow.’I was distracted. Yes, I even missed you, you big slobber monster,” she ruffled his ears as he wiggled delightedly.

“Go tell Kyra that Kassandra’s home,” Phoibe raised an arm in the direction of the villa. Orion considered for a moment, gave Kassandra’s cheek a final wet lick and set off at a run.

“I’m sure she’ll be delighted that you just did that,” Kassandra got to her feet, laughing, took Phoibe’s hand again. Why hadn’t they done this more often when Phoibe was smaller, she sighed. She’d been such a fool. She dropped her hand and put her arm around Phoibe’s shoulders instead, pulling her into her side as they walked.

“No, she’ll be cross,” Phoibe put her arm around Kassandra’s hips and leaned in close. It made it a little more awkward to walk, but neither minded. “Until she sees you. And then she’ll forget.”

“Kassandra?!” a gruff voice halted them in their tracks and they turned to see Praxos lumbering up behind them, a string of rabbits in one hand. “Thank the gods you’re back. Maybe you can get Kyra to eat something,” he slapped her on the shoulder. “Did you at least find what you were looking for?”

“Er...yes, sort of,” Kassandra pulled out the sphinx feather that she’d been keeping for just such an eventuality.

“What...in Hades? “ he breathed, dropping the game and taking the feather in reverent hands. “What is it? What manner of beast....”

“Ohhh!” Phoibe breathed wonder-struck, reaching out to stroke it. “It looks like metal but it feels like a feather. Oh! Is it a sphinx feather?!”

Kassandra nodded, ruffling her hair. “It is that.”

Praxos looked up at her, astonished, holding the feather as though he was afraid it might burst into flames or disappear.

“You fought a sphinx?” he frowned.
“No, I didn’t fight it,” Kassandra shook her head. “We talked.”

“And it gave you a feather?” he looked down at it in astonishment, held it up to the light.

“Well not intentionally I don’t think,” Kassandra admitted, as Praxos gave it back to her. “But it seemed like a waste to just leave it lying there,” she tucked it carefully back into her belt.

She had been concerned about damaging it initially, but on closer inspection she began to realise that it would withstand a lot more than Kassandra could subject it to by casually folding it around her waist inside her belt.

“I suppose I’m going to get herbs and onions on my own now that the conquering hero has returned,” Praxos winked at Phoibe and gave her shoulder a gentle nudge.

Phoibe looked up at Kassandra, smiled happily.

“No, let’s go Praxos,” she grinned. “Kassandra’s back now, we’ve got lots of time,” she reached up to hug her. “See you later,” she whispered in her ear. “Welcome home mater,” she kissed her cheek and went to pick up the rabbits that Praxos had dropped.

“I caught these by the way,” she grinned, holding them up “Rabbit stew tomorrow!”

Gods, rabbit stew sounded good, Kassandra thought, realising that her mouth was watering at the thought after so many days of ship’s rations. She watched the two of them ambling off towards the market, Praxos’ huge hand gently cradling the back of Phoibe’s head as she animatedly discussed something. Hunting probably, Kassandra smiled.

She hitched her belt up, threw back her shoulders and looked up to the villa. Time to go home.

The house looked even bigger and brighter and more airy than she remembered and she breathed deep as she walked inside, spirits lifting at all the familiar smells.

She heard Kyra before she saw her. Her heart sang at the sound of her voice, deep in conversation with some man, laughing politely. She wasn’t amused, Kassandra could tell and she smiled to herself at the knowledge.

Then she appeared.

She was in the company of two pompous minor bureaucrats from Delos. Not important enough to warrant full diplomatic attention but too important to palm off onto Aegeus and Savina. Kassandra found them insufferable.

The tall one with the curly hair in particular, Ochos, she thought grimly. He thought he was funny. He wasn’t. Artemis save her from men who thought they were funny, she scowled. He also seemed to be under the impression he was a bit of a ladies man, and gods knew where he’d got that idea from. He always smelled of garlic for one thing.

And his fat little sidekick, what was his bloody name again? Obsequious little weasel. Enops, that was it. He had shifty eyes and Kassandra didn’t trust him as far as she could throw him. She wondered idly how far that would be.
Kyra of course always handled them with breathtaking efficiency, if she was honest Kassandra was generally impressed at the sight of Kyra in professional action. Impressed and a little turned on quite often.

Ochos turned aside and Kassandra caught her first glimpse of Kyra.

Gods, she was beautiful. She’d been in Kassandra’s thoughts every night since she’d left, and yet she’d somehow managed to forget quite how gorgeous she was.

But Phoibe was right, she looked tired. She’d lost a bit of weight, her face was a little drawn and there were dark shadows under her eyes. She’d missed Kassandra just as much as Kassandra had missed her, she realised, suddenly moved.

And here she was, hanging on Ochos’ arm, laughing at one of his tedious anecdotes, turning her lovely eyes on him, making him feel like he was the centre of her universe for a little while. She knew it was ridiculous but Kassandra couldn’t help a twinge of jealousy. She hadn’t seen her wife for so long, had so much to tell her and here were these two driveling idiots keeping them apart for even longer.

Suddenly Ochos caught sight of her standing in the hallway.

“Ah, Archon, it appears that your misthios, has returned,” she could hear the sneer in his voice.

Yeah, there was another reason she didn’t like him. She was immediately painfully aware of how grimy and unkempt she must look. She knew only too well that she smelt of unwashed linens and stale sweat, pitch and salt fish and even from here she could see the oil glistening in Enops’ curly beard.

She must look like a barbarian, she realised glumly. She should have tried to clean up beforehand, taken a bath at the taverna perhaps, anything to not look like she’d just tumbled out of her bunk after all those days at sea, not to mention a trek up a filthy mountain.

Kyra turned at Ochos’ observation and looked at Kassandra as though Aphrodite herself had just materialised in her hallway. She dropped Ochos’ arm, her eyes glistened, she smiled softly for Kassandra alone.

“Indeed, Ochos,” she managed to sound professional. “She has been on a very important fact finding mission for me, to an uncharted island. If you would be so generous as to spare me just a moment or two of your time, I should be very grateful. Then you must continue with that amusing anecdote Ochos, I’m on tenterhooks to find out what the donkey did next.”

She managed to walk calmly over to Kassandra though her strained posture betrayed her urge to run to her. Kassandra’s heart was pounding in her ears as she came close. She could smell her perfume. If she reached out just a little she would be able to bury her fingers in the soft waves of Kyra’s hair. She wanted so much to touch her. To pull her into her arms and breathe in the smell of her, to drop to her knees before her and bury her face in the folds of her chiton, feel Kyra stroke her hair. She ached to tell her how much she’d missed her, how glad she was she was to be back, how much she loved her.

“Greetings Archon,” she said instead.

“Greetings, my misthios, “ Kyra breathed. “I have prayed for your safe return. How well you look,” she blinked, releasing the tears that had gathered in her lashes. “I have missed you so much,” she whispered too low for Ochos and Enops to hear. “Are you well, misthios?” she continued more
normally. “Completely uninjured?”

“Completely my Archon,” Kassandra swallowed. Gods, why did these idiots have to be here, now, of all times. “And I am pleased to report that...my mission, “ she gazed meaningfully into Kyra’s eyes. “Was a complete success.”

She wondered if “complete” might be overstating the point, but technically it was correct, she decided.

Kyra’s face was a picture of astonishment. She was silent for a few moments.

“Well...yes Archon... perhaps...a bath would be in order first,” she rubbed the back of her neck, grinning bashfully. She hadn’t been expecting that!

“An excellent idea,” Kyra said, quickly professional again. “Savina and Cymone are in the kitchen I believe, they will be only too happy to arrange hot water for you. I will see you later, I am most eager to hear all the details, “ she took Kassandra’s hand in a grip that from a distance might well have looked professional, but there was nothing business-like about the way her fingers caressed Kassandra’s wrist below her bracer.

“I’m so sorry, my love, I have to deal with these oafs, “ she hissed just low enough for Kassandra’s ears. “I will be as quick as I can.” she discreetly brushed the tears from her cheeks, smiled at Kassandra one last time and turned on her heel back to her unwelcome visitors.

“Thank you so much for your patience gentlemen, now Ochos, “ she took his arm, leaned into him just a whisker. “What was the donkey about to do next? You will have to tell me because I cannot begin to imagine!”

As they disappeared into Kyra’s office Kassandra smiled to herself. Any jealousy she might have initially felt had dissipated. She was home. Phoibe and Praxos were out getting provisions, Savina and Cymone were in the kitchen, where Kassandra could no doubt snatch something tasty, and her wife had just taken into her office two stupid men who would emerge some time later thinking they had charmed her, entirely unaware that she had in fact been running rings around them the whole time.

“Kassandra!” Cymone exclaimed as she entered the kitchen a few minutes later. She leapt up from the table where she’d been chatting with Savina and bustled over to wrap Kassandra in a warm hug. “Ooh it’s good to see you back. We’ve missed you, stand back, let me look at you,” she eyed her up and down.

“Well,” she said at last. “You look a damn sight better than the Archon does, I’ll give you that. But then you’ve been outside getting fresh air and exercise, I suppose. Poor thing, she’s been pining for you something terrible.”

“Cymone,” Savina frowned warningly. “ Hello Kassandra, it’s lovely to see you back. Did your journey go well?”

“Very well, Savina,” she nodded. “Thank you for asking. But it’s good to be home again, with my
family, and to see you two again, you both look very well,” she grinned down at Cymone, draped an arm about her shoulders. “And now I’m back I will devote myself to taking good care of the Archon, I promise.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Cymone nudged her, smiling suggestively. “She’ll not be short of exercise for the next few days eh?” she winked at Kassandra.

“Cymone!” Savina gave a scandalized gasp.

“Oh don’t be such a prude, girl,” Cymone bustled back to the table, poured some wine for Kassandra and began to fill a plate with grilled fish and honey bread. “It’ll do her the world of good, you see if it doesn’t. She not just been pining for romantic walks hand in hand through the meadows. Here you go, “ she pushed the plate towards Kassandra who took a seat opposite Savina giving her a cautious smile.

“Thank you,” she folded a thick, juicy chunk of fish in a piece of bread. “I’ve missed this,” she grinned.

“Well thank the gods you’re here to eat it all again,” Savina laughed, “Cymone has been cooking as though you’ve been here the whole time.”

“Aye, it’s a good job young Phoibe has still been eating,” Cymone shook her head. “The poor dog can only pick up so much slack.”

“Kyra hasn’t been eating?” Kassandra glanced up from her plate at Savina. “I thought she looked tired,” she said softly.

“She’s missed you, misthios,” Savina said quietly, sipping her wine. “I don’t think she realised how much she would miss you, how much...how much we would all miss you actually,” she admitted shyly.

Kassandra swallowed with some difficulty, took a mouthful of wine to hide it.

“Yes, if she was my wife,” Cymone leaned back in her chair, nursing her cup to her chest. “I’d go striding into that office right now, kick out those two pompous asses and carry her off to bed. Especially that Ochos, long streak of piss,” she muttered darkly.

Kassandra raised her eyebrows and glanced from Cymone’s grim expression over to Savina.

“He said she was passable for a provincial cook.” She explained carefully.

“The man’s a fool,” Kassandra took another enthusiastic mouthful of fish. “You make the best grilled fish I’ve had since I left Kephallonia. And your honey cakes are mmm, exquisite,” she grinned. “Do you have any, by the way?”

“For you? Maybe,” Cymone got up and went to find them. “Now if you don’t mind me saying so Kassandra, you smell like a ship’s mop bucket. No wonder of course, you have to make do while you’re at sea, I understand that. But I don’t imagine it’s what the Archon has been fantasizing about the past few nights, don’t make that face Savina, they’re married women, it’s all above board. If it’s all the same with you Kassandra I’m going to get the girls to prepare a bath for you, how does that sound? They can bring your clothes down as well, let’s get them washed for you.”

“Oh gods, that sounds wonderful,” Kassandra sighed gratefully. “I’m so tired of washing in a bucket. Didn’t used to bother me, but living here has made me soft I suppose.”
“Oh you don’t look soft to me,” Cymone winked. “Nothing wrong with enjoying a little luxury when you can get it.”

The inadvertent innuendo had brought a blush to Kassandra’s face. Things had been so familiar and relaxed that she’d forgotten all about what was going to happen in a little while.

“Are you all right Kassandra?” Savina tilted her head, a little confused by her expression.

“Eh? Oh yes, “ she shook her head. “A bit tired perhaps. It’s been a long trip,” Cymone had left the kitchen and Kassandra could hear her giving instructions, the sounds of general bustling about.

“Did you find what you were searching for?” Savina asked quietly.

“Yes, yes I did actually Savina,” she nodded.

“Was it worth it?” Savina gave her a searching look.

“I hope so,” Kassandra turned her cup slowly in her hands, looked up at her. “I really hope so.”

She took the opportunity to wash her hair in the yard as she waited for the bath to be readied, then sat in the kitchen roughly toweling out the worst of the water as she watched Cymone set about making preparations for the evening meal.

After a few minutes Savina got to her feet and quietly walked over behind Kassandra.

“If you would permit me, misthios?” she asked politely, easing the towel from Kassandra’s hands and beginning to work the full length of her hair through it.

“Thank you Savina,” Kassandra sat quietly, looking down at her hands.

The kitchen was quiet for a few minutes, apart from the sound of chopping and quiet humming from Cymone. Eventually Savina spoke.

“If you would forgive me for my over familiarity misthios,” she said very quietly. “You seem a little subdued. Is everything well?”

“Hmm?” Kassandra glanced up. “Oh, yes...it’s...it’s strange Savina. On the one hand it seems as though I never left. But on the other hand it feels as though I have been away for an age.”

“That’s the gods’ way of telling you not to abandon your wife for some pottery hunt again,” Cymone muttered over her shoulder.

Savina didn’t bother to reprove her.

“If you will permit me one final familiarity. I can say with some certainty that it has seemed more like an age to the Archon,” she placed a gentle hand on Kassandra’s shoulder. “But I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we are pleased to have you back safely. There, does that feel better?” she stepped back.

Kassandra reached up, her hair was very nearly dry now, she looked back over her shoulder at Savina and smiled softly.

“Yes, thank you.”

The door opened and one of the servants popped her head around to announce that the bath was ready for her, as she thanked them and left for the bathroom Cymone turned to Savina and frowned
thoughtfully.

“Does she seem different to you?”

The bath was steaming slightly when she entered, the servants had clearly done a good job of making sure that it was warm enough, they’d also poured into it a little of the scented oil that Kyra used. The room smelt warmly of her.

Kassandra felt a twinge of guilt at the thought that others had spent so long preparing this for her. Her life had changed in so many ways since she had settled down as the companion of the Archon of the Silver Islands.

She knew deep down that if she had to live in a cave in the rocks it would still seem like home so long as Kyra and Phoibe were there with her. But that would be no place to raise a baby, she smiled wryly. The very fact that they were able to contemplate raising a child together was down to the advantages afforded them by Kyra’s position.

Stopping by the door, she eyed the bolt. Ordinarily she never thought to bar the door when she was in here. She’d never been bashful about nakedness, her own or others, but now it was a little different. She reached for the bolt.

But what if Kyra came up while she was in the bath? She’d never barred a door against her wife. That would be an inauspicious start to their endeavour.

Thinking about it, Kassandra realised that even nervous as she was, there was a part of her that was eager for Kyra to see her, wanted to display herself to her. Wanted to show Kyra what she had done for her, for them.

All the same she didn’t want the first person to see her to be some poor serving girl wandering in to collect her laundry, it wouldn’t do to linger between the bath and the door, she thought.

Undressing quickly, she dropped her sweaty, grimy clothes in the basket that had been left for that purpose and made her way to the bath.

It was still steaming lightly and she held out the back of her hand to check the temperature, remembering the last time she had done this, above a pool of thick, milky, pink liquid, a pool that had changed her life.

Climbing in, she lowered herself carefully, gasping a little in surprise at the feel of hot water on strange new flesh. It would have been much better she realised to have washed before getting into the bath, and the servants had left a bucket of hot water and some cloths by the bath for just such a purpose, but she’d been unwilling to risk standing there exposed for so long.

This was still worlds better than the cat lick and a promise that she’d been able to have on board the ship, better than Theis’ valiant effort at a one woman bed bath.

As she washed, Kassandra took the opportunity to check on the progress of the various cuts and scrapes that she’d acquired, presumably falling down that bloody slope. Even the worst of them, on her knee, was pretty much healed. The scabbing had sloughed off the previous day to reveal fresh pink skin.

The only thing that was going to leave a lasting impression was the embarrassing bite on her elbow. She would definitely have to come up with a better explanation than “I was bitten by a sheep”, she
thought.

Folding a cloth into a makeshift pillow she lay her head back against the side of the bath and closed her eyes. Naturally enough within five minutes she was asleep.

She had no idea how long she had dozed when she was woken by a light tapping at the door. For a moment she forgot where she was and was on the verge of calling in whoever had knocked.

Stopping herself just in time she called out an inquiry and grabbed one of the smaller towels that had been left on the stool by the bath, dropping it in the water and folding and draping it over her crotch.

“It’s me, Phoibe, can I come in?”

“Of course, “Kassandra gave her coverage a final check, the towel and the slight milkiness of the water would keep her secret.

“Hello,” Phoibe peeked around the door, came in, closed it behind her. “Cymone says she’s going to have your evening meal sent up to your room. She seems to think that you and Kyra are going to be too...preoccupied to come down to eat,” she grinned, moving the towels and perching on the stool by the bath.

“Kyra would kill her if she heard her talking like that,” Kassandra laughed, shaking her head. “Especially to you!”

“She wouldn’t say it if Kyra was there,” Phoibe laughed. “Can you imagine Kyra’s face? I’d almost like to see it, but I don’t want us to have to get a new cook. Savina will make it sound more...polite...less sexy. She’s good at that.”


“You know I didn’t mean that!” she grinned. “She’s good at talking, clever talking. Persuading people. Kyra says she’d have been a good diplomat if she’d had a higher class family and if women were allowed to, “ she grimaced. “That’s not fair. But I’m glad she’s here.”

She looked at Kassandra in silence for a while.

“What was it like?” she asked at last. “The sphinx?”


“Did you really just talk to it?” Phoibe frowned. “You didn’t hurt it?”

“I’m not sure I even could have,” Kassandra said thoughtfully. “But I didn’t try. And I suppose it talked to me more than the other way round really.”

“Did you go to ask it for something?” Phoibe said, trying for casual and failing.

Kassandra turned to look at her. She was studying her sandals carefully.

“You know you can say anything to me, Phoibe?” she said carefully. “You can say anything, tell me anything, ask me anything? And I will never be cross or disappointed. You do know that?”

“Did you go to ask the sphinx for a baby?” Phoibe blurted quickly, not looking at Kassandra. “Don’t
be cross please. I overheard Kyra and Ophelia talking at the temple. Kyra went every day while you were away to make offerings and pray for you. And well, Ophelia’s ears don’t work so well and I don’t think she always realises how loud she’s talking. Please don’t be cross. I just want to know. It was stupid to go all that way and face down a sphinx for pots, but for a baby, that’s different.”

Oh they’d been stupid all right Kassandra realised. Stupid and unfair to Phoibe, yet again. She should have been told what was going on, should have been involved from the start. This would upend her life as much as anyone’s.

“I’m not cross, Phoibe, of course I’m not, I wouldn’t blame you for being cross though,” she admitted. “We should have told you.”

“Why would I be cross?” Phoibe looked up grinning happily. “You’re going to adopt a baby? Did the sphinx say it would be a good idea? It did, didn’t it? Please say it did? Or was it a special baby you were waiting for? Does the sphinx have to bring it? Will we get to see the sphinx? Is it...no, never mind, doesn’t matter. Kassandra that’s so exciting! When? When do we get the baby? Is it a baby? Or a bigger child, like I was. It doesn’t matter, but a baby would be lovely don’t you think?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Kassandra laughed, holding up a hand. “So you wouldn’t mind a little sister or brother?”

“Mind?” Phoibe’s eyebrows shot up. “Why would I mind? I’d love it. I’m going to be a great big sister, I promise. If it’s a baby I’ll change nappies and feed it and everything, I promise. We can teach it to hunt together! Well not when its a baby obviously.”

“Well nothing is definite yet,” Kassandra replied, cautiously.

“Oh that definitely sounds like we’re getting a baby!” Phoibe grinned. “You know, when I was younger I used to wish you and Kyra could have a baby together, don’t make that face,” she laughed. “I know how you make a baby now,” she rolled her eyes.

“I suppose Clio told you eh?” Kassandra smiled.

“Quite honestly Kassandra, you’re the only woman who hasn’t told me,” Phoibe said dryly. “I suppose you do know?”

“Well it’s a little outside my realm of experience,” Kassandra raised an eyebrow. “But I think I know the basics.”

“Knowledge is power,” Phoibe reflected. “That’s what Dion always says. Well he says a lot of things, but that’s one of the ones that makes the most sense. Gods, it’s a good job two women can’t make a baby,” she began to laugh. “You’d have children all over the Aegean!”

“I think that’s enough of that talk, thank you,” Kassandra said a little primly for someone about to undertake what she was about to. “And why would I be the one doing all the….” she stumbled.

“Fathering?” Phoibe wiped tears of laughter from her face. “I don’t know. I always just imagined it that way. You’ve got that kind of...energy? Plus you’re always climbing up things or jumping off things or chasing things. You can’t do that with a baby in your belly,” she pointed out, reasonably enough.

“No, you’d definitely be the pater. You’re my mater though,” she smiled fondly. “And I’m glad you’re home. It only really feels like home when you’re here,” she got to her feet. “I’ll see you in the morning anyway. Be good to Kyra, she’s really missed you,” she dipped and kissed Kassandra’s cheek.
At the door she stopped, looked back over her shoulder.

“When we get the baby, if it doesn’t already have a name,” she asked. “Can I help choose?”

“Of course,” Kassandra nodded. “Of course you can Phoibe,” she watched her leave, heard her greet Kyra outside the door, swallowed hard.
You'll notice that the tag has changed from Mature to Explicit, it's not that there's anything particularly earth shaking that's changed just that after a chat fishbone76 and I decided maybe I had wrongly tagged it in the first place. At any rate I'd tagged inconsistently across what I'd written, other stories had been tagged Explicit when they were no more "explicit" than this so.

Definitely sex adjacent, no low humour, no more Barnabas and Theis ;( 

Phoibe had half closed the door as she left and Kyra tapped politely and stood outside.

“May I come in Kassandra?” she tilted her head, smiled hopefully.

Kassandra’s throat constricted at the sight of Kyra there in the door, back-lit by the lamps in the hallway. She nodded, licked her lips, watched as Kyra came in, closed the door softly behind her, and quietly bolted it.

“I don’t think we want to be disturbed eh?” She smiled, turning to look at Kassandra.

She was sitting, glowing slightly from the warm water, cheeks flushed, hair loose about her shoulders. She had turned to face Kyra and her hands clutched the side of the bath.

“Gods Kassandra,” she stopped, gazed at her. “I’d forgotten how beautiful you are. How could I have forgotten how beautiful you are?” she placed a hand to her mouth.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Kassandra breathed. “Oh Kyra, I’ve missed you so much.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” Kyra shook her head and made her way over to the bath. She noticed the towel draped over Kassandra’s lap, but didn’t make a point of it.

“May I wash your back?” she perched on the stool that Phoibe had vacated and pushed up her sleeves.

“You don’t have to do…” Kassandra began.

“May I?” Kyra repeated, leaning forward and kissing Kassandra’s back softly. “Please?”

“I’d like that, thank you,” Kassandra handed her the cloth she’d been using.

Kyra gathered Kassandra’s hair carefully and lifted it to lie over her shoulder then began to rub firmly at the muscles of her back, following the path of the cloth with the fingers of her other hand, occasionally dipping her head to kiss her gently, feeling Kassandra twitch and shiver beneath her attention.

“Was there a sphinx, my love?” she asked at last, rubbing the cloth across the big muscles of Kassandra’s shoulders, slowly, soothingly.
“There was,” she nodded, beginning to relax as Kyra continued to caress her back and shoulders with the cloth, with her fingers, with her lips. She could feel the soft waves of Kyra’s hair brushing against her skin.

“It was vast Kyra,” she breathed, thinking back. “I’ve never seen anything like it. It was so beautiful and absolutely terrifying.”

“And the riddle?” Kyra dipped her hand below the water, rubbing the cloth across the small of Kassandra’s back, finding the dimples above her ass with her fingertips. “Can you tell me what it asked?”

“There was no riddle,” Kassandra shook her head thoughtfully. “At least not in the way I was expecting. It asked me questions. Dragged answers from me. Answers I didn’t know were there at first,” she glanced over her shoulder, caught Kyra’s eyes. “It made me face the truth, Kyra. Truth I’d been too much of a coward to search for myself.”

“Can you tell me?” Kyra whispered, leaning forward, kissing the nape of her neck. “Are you allowed to tell me?”

There was a long silence, Kyra continued to caress Kassandra’s back, her shoulders, her arms, waiting patiently.

Kassandra turned in the bath, shifting so that she could look Kyra in the eye, forcing herself not to flinch from her gaze.

“I went there thinking that I wanted to make you happy. That I wanted to give you a baby to make you happy. I was afraid to look any deeper. The sphinx made me look, Kyra.”

“And what did you see, Kassandra,” Kyra reached out, cradled her cheek in her hand, smiled cautiously.

“I saw us, Kyra,” Kassandra frowned, thinking back to that astonishing night in the clearing, when she had knelt weeping before the sphinx’s inscrutable gaze and looked into the heart of herself.

“I saw you and me and Phoibe and our child. Our child Kyra. Not a baby that I’d given to you, to make you happy. Our child, that we had made together, our family, a family we’d made together. I realised that I want your baby Kyra. I want our baby.”

“Oh Kassandra,” Kyra breathed, barely audible. She leaned forward and caught Kassandra’s lips with her own, kissed her, tenderly at first, but with growing hunger. She teased with the tip of her tongue, smiling into the kiss as Kassandra opened her mouth and moaned low as Kyra licked softly into her, felt a tentative hand reach out to pull Kyra closer.

“Perhaps the bathroom isn’t the most appropriate place for us to rediscover each other,” Kyra broke the kiss gently, nosed into the soft waves of Kassandra’s hair, nibbled lightly at her ear. “Let’s go to our room. Shall we?”

She felt Kassandra’s nod, stood upright and picked up a large towel.

Reaching out to hand it to her she saw Kassandra hesitate, glance down at her lap, blush a little, lick her lips.

And suddenly she realised what the problem was.

She was shy. The mighty Kassandra of Sparta was shy!
She swallowed a fond smile, unfolded the towel without a word. Kyra didn’t think she’d ever loved Kassandra more than she did right now.

She held out the opened towel and politely averted her gaze as Kassandra stood behind it, took it from her hands and wrapped it about her hips as she stepped out of the bath.

Kyra desperately wanted to look but restrained herself, noticing a robe lying on a chair by the wall. She walked over to fetch it and turned to find Kassandra awkwardly trying to dry off without revealing too much of what was happening behind the towel.

There was enough movement for Kyra to see that *something* was going on, however, and whatever it was, it looked pretty impressive she thought, resisting the urge to lick her lips.

“They left a robe for you,” she held it out. “Perhaps this would make it easier to dry yourself?”

“Ah, yes, thank you,” Kassandra took it from her, hesitated, clearly wanting to say something. Kyra interpreted her awkward silence correctly and politely turned her back.

“Perhaps the privacy of our bedroom would be a better place for us to renew our acquaintance?” she allowed Kassandra to hear the tease in her voice.

“I think so, perhaps,” she heard Kassandra toss the towel aside and gave her a moment or two to arrange the robe before she turned to look at her. She wanted so much to look down but she made herself concentrate on Kassandra’s face, her hopeful, vulnerable expression.

Kyra unbolted the door, turned back to Kassandra and held out her hand.

“My love?” she smiled encouragingly.

Kassandra took a deep breath and walked over to her and there was no avoiding it now, the way her robe was tented, swaying with each step. The way Kassandra’s hands hovered about her crotch, struggling to disguise it without drawing attention and failing miserably.

Kyra felt the blood pounding in her ears, felt a hard twist of desire deep in her belly. She said nothing, didn’t stare, took Kassandra’s hand and led her out into the corridor.

“Everyone has left for the evening, my sweet, there’s no need to be anxious,” she smiled. “We have the place to ourselves. Apart from Phoibe and Orion of course, but they are safely in bed. There’s nothing to worry about,” she squeezed her hand comfortingly as they made their way to the stairs.

In their room Kyra again bolted the door, she’d asked Savina to light the lamps and Cymone had sent up tray of food and a jug of watered wine she noticed.

“Would you like a drink?” she went over to the table, poured herself a cup.

“I...er...no, no, better not, is there some water?” Kassandra was standing by the bed, looking nervous. Kyra’s heart went out to her.

“Of course, my misthios,” she smiled reassuringly, poured a cup, took it over to Kassandra.

She took it, drank gratefully, avoiding Kyra’s gaze.

“Kassandra,” Kyra reached out, stroked a lock of hair back from her face. “I can see that you’re nervous. We don’t have to do anything tonight. We certainly aren’t going to do anything that you don’t want to, I swear.”
“I do want to though,” Kassandra frowned, turning the cup in her hands. “It’s just that…” she heaved a great sigh and looked up at the ceiling.

“You’ve never done it this way?” Kyra suggested. “I understand. It must feel like your first time all over again? But we can take as long as you like,” she stroked her cheek gently.

“As long as you need, my love. You can tell me what you want, what you’d like, what you need,” she breathed. “There’s no need to be afraid, I promise you. You won’t shock me. We can do whatever you need.”

She heard, as well as saw, Kassandra swallow, watched as she closed her eyes and took a shaky breath. Kyra took the cup from Kassandra’s hands went to place it on the table, took a deep draught of wine, a few slow breaths and turned back to face her.

She looked a little deflated, in every sense of the word, Kyra noticed, her gaze slipping to Kassandra’s crotch.

Well, she thought, she could sort that out, and there was no time like the present. She began to unbelt her chiton.

“Would you like to undress me, Kassandra?” she smiled. “Or would you prefer to watch?” she slipped the strap of her robe down her shoulder a little.

“Kyra!” Kassandra blurted suddenly. “I have to show you something. Please?”

She looked desperate Kyra realised.

Desperate and...scared?

“Oh Kassandra, love,” she rushed over. “It’s all right. It’s all going to be all right. I know it seems strange, but I have had some experience with men before. I have a good idea what to expect. I’ll take the lead if you like. It will seem odd at first I’m sure, but I will try my best to make sure you enjoy it,” she tilted her head to meet Kassandra’s worried gaze.

“Please, trust me. I’m not going to be shocked. I’ve seen it all before.”

“Not like this,” Kassandra said quietly, refusing to meet her gaze.

Kyra tried to control her expression. It suddenly occurred to her that while she’d had sexual experiences with men before, she’d never dealt with a magically bestowed penis.

Just what had the sphinx given her?

Well whatever it was, Kassandra had done this for them, so that they could conceive a child and Kyra would face it and be supportive.

She swallowed, took a breath, adopted a reassuring tone.

“May I see Kassandra, please?” she asked softly. “I can see that you are very worried about it. The sooner we get this out of the way, the sooner I can busy myself giving you pleasure, no?” she smiled.

Kassandra heaved a huge sigh and unfastened the robe. She seemed unsure about whether to drop it or reveal herself slowly.

Possibly so she couldn’t back out at the last moment, she decided on the former. The robe fell to her feet in a whisper of fine fabric and Kassandra stood naked before her.
Kyra made a point of not staring straight at her crotch. She took in Kassandra’s anxious, slightly ashamed expression and felt her heart clench with sympathy. She moved over her familiar broad shoulders, small firm breasts, taut nippled despite her evident anxiety, down the ridged muscles of her belly to…

Kyra gave a brief startled gasp of laughter and clapped a hand to her mouth, instantly horrified by her reaction. She watched Kassandra scrabble for the robe about her feet, begin to pull it back on, her face a mask of shame.

“Oh fuck! No Kassandra,” Kyra rushed over and tried to stop her. They struggled with the robe for a moment or two before Kassandra dropped it and slumped defeated, tears rolling down her face.

“I’m sorry Kyra,” she began to weep. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know it was going to…”

Kyra stopped her with a hard kiss, pressed her forehead to Kassandra’s.

“No Kassandra, do not apologise. I’m sorry. I wasn’t laughing at you I swear. May the goddess strike me dead here and now if I was,” she frowned.

“I was surprised that’s all. It was a laugh of surprise. And delight, I swear. It’s beautiful,” she gazed down. Kassandra was totally limp now, and no bloody wonder, Kyra cursed herself.

“It’s all right, you don’t have to say that,” Kassandra began.

“It’s not all right,” Kyra shook her head. “I’ve hurt you and I can’t apologise enough. But I swear, it was just surprise. Remember when Aegeus’ dog had those pups?” she asked, quickly.

Kassandra met her eyes now. She clearly had no idea where Kyra was going with this. She nodded reluctantly.

“And she was brown?” Kyra said softly. “And so was the father?”

Kassandra nodded, they’d been there with Phoibe to watch the litter being born, she remembered.

“And she had seven gorgeous little nut brown pups with little black muzzles and then the last one?” Kyra prompted.

“Was black and white,” Kassandra remembered.

“And do you remember how we all reacted?” Kyra asked hopefully.

“We laughed,” Kassandra said quietly.

“We weren’t laughing at the puppy.” Kyra smiled. “We were surprised by it. It was just as beautiful as its brothers and sisters, we just weren’t expecting it.”

“Now, let me see? Please?” she drew Kassandra’s hands away from the position they’d assumed, defensively cupping her sex, stretched up, pressed a gentle kiss to the sharp angle of her jaw and looked down.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Well the sex has arrived! This chapter is pretty much skippable, I think, if you just want to avoid the "magical penis" sex, so you decide for you :)

Kyra ran a cautious hand down the flat of Kassandra’s belly, tracing the line of pearlescent skin wonderingly. 

“Kassandra,” she sighed softly. “It’s lovely.” she slid slowly to her knees, looked closely at the skin, touched it with gentle fingertips.

“Does it feel just the same as your other skin?” she looked up. “You can feel when I do this?” she traced its path.

“Yes” Kassandra said quietly. “I can only tell it’s different when I look down at it.” She met Kyra’s eyes nervously.

“Can you feel when I do this?” Kyra eased forward cautiously, kissed the flat of her belly, letting her feel the very tip of her warm, wet tongue.

She kept her eyes on Kassandra, heard her hiss, felt the muscles of her belly clench suddenly.

“That’s a “yes” then?” she smiled. “It’s so pretty, Kassandra,” she breathed, kissing down along the whole trail of it, right down to the soft nest of pink-white curls. “So, so pretty,” she ran her fingers through them, nosed into them teasingly. “Look how pretty,” she grinned up at her, genuinely delighted now.

Kassandra seemed to recognise her sincerity and looked a little reassured.

“Do you think we can work out how to keep it pink when you change back?” Kyra winked, teasing gently.

She ran her fingers along the opalescent skin of Kassandra’s groin, traced it down to her inner thighs, chased the path of her fingers with her lips, licking into the tender skin at the crease of her hip.

Kyra felt Kassandra’s cock twitch as she nosed against it, pressed a tender kiss to the shaft, traced along it with the warm, wet tip of her tongue and felt it begin to pulse into life for her.

“That’s better,” she smiled up at her, pressed a final soft kiss to the head, got carefully to her feet and kissed Kassandra’s chest, between her breasts, over her heart.

“I love you so, Kassandra,” she breathed, licking over to her breast, teasing her nipple between her teeth, tugging lightly.

“You are so beautiful my love, and I have missed you so much,” she slipped her hand down Kassandra’s belly, across the ridged muscle, down to the cut of her hips, following the narrow channel down to the juncture of her thighs.
Here Kyra cupped her lightly with her hand, felt her throb and jerk beneath her touch, slid her hand around Kassandra’s thickening cock, stroking gently.

“There now, that’s better,” she leaned up and bit Kassandra’s ear softly.

“Lie back for me, my handsome misthios,” she placed a firm hand in the centre of her chest. She felt Kassandra permit herself to be pushed back, felt her allow Kyra to push her down onto the bed.

Kyra took a long step back and watched as Kassandra raised herself on her elbows to look at her, hopeful and yearning.

Slowly, teasingly, Kyra unfastened the shoulders of her chiton, letting it slide to the floor, stepped out of it and kicked it aside, watching as Kassandra’s cock gave a lurch.

“You seem to see something you like, Kassandra of Sparta,” she growled, slowly unwinding her strophion, tossing the loose cloth aside, cupping her breasts, kneading firmly, teasing her nipples between fingers and thumbs.

“Is that right?” she cocked her head quizzically, ran her tongue across her upper lip.

Kassandra nodded silently, jaw slack, her glance darting between Kyra’s teasing eyes and her busy hands.

She was fully erect now, Kyra noticed with a smile, twitching lightly now and again as she licked her dry lips and allowed her eyes to slide down the firm slope of Kyra’s belly.

“Would you like to see the rest?” she arched an eyebrow, following Kassandra’s hungry gaze and teasingly hovering a hand at the knot of her perizoma.

Kassandra looked up, nodded eagerly, her eyes glazed with desperate longing.

“Would you like to see the rest?” Kyra repeated, smiling archly. “Can you use your words Kassandra? Yes Kyra, I would like to see the rest”. Let me hear you, my misthios, I’ve waited a long time to hear your voice. Don’t deny me now.”

“Yes,” Kassandra swallowed, licked her lips. “Yes, please Kyra, I would.”

“Close enough, my sweet,” Kyra smiled, slowly removing her last item of clothing. She threw the cloth aside to lie with the rest of her clothing and ran a lingering hand down the plane of her belly, circling her navel for a moment, watching Kassandra’s eyes as they followed her, fascinated.

Kyra took a half step towards the bed. She should be close enough now for Kassandra’s acute sense of smell to be able to detect how very aroused Kyra was, she thought, smiling.

Watching Kassandra’s eyes intently, she eased her hand down her belly, teasing through the neatly trimmed hair at her sex, dipped down and stroked herself slowly, moaning a little.

Kassandra was panting now, open mouthed. Kyra could see her chest heaving, the muscles of her belly tensing, her hips beginning to shift slightly.

“I have imagined this moment every night since you left,” Kyra breathed, easing her fingers between her labia, carefully circling her clitoris. She was almost too sensitive, a sharp shiver of desire sent a rush of arousal to her cunt. Kyra could feel how wet she was, felt the slickness on her inner thighs, knew Kassandra must see it.
She was dangerously close to release, too close to be playing this game really she realised. She
withdrew her fingers, held them up so Kassandra could see how they glistened, could catch the
warm heady scent of Kyra’s arousal.

“And not a single one of my fantasies came anywhere close to how desirable you look right now,
Kassandra,” she sighed, bringing her fingers to her mouth, licking them suggestively before sucking
them into her mouth and moaning softly, keeping her gaze locked on Kassandra’s amber eyes, dark
with lust now.

Kassandra gave a deep groan, the muscles of her belly and hips shuddered and she gave a short,
involuntary thrust of her pelvis. Kyra noticed a large, clear bead form at the head of her cock and
realised she needed to stop teasing her or this was all going to come to a premature end.

“Get on the bed for me, my misthios,” she instructed, “Lie back now, make a little room for me,” she
watched as Kassandra hastened to obey, shuffling back to lie against the pillows, eyes locked on
Kyra’s face the whole time, eager for direction.

“Very good,” Kyra growled teasingly, climbing onto the bed, laughing softly as Kassandra moaned
at the praise.

“Now, let’s find out what you’re made of, Kassandra of Sparta, shall we?” she straddled her thighs
and circled her cock carefully, fingers firm, pumping steadily.

Kassandra’s head fell back, her eyes closed for a minute and she whimpered with pleasure, hips
jerking against Kyra’s sex.

“Careful, please Kyra,” she opened her eyes, looked a little desperate. “I’m so close,” she breathed
warningly.

“You’re doing so well, my love, so very well, and I’m close too,” she reached up for Kassandra’s
breast, kneaded hard, pinched her stiff nipple between two scissoring fingers, drawing a hiss of
pleasure from her.

“You are magnificent Kassandra, and so very beautiful. I can’t tell you how much I’ve missed you,
how much I’ve ached for you, for this night,” she leaned forward and kissed the base of her throat.

Kyra eased Kassandra’s cock to lie flat against her belly and began to rock her hips steadily, rubbing
herself smoothly against the underside of the rigid shaft, moving slowly, firmly from base to head,
stroking her clit with every pass, resisting the building urge to just rut against her and chase the
release that was so close now.

Kassandra groaned, breathing Kyra’s name at every stroke.

She reached up to cup Kyra’s breasts, kneading them firmly, plucking at the taut peaks of her nipples,
feeling her shiver against her.

They were both close now Kyra could tell, pulses racing, breathing quick and hard. She lifted herself
up enough to grasp Kassandra with one hand and carefully part her dripping labia with the other,
easing Kassandra inside till the head of her cock lay against her entrance.

“Are you ready, my love?” she breathed. “Are you ready for me?” she looked down at her, met
Kassandra’s yearning gaze, those startling amber eyes never leaving Kyra’s face. “Are you ready to
put this baby inside me, my sweet misthios?”

“Yes! Kyra, gods yes, please,” Kassandra’s eyes were desperate, her expression longing.
She dropped her hands to Kyra’s hips and grasped hard, holding her as she sank smoothly onto Kassandra’s cock. Sinking carefully onto the full length of it, hearing Kassandra’s deep, rumbling groan of pleasure as Kyra’s wet heat steadily surrounded her.

Kyra settled there for a moment and remained still, adjusting to the feeling of Kassandra’s thick length inside her, giving them both time to steady themselves. They looked deep into each other’s eyes and Kassandra reached up, tenderly stroked Kyra’s cheek, frowning with concentration as she tried to resist the urge to thrust.

“You are so lovely Kyra,” she breathed, her voice shaking a little and Kyra watched as a tear formed, gathered on the fringe of her lashes for a moment before rolling down her cheek. “I love you so much and I so want to give you this baby, I want that for us more than I can say.”

“Then do it my love. Do it now, let me feel you,” Kyra raised herself a little, giving Kassandra just enough room to thrust without any danger of slipping out, rested her hands flat against her chest to steady herself. “Do it Kassandra. Let go for me, my sweet, let’s make this baby.”

Kassandra groaned, grabbed Kyra’s hips again and gave in to the desperate desire to move, to thrust hard and steady into her clutching heat, again and again, every muscle in her body tensing as desire grew, built, overwhelmed her and release rushed closer and closer.

She managed to keep just enough control to slip one hand between them to give Kyra something to rub against as Kassandra drove repeatedly into her, teetering right on the very edge of climax, wanting to feel Kyra coming too.

Kassandra gazed up at her wonderingly, drinking in her desperate, urgent expression, watched Kyra’s lust darkened eyes widen as she felt Kassandra’s hips begin to stutter out of rhythm, every muscle in her body tightening to the point of pain and then suddenly, uncontrollably releasing, in a great, shuddering, gasping climax, spilling hot and hard, deep inside Kyra.

Kassandra’s jerky thrusts, her whimpering cries of release, were enough to bring Kyra to orgasm, thrusting against Kassandra, driving herself down on her pulsing length, rubbing urgently against her strong, steady fingers.

Kassandra gasped, wide eyed and astonished, feeling Kyra’s cunt clenching about her as she came, hard, drawing forth a couple more thrusts from Kassandra, before she felt Kyra’s whole body melt and relax, slump against her, sliding down into Kassandra’s embrace, weeping against her powerful shoulder, whispering her name softly into the warm crook of her neck.

Kyra lay there, cradled against Kassandra’s chest as they both regained their breath.

“Stay inside me, please?” she whispered, “just for a little while longer, love, I’ve missed you so much.”

“Gladly,” Kassandra slid her hands down to cup the firm curve of her ass, kissed her temple softly.

“I love you Kyra. Gods, there were nights I never thought I’d be here again.” She sighed, rubbed her cheek against Kyra’s hair, closed her eyes, breathed in the scent of her. The scent of home.

“I get the feeling you have a lot to tell me,” Kyra stroked lightly at Kassandra’s nipple, felt her cock begin to soften inside her and a warm trickle run between them wetting her thighs. She purposefully clenched, heard Kassandra chuckle and tilt her head to look down at her.

“What are you doing?” she asked, laughter in her voice.
“I was just checking,” Kyra smiled. “Perhaps I was just curious to see how magical it really was.”

“Don’t test me, woman,” Kassandra laughed, blushing a little.

“Well you do have a lot of missed nights to make up for,” Kyra shrugged. “And I did do a lot of the hard work, just then.”

“Is that right?” Kassandra arched an eyebrow. “One of us faced down a terrifying sphinx, remember.”

“I suppose so,” Kyra smiled, nodded. “I’ll let you have that one.”

“I have a feather to prove it,” Kassandra remembered. “For Ophelia. A souvenir of our adventure.”

“Seriously?” Kyra raised herself a little to look at Kassandra’s face, suspecting she was teasing. As she did so she shifted her hips and to her astonishment felt Kassandra harden again inside her.

“Gods, Kassandra,” she frowned, unsure. “Can you go again, already?” she gave a cautious tilt of her head.

Kassandra blushed a little and gave a bashful smile.

“It’s sort of new, I suppose...and magic I guess,” she laughed awkwardly. “I’m sorry, we don’t have to...”

Kyra cut her off with a kiss, licking deeply into her mouth, drawing back to bite at her lower lip.

“Are you kidding?” she looked down at her. “Feel free to continue showing me what you’re made of, misthios,” she rock her hips a little, drew a deep groan from Kassandra and felt her move against her, beginning to match her rhythm.

“That sounds a little like a challenge?” Kassandra caught her hips in a strong grip and before Kyra had time to register what she was about to do, she flipped her onto her back, managing to stay inside as she moved atop her.

Kyra gave a little squawk of surprise, clutched at Kassandra’s shoulders grinned and gazed into her eyes.

“That was very clever, Kassandra,” she licked her lips. “If you’re not careful, I might think you’ve been practising,” she breathed, leaning up to chase a kiss.

“I did have time on board to give it some thought,” Kassandra bit softly at the side of her neck, began to thrust slow and steady, drawing a little further out with every stroke, gradually adding a little kick of her hips at the end of each thrust.

“I thought about you a lot the last couple of days,” she growled, lowering her head to bite at Kyra’s breast, drawing out a gasp of shocked pleasure.

“Only the last couple of days?” Kyra grabbed two fistfuls of Kassandra’s hair, pulled her head up to look in her face, rocking her hips up to meet her thrusts.

“Pretty much,” Kassandra’s expression became a little more serious, “but maybe we should talk about that later. It’s not really pillow talk, some of it.”

Kyra looked searchingly at her and frowned, stroked Kassandra’s hair back from her brow, gathered it, draped it over one shoulder, examined her expression.
“What happened out there, Kassandra?” she asked quietly.

There was a long pause, Kassandra’s hips slowed, stilled. She frowned and avoided Kyra’s gaze.

“Please Kyra,” she glanced up at last. “I will tell you everything. I promise. You can ask me about all of it and I’ll tell you everything I can remember. But not now please?”

“All right,” Kyra nodded. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to spoil the moment,” she smiled softly, stroked Kassandra’s flank soothingly.

“That’s all right,” Kassandra gave an experimental thrust of her hips. “Not entirely spoiled, see,” she smiled slowly.

“It seems like it’s a good job that I’ve worked so hard while you were away,” Kyra groaned as Kassandra slipped a hand between them, sought her clit, rubbed firmly with the flat of her fingers. “I’m predicting some postponed meetings in my immediate future.”

“You are a veritable oracle,” Kassandra bent her head to Kyra’s shoulder, bit hard, definitely enough to raise a bruise Kyra thought, shuddering with arousal.

“Do not leave a mark where I will have to cover it,” she warned, smiling but meaning it. She did not need to appear in her office bearing the brands of Kassandra’s passion.

Kassandra had the grace to appear chastened, but all the same as she soothed the bruise with kisses she began to thrust again. She braced herself on one powerful arm and slipped the other about Kyra’s waist, pulling her close, effortlessly raising Kyra’s hips off the bed as she moved inside her.

Kassandra drew out as far as she could at each stroke, easing back in slowly to her full length, bending to take Kyra’s nipple in her mouth, circling with the flat of her tongue before sucking hard, adding an edge of teeth, till she whimpered.

“I missed you so much,” Kassandra raised her head a little, looked steadily into Kyra’s eyes. “There were times I was so tired,” her thrusts were becoming harder, faster, “and the thought of you would keep me going, make me able to put one foot in front of the other for just a little longer, hoping for the chance to be here with you, back in your arms,” she was panting now, driving her hips hard against Kyra, inching her up the bed with the force of her thrusts.

“Times when I was so scared,” she bent her head to Kyra’s neck, rutting desperately against her now, driven on by Kyra’s needy gasps and whimpers. She gripped hard about Kyra’s waist, pulling her hard towards her to meet each jerk of her hips.

“So scared,” she whispered, feeling Kyra’s nails digging into the muscles of her back as she clutched and rocked against her, chasing her own release. “And the thought of you would give me strength, give me the courage I needed to go on,” her rhythm was stuttering now as her climax neared.

She released her hold on Kyra’s waist, tilted her hips a shade, slipped her hand between them, rubbed Kyra’s clit in time with her own urgent thrusts, heard Kyra cry out, felt her nails rake through the skin of her shoulder, felt her clenching hard around her, drawing a second hot, gasping orgasm from Kassandra where none should have been possible.

“You’re my strength Kyra,” she whimpered, shuddering against her. ”My courage, my endurance, it’s all you my love, it’s always been you, it always will be,” she fell against her with one final shaky thrust of her hips.

Later as they lay together in a tangle of limbs, sweat prickling their skin as it cooled and dried,
Kassandra leaned up and reached down for the sheet to cover them.

As she was about to lie back down into Kyra’s sleepy embrace, she caught her looking at her, fondly, searchingly.

“What is it, love?” Kassandra stroked a stray lock from Kyra’s eyes.

“I’m just so relieved that you’re home,” Kyra leaned into her touch, closed her eyes briefly. “It’s odd,” she looked up at Kassandra again, frowning a little. “Somehow it feels as though you went much, much further than Lesbos.”

Kassandra considered for a moment, nodded, lay back down, sighing as Kyra took her in her arms, pulled her close, kissed her brow.

“I think perhaps I did, Kyra,” she said, quietly.
In which a truly legendary amount of sex is had...off screen.

Everyone had rather assumed that when Kassandra eventually returned home things would go back to normal very quickly.

Quickly, but not immediately of course, they reasoned when Savina came downstairs the following morning with the news that the Archon would be unavailable for the whole day and that she and Aegeus were to deal with any business that might arise.

“It’s totally understandable,” Cymone shrugged, beating a bowl of eggs and listening to Aegeus grumbling. “All that time apart. Even if they weren’t getting “reacquainted” as it were,” she gave him a broad wink and watched him shudder. “The poor Archon would need a day in bed to catch up on all the sleep she missed while she was fretting about her wife. Don’t be unreasonable.”

“There are issues that require the Archon’s personal attention Mistress Cymone,” he tapped a fingernail irritably against the rim of his cup. “Issues which Mistress Savina and I are ill equipped or indeed unauthorised to deal with. Issues beyond our remit.”

Cymone gave him a disapproving look.

“Where’s your romance, Aegeus?” she sighed. “Your sense of the wonder of young love?”

“There is no room for romance in politics Mistress Cymone,” he pursed his lips primly. “And if you spent less time in the kitchen and more time paying attention to the professional doings of the household you would be aware of that.”

Savina was standing by the door, sipping a cup of watered wine, she could see the way this conversation was going to go by the speed with which Cymone’s eyebrows were descending.

“If I spent less time in the kitchen, you wouldn’t be able to sit there eati…”

“Well I think you both make very good points,” Savina intervened. “Very sound points indeed. Of course the Archon’s presence is a necessity for the efficient day to day running of the Islands, but along with her political existence, she is a woman, Aegeus, with a wife and child, a family and private life. That insight into the lives of her people is what helps to make her such a good Archon, after all. And it’s our job to help her balance that most efficiently. There’s nothing we can’t handle for this one day while she catches up with her wife.”

“One of the things I was most relieved about when I accepted this position,” Aegeus said primly. “One of the things which you might even say, swayed my hand, was the fact that the Archon was partnered with another woman,” he sniffed.

“Why how very open minded of you Aegeus,” Cymone gave a him a suspicious look.

“Indeed, I am a very forward thinking man, in many respects,” he nodded smugly. “I immediately realised the advantages to this unorthodoxy. Women, whilst some are very intelligent and capable
individuals are ill suited to public office by the very nature of their biology, no offense my good ladies.”

“None taken I’m sure,” Cymone said, stiffly.

“Do continue?” Savina frowned dubiously.

“Children, my friends,” he shrugged. “A double edged sword don’t you agree? A blessing to a family of course, lineage and so on and so forth, but what a curse it would be for the Archon to see her work delayed, even derailed perhaps by the burden of childbearing. Her wife may be a little...diplomatically challenging at times,” he sipped thoughtfully, “but at least she won’t give rise to that particular problem. The Archon can continue her great work, build her reputation, her legacy even, completely unhindered.”

“What I said earlier?” Cymone began to peel an onion. “About you being open minded? Well...I cha...”

“It’s an interesting point you raise,” Savina intervened. “The Archon has the blessing of a child without having had to interrupt her career of course, but I suspect you over estimate the burden it would cause anyway Aegeus. The household is large enough for us to raise a child without any serious difficulty I’m sure.”

“Oh that would be lovely, don’t you think Savina,” Cymone smiled a little dreamily. “A little one running about the place. The laughter of small children. Imagine Aegeus,” she said pointedly. “The laughter of small children...if you can.”

“Well blessedly that it is not ever going to become an issue,” he smiled serenely, “because we have been graced with an Archon who has placed herself above such...petty mundanity. No, I personally will not hear a word against the path of Sappho! Why, imagine! Looked at from a purely practical perspective, it has the potential to provide the means towards the liberation of your fellow women, no?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you are a very confused and confusing man Aegeus?” Cymone said over her shoulder.

“I don’t believe so,” he shook his head. “But I am confused this morning. I cannot believe the Archon would… I hesitate to say “shirk” but..”

“And yet you just did,” Cymone sighed, crushing garlic with a little more vigour than it really warranted.

“But to leave us...in the lurch like this!” he protested.

“There are many reasons why the Archon might be indisposed for a day Aegeus,” Savina soothed. “As her assistants we should be fully capable of undertaking some of her duties for a day.”

“Indeed,” Cymone nodded. “What if she got hit by a donkey cart?”

“The very idea!” he recoiled, shocked.

“Who’s got hit by a donkey cart?” Phoibe strolled in sucking on a piece of straw.

“No one dear,” Savina shook her head. “It was just a...figure of speech.”

“It’s rabbit stew tonight right?” Phoibe eyed Cymone’s handiwork with interest. “Want me to peel
some vegetables?"

“That would be very helpful young Phoibe,” Cymone smiled approvingly. “See, that’s the sort of thing someone ought to be doing when they come to spend time in my kitchen, not sitting at the table, swilling the good wine, eating my honey cakes and grumbling about their boss,” she cut her eyes at Aegeus.

“Who’s grumbling about the...oh Kyra?” Phoibe hopped up to sit on the work surface and set to peeling a pile of potatoes. “Why, what’s she done?”

“I don’t think we really ought to be discussing…” Savina began.

“Actually, where is she?” Phoibe frowned thoughtfully. “And Kassandra...ohhh!” she raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, of course, you’re probably not getting them out of the bedroom today Aegeus,” she grinned. “Live with it.”

“Live with it indeed, Mistress Phoibe” he muttered. “It’s most unprofessional and most unlike our beloved Archon. Remember if you will the unfortunate occasion when she broke her arm whilst hunting and actually conducted business as the healer was setting the bone,” he gave a faraway sigh of admiration. “That’s the sort of resolute political determination I expect from her. She’s a truly remarkable woman. Usually.”

“I do remember that,” Cymone put down her knife for a moment and assumed a look of studied reminiscence. “You sat in that very chair, swilling the good wine, and eating my honey cakes just like today and moaning on about how she shouldn’t have been out hunting in the first place.”

“Oh it’s only one day Aegeus,” Phoibe accepted a chunk of carrot from Cymone and began to crunch cheerfully. “I’d have liked to go swimming with Kassandra this afternoon, but I already knew it wasn’t going to happen really cos they haven’t seen each other for going on two weeks and they’ve a lot of...catching up” to do. I can wait to go swimming, till they’ve got it out of their systems. You can do some...filing? Or something? “

“Or take the afternoon off and go swimming,” Cymone suggested cheekily, winking at Phoibe.

“There you go!” she grinned. “We could go swimming Aegeus, what about it?”

He snorted in disgust and got to his feet, brushing an impressive amount of honey cake crumbs from his tunic.

“Clearly none of you are prepared to take this matter seriously,” he gathered himself with wounded dignity. “I intend to go and investigate the complaints about that new baker fellow who has set up stall hear the dock. Someone here needs to have the reputation of the place at heart. Good day ladies!” he stalked out.

“You notice he didn’t take umbrage and walk out till he’d finished that plate of cakes,” Cymone raised an eyebrow. “Pompous fool,” she shook her head.

“But he’s very good at his job,” Savina defended, taking his vacated seat.

“I’m guessing it’s not a political emergency just yet, “ Cymone smiled. “Judging by the way you’re sitting in here chatting?”

“No, not yet, unless something untoward happens, and then I’m sure the Archon would be prepared to interrupt her...private...business, under those circumstances,” Savina flushed pinkly. “She worked so long and hard in Kassandra’s absence that she’s well ahead of all her routine business anyway. 
Aegeus just doesn’t like his routine disrupted.”

“Or to be reminded that his beloved Archon is a human being,” Cymone laughed, wiping her hands on a cloth. “Now who wants some honey cakes?”

“I thought Aegeus ate them all,” Phoibe perked up, having finished her carrot.

“Phh,” Cymone snorted. “Those were yesterday’s leftovers,” she produced a plate of fresh cakes from a shelf under the table. “Like I was going to let him loose on the fresh ones. Get stuck in young Phoibe, if your maters are going to be worshiping Aphrodite all day, more cakes for us.”

“Cymone!” Savina reproved, casting a meaningful glance in Phoibe’s direction, as she took a sticky cake.

“Oh don’t worry,” Phoibe mumbled around a mouthful of sweet dough. “Business as usual growing up with Kassandra.”

“Well, I’m sure we can all turn a blind eye to it on this occasion,” Savina said, a little primly. “It’s only one day after all.”

Phoibe raised her eyebrows and licked her thumb clean before taking a second cake.

“You know, I’d count on two if I were you, Savina,” she warned.

She gave Savina an “I told you so” look the following morning when she came downstairs looking anxious.

Aegeus was pacing back and forth along the hallway.

“Well?” he frowned, throwing his arms wide. “Where is she?”

“Oh I think you know where she is Aegeus,” Phoibe was sitting on a low table kicking her legs slowly, watching the drama unfold with quiet amusement. “Maybe not the specific details but the general location.”

“Mistress Phoibe, if you would, please,” he held up a hand to prevent further elaboration. “When is she coming, Mistress Savina?”

Phoibe smirked but caught Savina’s warning glance and said nothing.

“She is currently indisposed I’m afraid Aegeus,” she sighed. “We are to continue routine business in her absence and only to disturb her in case of genuine emergency.”

“Again!” he squeaked indignantly. “Two days running? What on earth are they doing?”

“Phoibe!” Savina saw Phoibe opening her mouth and cut her off at the pass. “Do you not have lessons with Master Dion?”

“Indeed I do Savina,” Phoibe smiled. “But not till later today. He has a meeting with Ophelia all morning at least.”

“Oh...yes,” Savina recollected that she’d seen him shuffling off first thing, with an amphora of the best wine tucked under his arm.
“And those two are as thick as thieves these days, I notice. And I’ve also noticed the creeping reduction of the contents of the wine cellar,” Aegeus sniffed disapprovingly. “Master Dion is paid to be here specifically for the private tutelage of Mistress Phoibe. Not to be flitting about on clandestine business with drunken old priestesses.”

“A little respect Aegeus,” Savina frowned primly. “Ophelia is an elder Priestess of Artemis after all.”

“I think she might even be the Eldest Priestess of Artemis,” Phoibe remarked dryly.

“She’s a drunken old soak, is what she is,” Aegeus protested.

“Aegeus!” Phoibe and Savina said in accidental unison, but with completely different tones.

“It’s true,” he defended. “And she takes up far too much of Master Dion’s time these days. He is in the pay of the Archon after all! His priority is the education of Mistress Phoibe above all!” he was getting quite agitated.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Phoibe smiled thoughtfully. “I think it’s rather sweet myself.”

“Sweet?” now it was Aegeus and Savina’s turn to speak in unison, though in this case they both sounded equally perplexed.

“Mmm,” Phoibe nodded. “Young love, even though they’re both old as Olympus. Love’s a treasure Aegeus,” she smirked. “A precious gift from Aphrodite. Let them have it,” she clasped her hands to her breast dramatically.

“And this, Mistress Phoibe,” he wagged a finger. “Is exactly why you need to be occupied with your studies, instead of being left to your own devices.”


Seconds later there was a frantic scrabbling of claws on tiles and Orion came barreling down the stairs, almost taking with him Savina, who had been conducting the conversation from the third step.

“Come on boy, let’s go get some fresh air,” she slapped her thigh. ”Don’t worry you two, they’ll be up and about in the morning, business will be back to normal. Enjoy the change while it lasts,” she waved over her shoulder as they left.

The following morning when Savina walked slowly down the stairs, utterly deflated, even Phoibe looked slightly taken aback.

“Did...what...how can...no, no, this is...whatever are?” Aegeus spluttered, pacing frantically back and forth. He stopped in his tracks, flung out his hands despairingly.

“But wolves!” he exclaimed suddenly.

“Wolves?” Savina frowned.

“Wolves!!” he repeated, face a little red.

“Lions!” Phoibe chimed in.
They both turned to look at her and she shrugged.

“Oh! I thought we were just shouting random animal names at each other? Are we not?” she smiled cheekily.

“I do not believe for one moment, Mistress Phoibe,” Aegeus gave her a disapproving look. “That you thought that at all. And your levity is completely inappropriate under the circumstances. There are genuine wolves causing genuine problems and it is not a suitable matter for humour. I needed the misthios. We needed the misthios. The island needs the misthios. And she’s still holed up. Doing who knows what and with no indication when all this will be over. The Islands are going to fall to rack and ruin. All my hard wo...all our hard...all the Archon’s hard work, all melting away, and for what?” he flung up an arm in the direction of the bedroom.

“I understand that many people set great store by... it, but I refuse to believe that it can be so very entertaining as all that. Not enough to evade your responsibilities for three days!”

His voice was climbing higher and higher with each word and Savina was starting to look a little worried. His face was very red now, and he wasn’t a man in the first blush of youth after all.

“Hey, “Phoibe smiled soothingly, and came over to him, patted his arm. “Calm yourself Aegeus, it’s all going to be all right. You’re going to do yourself a mischief if you carry on like this. What’s this about wolves then?”

He stopped pacing, took a few deep breaths. His colour began to fade a little.

“Thank you for your concern, Mistress Phoibe,” he placed a calming hand on his chest. “The wolves in question seem to have been driven out of their natural territory by the expansion of neighbouring farms. Deprived of access to their traditional hunting grounds they are beginning to prey on surrounding livestock. The farmers are up in arms, they wish the Archon’s Misthios to go and solve the problem. How am I to explain... this to them!”

“All right Aegeus,” Phoibe nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe three days does seem a little excessive, even for Kassandra. But the wolves, you can absolutely deal with that. Praxos and I will sort it out. I know we’re no Kassandra or even Kyra if it comes down to it. But we’re what you’ve got and we’ll do. Leave it to us, we can go out and investigate tomorrow I bet. No explanation necessary”

“There you are Aegeus,” Savina smiled soothingly. “One problem out of the way. Now is there anything else troubling you?”

“There are a lot of things troubling me, Mistress Savina, I assure you,” he shook his head wearily.”But as Mistress Phoibe seems to think that she and Praxos can deal with the wolves, my next pressing concern is Nomiki.”

Savina rolled her eyes, she’d half expected this, whatever it was.

“What has he done now?” she sighed.

“There have been...complaints,” Aegeus frowned. “About the nature of that strange new oil he’s been selling. Customers are complaining that he has raised the price and that the quality has worsened since his first delivery.”

Savina rubbed the bridge of her nose wearily, she could predict exactly what was going on. Fortunately, for all his grand money making schemes Nomiki really lacked the brains or discipline to carry any of them out with any degree of efficiency. She could deal with this.
“As you know, the Archon herself issued the permit that allows him to import and trade,” Aegeus was gesticulating wildly. “This will all reflect very poorly on her if…”

“Leave that with me Aegeus,” Savina said calmly. “I know how to deal with Nomiki and I also know what that oil is supposed to taste, feel and smell like. I shall deal with that matter today.”

“Oh,” Aegeus blinked. “Very well then…it seems that we have things under control.”

“Of course you do Aegeus,” Phoibe patted his arm brightly. “Because you are very good at organising things. The Archon is always saying it’s one of your strengths.”

“She...she says that?” he placed a hand to his chest, “how very gratifying. But of course she would. The Archon is a very observant woman. Unwavering eye for the smallest detail. Well then! If we have everything in hand. Mistress Savina, Mistress Phoibe? I shall wish you a good day for now, I have permits and permissions to scrutinize.”

He stalked off leaving Savina and Phoibe exchanging glances.

“Have you ever noticed that he always calls us Mistress but it doesn’t sound polite half of the time? How does he do that?”

“Practise,” Savina sighed. “Phoibe?” she sat down at the bottom of the stairs. “You’ve known Kassandra for longer than anyone? Is this curr…”

“Three days?” Phoibe interpreted. “It is a little bit unusual. I don’t know what she found on that island. Perhaps it was the sphinx feather?” she frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps its a side-effect of Sphinx feathers? I hope word doesn’t get round, for the sake of the sphinx!”
The next morning Savina entered the villa full of trepidation and it was beginning to show. Her golden blonde hair, normally so immaculately arranged was a little rough around the edges and she was only wearing one earring.

As she stepped inside she glanced wearily up at the stairs, heaved a great sigh and then heard a man’s simpering laugh and the familiar voice of the Archon coming from the direction of the office.

She walked over and seeing that the door was open, leaned on the frame and looked inside.

There was Kyra, sitting at her desk as though she’d never been away. And she looked...radiant, Savina realised wonderingly. Gone was the drawn expression, the dark shadows below her eyes, and she was smiling, and at something Aegeus had said as well!. She blinked.

“Savina!” Kyra spotted her and beamed. ”How lovely to see you. I was just telling Aegeus,” she patted his hand, he blushed. “How very, very grateful I am for all of your help while I have been otherwise engaged. Truly the Silver Islands could barely run without either of you. Rest assured, I shall find some way to repay you, in at least a small part, for all your hard work.”

“There is no need Archon,” Savina blinked slowly. “No need at all. It’s our duty,” she looked at Aegeus who was gazing with dog-like devotion at Kyra. “And our pleasure to help you. You work so hard all the time, and often with little thanks. You deserved a small ...break from your duties.”

“Exactly what I was saying” Aegeus smiled contentedly.” I said to Mistresses Savina, Cymone and even young Phoibe, the Archon has prepared us well for just such an eventuality, there is nothing here that we cannot handle. She deserves some time away from her arduous duties.”

Savina gave him a cool look but he was still gazing devotedly at Kyra as she applied her seal to another document.

“Aeton and Onesimos, I need to see them, and soon Aegeus,” she sighed. “Those idiots will see the grain go to waste rather than lower the price and I won’t have that. Savina? “ She looked up. “I believe you went to see Nomiki? I assume he’s been adultering his coconut oil to maximise his profits? Short sighted idiot.”

“Good morning everyone!” they all turned to see Kassandra swaggering into the room, grinning broadly, the picture of satisfaction.

“Savina, how very lovely you look this morning,” she smiled. “You’ve done something different with your hair. It’s very pretty, softer somehow. Oh and just one earring. That’s an intriguing look,” she arched an eyebrow, gave her a theatrically wolfish smile.

Savina flushed despite herself, checked her ear.

“How lovely to see you too, misthios,” she nodded. “And looking so well.”

She watched her stride over to the desk and smoothly but firmly insinuate herself between Kyra and Aegeus.

He looked a little put out, but Kassandra directed the full force of her smile on him as she placed a rather proprietary hand on the back of Kyra’s chair.
“And you are also looking very nice this morning Aegeus,” she eyed him up and down. “Is that a new chiton? It’s a very fetching colour on you. Brings out your pretty eyes,” he blushed adorably to Savina’s quiet amusement.

“Don’t you think Aegeus has pretty eyes, my love?” she looked down at Kyra and perched on the chair arm.

“Indeed,” Kyra said dryly. “I am going to find it difficult to work however, with you sitting on my arm like that, misthios,” she smiled, nudging Kassandra’s hip with her elbow.

“Ah, sorry,” she stood, looking down at Kyra with a besotted smile. “I hadn’t seen you for over an hour. I just wanted to make sure that you were well?”

“I have never been better,” Kyra assured her.

Savina could see her melting a little under Kassandra’s ardent gaze. “But I do have work to do. We have...I have been away from my desk for long enough and there’s business to catch up on. You’re more than welcome to stay of course. But perhaps in a chair of your own, where you will be a little less...distracting?”

Before Kassandra could respond there was a knock at the door, and one of the house servants entered.

“Pardon me Archon but there is a messenger here, from the Temple,” she explained.

“Send them in, by all means,” Kyra sat up a little and watched as a young woman ventured in, clearly nervous. She was just a girl really, Kyra thought, she could barely be out of puberty and was obviously a little overwhelmed at finding herself in the presence of not only the Archon, but a small audience.

Savina gave her an encouraging smile and indicated that she should approach a little closer.

“Good morning child,” Kyra nodded, reassuringly. “Do you have a message for me?”

“No,” the girl said, a little shakily. “I mean, yes, Archon, but begging your pardon, the message isn’t for you Archon.”

“Oh!” Kyra smiled. “Then...who is it for? Don’t be nervous, no one here will bite. Not even Orion,” she teased. He’d wriggled out from under her chair and was waggling forward to investigate the newcomer. “Gently now, Orion,” Kyra reminded him. He sniffed the girl’s trembling hand, gave it a quick lick and then rolled onto his back, grinning expectantly.

“He likes you,” Kyra laughed, shaking her head. The girl looked a bit unsure about what was expected.

“He wants you to tickle his belly, young miss,” Aegeus said kindly, making his way over and rummaging in his belt pouch for one of the dog treats he always had about him. “Tickle his belly young lady, and then give him this and he will be your friend forever.”

By the time Orion had broken the ice the girl seemed calmer, less overwhelmed.

“Now,” Kyra tilted her head encouragingly. “Your message, who is it for?”

“For your misthios, if it please you Archon,” she nodded towards Kassandra.
For her part she didn’t even seem to have noticed that the girl had entered. She was standing as close as she could to Kyra’s chair without breaching her instructions not to sit on it and was gazing at her as though she were the only person in the room.

“For you Kassan..oh!” Kyra turned, recoiled a little at Kassandra’s unexpected intensity. “Kassandra!” she hissed.

“My treasure?” Kassandra smiled dreamily.

“My misthios!” Kyra said with emphasis.

My Archon?” Kassandra breathed, leaning in.

“Kassandra!” Kyra hissed sharply.

“Huh, oh,” Kassandra recovered herself and turned to find herself the subject of three curious gazes from across the desk. “I’m sorry, you were saying?” she smiled hopefully.

“There is a message for you, misthios,” Kyra nodded her head at the girl.

“Ah, good morning, my young friend,” Kassandra registered the girl at last, gave her an encouraging grin. “How may I help you?”

“If it pleases you misthios,” she gulped. “I bring a message for you?”

“There is absolutely nothing which could fail to please me on this glorious morning,” she placed her hands firmly on her hips, threw back her shoulders and beamed.

“It’s from Priestess Ophelia,” the girl began.

“Oh shit!” Kassandra hissed, shoulders dropping.

Kyra gave her a sharp dig in the ribs and smiled soothingly at the girl.

“Do continue,” she nodded.

“The Elder says she’s delighted to hear of your safe return and trusts that you have had sufficient time to recuperate and..and…” she frowned hard, clearly trying to recollect the exact wording.” And she trusts that you and the Archon have had sufficient time to...to…”

Everyone’s eyebrows raised as they waited with nervous expectancy.

“To renew your acquaintance!” she grinned at her success.

There was a general sigh of relief.

“And that this being so she would be grateful for your attendance in her quarters at your...earliest convenience so that she might prevail upon you for the details of your recent adventures,” the girl gave a huge sigh and grinned with evident relief.

“Well done young miss,” Aegeus patted her shoulder. “Very well delivered wouldn’t you say Mistress Savina?”

“Indeed,” she smiled reassuringly. “Very well remembered also. You should be very proud.”

“Yes, good job,” Kassandra smiled, “tell Ophelia I’ll be along later when I’ve grabbed some
breakfast and gathered a few things.”

“Please let the Elder know that my misthios will attend within the hour,” Kyra intervened. “Now, it’s a very warm morning, please allow Savina to take you to the kitchen for a cool drink and some refreshments before you return to the temple. And it seems as though Orion would like to accompany you, if that’s all right?”

The girl nodded enthusiastically and followed Savina to the door, her hand on Orion’s wrinkled brow. At the last moment she remembered herself, stopped and turned.

“Thank you so much for your kind attention Archon,” she dipped a little bow.

“How charming,” Aegaeus folded his hands at this chest.

“Indeed, “Kyra nodded. “And now Aegaeus, I need you to go and pay a visit to those two recalcitrant grain merchants,” she smiled coolly. “And bring them right back here with you, don’t give them time to think. I want them wrong footed by the time they get here.”

“Oh Archon,” he smirked delightedly. “It will be my absolute pleasure. And may I say,“ he stopped at the door. “What an absolute joy it is to see you about your duties again?”

As he closed the door behind him Kassandra gave a low chuckle.

“You know my sweet,” she placed an arm about Kyra’s shoulders. “Even though Aegaeus is immune to the pleasures of the flesh, I think he gets a little bit hard when you talk like that,” she grinned wolfishly, lowered her head to Kyra’s neck and growled in her ear. “And he’s not the only one.”

“Really?” Kyra laughed. “That’s an image I could have lived without. And hopefully you’ll be feeling a little less rigid by the time you arrive at Ophelia’s door. She is an Elder Priestess…”

“...of Artemis! Yes, yes,” Kassandra sighed. “I’d better go raid the wine cellar I suppose?”

“Why not take her a couple of jugs of the honey wine?” Kyra suggested as Kassandra got to her feet. Seeing her raise her eyebrows Kyra smiled. “She’s certainly earned it, don’t you think, if only for the last three days?”

“A very sound point,” Kassandra took Kyra’s hand, pressed the palm to her lips, kissed it softly with a light suggestion of tongue. “I shall go pay my respects and renew my acquaintance with that bloody stool,” she grinned.

“Well, well, well, look at you!” Ophelia blinked up at Kassandra as she ducked her head and entered the familiar warm, windowless, lamp lit room. “I’d forgotten how much space you take up. Come on in, come,” she waved a hand over her shoulder as she shuffled over to the table.

Not much had changed since she’d been away Kassandra thought, looking around. It was more cluttered than before, the contents of the underground chamber were piled up against the walls, there were more scrolls and parchments in a wooden chest by the tiny bed.

The bloody stool was still there, she observed. She looked about for the chair that Ophelia had produced for Kyra when she’d visited.
“Sit, sit, you big ox, I haven’t missed your looming,” Ophelia took a seat at the table, eyed Kassandra owlishly, squinting a little indelicately in the region of her crotch.

“Can I not have the...where is the chair?” Kassandra peered about, wondering if it was under a pile of pots perhaps.

“I needed the space,” Ophelia waved an arm. “Had to make room for all these. I didn’t let them take your stool though, never fear,” she kicked it over to Kassandra. “Take a perch.”

Kassandra heaved a sigh and placed the two jugs on the table.

“I come bearing gifts,” she found a cleanish cup and unstoppered one of the jugs.

“Is that hydromeli?” Ophelia accepted the cup with eager hands and smacked her lips in anticipation. “By the goddess I’ve not tasted this in an age,” she emptied the cup with startling speed, held it out for a refill. “Oh, that hits the spot. I take it your trip was successful then?” she grinned. “Sit, sit, for the love of Artemis, sit.”

Kassandra reluctantly crouched down onto the stool, winced, tried to rearrange herself discreetly. Ophelia chuckled heartily, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Not as easy as it was eh?” she wiped her eyes with the ink stained sleeve of her chiton.

“It was never easy, actually,” Kassandra shuffled uncomfortably, splayed her knees a little further. “It just takes a little more...arranging now,” she frowned.

“Clearly your trip was an unqualified success then?” Ophelia winked broadly. “I imagine it has its advantages though, no? I suppose that was why it took you so long to get here, eh? Three days? Can the poor Archon walk straight?” she chuckled.

“Hardly an appropriate topic for a Priestess of Artemis,” Kassandra said stiffly.

“Dear me, did you have to trade your sense of humour for it?” Ophelia held out her cup. “Oh wait, you didn’t really have one to start with, did you?” she laughed.

“There isn’t room for one on this stool,” Kassandra said bitterly. “And you’re going to end up under the table at this rate,” she refilled the cup.

“Don’t tell me about drinking, girl,” Ophelia smacked her lips, “I was doing it before you were a twinkle in your pater’s eye. So...what was this mysterious island like?”

“Dark, barren, smelly,” Kassandra said, thoughtfully.

“You have a poetic soul misthios,” Ophelia eyed her narrowly. She rummaged around on the table found a pile of papyrus and an inkwell. “I was intending to take notes,” she arched an eyebrow. “but you’re going to have to do a bit better than that.”

I brought you something,” Kassandra said, a little archly, watched as Ophelia’s expression brightened. “I said I would, no?”

“Indeed you did, misthios, indeed you did,” Ophelia grinned, producing a cup from the dark recesses under the table. “An actual artefact eh? Perhaps this deserves a sip of...”

She reached for the jug, as Kassandra rummaged in her pouch and produced a small lump of jet black rock.
“... water,” Ophelia’s hand swerved to the jug on the floor by her chair. “There you go, girl, wet your whistle,” she exchanged the cup for the rock.

Kassandra smirked quietly, sipping the tepid water and watching as the old priestess held the strange rock right up to her nose, stroked it experimentally, touched it with the tip of her tongue.

“Well this is...quite interesting...I suppose,” she conceded eventually. “It’s more Dion’s area of interest really, I imagine he’ll be glad enough to see it. Was there anything else?”

“Not a damn thing,” Kassandra shrugged. “No pots, no artefacts, no writing, no statues, no buildings, no...”

“Very well girl, I get the idea,” Ophelia’s face fell. She drained her cup with less enthusiasm than Kassandra ever seen.

“The only thing I managed to find was....” she reached into her belt and pulled out the feather with a theatrical flourish.

“This!” she held it out over the table, under Ophelia’s nose.

The priestess’s face was a picture of astonishment. She absently put down the cup, nearly missing the table and reached out with trembling hands for the wondrous object.

“Misthios,” she breathed. “Is...is this really? Oh...by the gods...sweet Artemis...”

To Kassandra's embarrassment a tear ran down Ophelia’s wrinkled cheek.

“Yes, yes, it’s a sphinx feather,” she shrugged awkwardly.

“Did you?” Ophelia took hold of the feather, held it close to her face, peered reverently at the veins of its feathering, the way it seemed to glow with an internal light. “Did you have to...” she trailed off.

“No, no, I didn’t have to harm it at all,” Kassandra shook her head. “You know what? I think that maybe it left it on purpose. Perhaps it left it for you?” she smiled.

“Kassandra!” Ophelia beamed. “Ohoho Kassandra, you rascal, you absolute rascal,” she took Kassandra’s cup from her hand, tossed the remaining water on the floor and filled it with honey wine.

“To your very good health...to say nothing of your hopefully remarkable potency eh?” she raised her cup.

Kassandra had no idea how long it took them to empty the first jug of hydromeli and start on the next one. But it was long enough for her to relate the whole story to Ophelia, then relate selected highlights again while she took notes and for Kassandra to draw some rather inexpert pictures of the island, the rock doorway, the moonlit arena, the sphinx and the strange pool.

“You are a not entirely untalented artist misthios,” Ophelia slurred a little, she’d had two cups for every one that Kassandra had emptied. “What’s this one? The sphinx again?”

Kassandra peered over, she had it upside down,

“That’s Jason,” she frowned, turning the papyrus round. “See...those are his curly horns?”

“Ah...yes? The unfortunate ram,” Ophelia said doubtfully. “And this?!?”
“That’s me!” Kassandra beamed, she was particularly proud of that one. “Afterwards of course.”

“Oh..I..see?” Ophelia rotated it ninety degrees, squinted. “And this?” she tapped with her finger.

“That’s...that’s my...you know?” Kassandra nodded to her lap.

“Ah!” Ophelia, turned it back upright. “But what are all these lines?” she frowned and glanced warily over at Kassandra’s crotch.

“Those are shimmer lines!” Kassandra grinned. That had been a particularly inspired bit, she thought.

“Admittedly I’m not an expert in this area,” Ophelia shook her head. “But...”shimmer” lines?”

“For the shimmer,” Kassandra got to her feet. Her head felt a little light.

“Yes, I heard shimmer,” Ophelia refilled their cups. “But it’s not a word I associa....whoa, whoa, whoa,” she held up her hands as Kassandra hitched up the hem of her tunic. “It’s all right Kassandra really, I get the picture, I don’t need to....by the Gods!”

Kassandra had eased aside the folds of her perizoma just enough to reveal the opalescent skin at her inner thigh.

“What in the name of all that’s...” Ophelia lifted the lamp from the table and leaned forward. “Well I never...shimmer...indeed,” she smiled. “Look at that would you.? And it’s all like that? Remarkable!”

“Shimmer lines, see,” Kassandra nodded at her drawing, grinning proudly. She picked up her cup, tossed back the shot of honey wine.

“Why yes, yes, I see that now,” Ophelia glanced up. “Very artistic. You’re wasted hitting things with a sword really.”

“Elder Ophelia,” the door opened and a middle aged woman, dressed in the robes of a senior priestess entered, stopped, took in the scene before her, blinked slowly.

Kassandra and Ophelia turned and looked at the newcomer.

“Yes, yes? Is there any chance you could learn to knock before I cross the Styx, do you think Amyrita?,” Ophelia said shortly. “Get on with it, girl.”

“I...was just...” Amyrita said slowly. “Word has come from the Archon’s villa...”

“Yes? Come along now, out with it,” Ophelia had put the lamp down on the floor and was scribbling frantic notes.

“The Archon was wondering if her misthios would be returning to the villa in time for the evening meal?” Amyrita looked at Kassandra, concentrating hard on her face.

“Gods, is it that time?” Kassandra lowered her tunic and began to put on her belt. “I have to be going Ophelia. I didn’t realise how late it was.”

“Of course, of course,” Ophelia got to her feet, swayed a bit, placed a hand on Kassandra’s arm. “Work to do eh?” she tried to wink, failed dismally. “May the gods bless your endeavours, my friend. Don’t be a stranger now, you hear? Pay the occasional visit to the temple as well.”

“Absolutely!” Kassandra lied. “If you have any further questions Ophelia, you know where to find
me.”

“Indeed, indeed, “she looked back at the glowing feather draped across the table and chuckled. “You rascal, misthios, you absolute rascal,” she patted her arm.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Kassandra arrived back at the villa relatively unscathed. She’d taken one tumble into a patch of shrubbery on the way, but after glancing about with theatrical casualness she was reasonably sure no one had seen.

She was standing contentedly by a low wall outside the villa making an unscheduled comfort break into a bush when Kyra emerged from a nearby doorway, and looked about.

“Hello, sweetheart!” Kassandra whispered loudly enough for the patrons at Mikis’ tavern to hear. “It’s me,” she waved.

Kyra turned, saw her, beamed delightedly and strode over, stopping abruptly a few steps away.

“Hello, my treasure,” Kassandra swayed a little, glanced down to check progress.

Nearly done she figured and looked back up.

Kyra was beaming a good deal less now for some reason.

“Are you peeing in my shrubbery?” she hissed, outraged, stalking across and peering over the wall. “You are! I knew it. Stop that immediately.”

“Any moment now,” Kassandra assured her. “Did I mention how very lovely you look?” she smiled lopsidedly.

“No you didn’t actually,” Kyra had to fight a smile despite her annoyance. “And it’s a good deal less charming a compliment when you’re delivering it with your dick in your hand, take it from me.”

“That’s not the way you reacted the other night,” Kassandra grinned wolfishly, waggling her eyebrows and adjusting her clothing. “Can I have a kiss?” she grabbed hold of the top of the wall and began to vault over.

“Ah ah!” Kyra held out a hand, catching her in the chest with more force than she had intended. She watched dismayed as Kassandra flailed a little bit and toppled back off the wall and out of sight.

“Gods preserve us,” she pinched the bridge of her nose.

Kassandra’s head appeared over the top of the wall, grinning happily.

“I’m okay,” she flung out her arms. “I didn’t land where I peed. That’s always good!”

Kyra really didn’t want to know what experiences had given birth to that statement.

“I was going to say, come in via the gateway like a civilized person,” she sighed. “But you’re not really a fully civilized person, are you?”
“Not all the time,” Kassandra admitted, folding her arms atop the wall and resting her chin on them.

“Aphrodite!” she breathed, serious suddenly. “You really are...you’re just lovely Kyra. I’m sorry, I’ll go round to the gate,” she began to walk off.

“No, no,” Kyra shook her head, laughing now. “Climb over the wall,” she sighed. “I know how you love climbing on things, you big handsome ox.”

Kassandra grinned lasciviously and opened her mouth to say something.

“Good evening Archon!” one of the guards rounded the corner on his regular patrol route.

“Ah guard!” Kyra jumped a little. “I was looking for you actually. And here you are.”

“Indeed Archon, how may I be of assist... oh good evening to you Misthios,” he noticed Kassandra, who was about to place a foot atop the wall.

“Good evening guardsman,” she nodded with studied courtesy. “Out and about your...guarding, I see. Excellent work. I was just out...for a stroll...and” she glanced around. “I inadvertently fell off this wall. Nothing to worry about.” she shook her head.

“If you’re sure?” he frowned cautiously, glanced at Kyra.

“Assollut...absip...no, no, nothing to worry about,” Kassandra was clambering inelegantly over, scrabbling to her feet beside Kyra.

“I was simply going to ask if you had seen Kassandra this evening,” Kyra smiled at the guard. “But here she, quite evidently, is. So I’ll let you continue about your duties, thank you so much.”

They watched him stride off, making a poor job of hiding his amusement.

“Nailed it!” Kassandra hissed, grinning and giving Kyra a quick thumbs up.

“You are the most ridiculous...oaf!” she shook her head, smiling. “Only you could come back from a day at the Temple Of Artemis absolutely plastered.”

“In fairness I think anyone could if they spent the time with Ophelia,” Kassandra said thoughtfully. “Though, no, that’s not really accurate cos she doesn't usually share.”

She tilted her head suddenly and sniffed the air with dog-like intensity.

“Gods, something smells gorgeous!” she breathed. “It’s not you is it?” she made a grab for Kyra who glanced around quickly and then permitted it.

“No, it’s yesterday’s boar stew being heated up,” she laughed “and that is not the compliment you might imagine it to be,” she looked up at Kassandra.

She was clearly drunk but gazing at Kyra with such open devotion, a hopeless love struck smile on her face, that Kyra couldn’t be annoyed.

“You do smell good though,” Kassandra breathed, lowering her face to Kyra’s neck, nuzzling below her ear.

“You always smell good but...tonight you just...mmm,” she kissed her neck softly.

“That, my love, is the hydromeli talking,” Kyra tilted her head a little. There were a clear three
minutes before the next guard circled.

“No...no, I don’t think it *is* actually,” Kassandra seemed to sober for a moment but then clearly forgot what she was about to say as Kyra shifted her head to meet her lips, drawing her into a long slow kiss.

Kassandra’s mouth tasted of sweet honey and the sharp kick of fermented fruit. Apricots, Kyra wondered?

She took Kassandra’s hands in hers and slid them down to her hips, around to her ass, moaned a little as Kassandra pulled her tightly against her, lapping into her mouth with that clever tongue of hers.

“Did you please Ophelia with your tales?” Kyra broke the kiss, nuzzling against Kassandra’s neck.

“I pleased her with my sphinx feather,” Kassandra smiled.

There was a moment’s awkward silence and then Kyra released the snorting laugh she’d been trying to hold.

“I didn’t mean that to sound as filthy as it did,” Kassandra grinned sheepishly, shaking her head.

“I can’t tell you how relieved I am to hear it,” Kyra chuckled. “And what about *me*, my handsome misthios?” she gazed up at her from beneath lowered lashes. “Are you going to be able to please *me*, tonight? You’ve taken on board quite a lot of hydromeli from the sound of it.”

“Oh, I don’t think you have too much to worry about,” Kassandra growled taking Kyra’s hand and running it slowly down her belly to her crotch. “Theis was right. It *is* completely different with you in my arms.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, my love,” Kyra smiled. “But I can certainly tell that you’ve not put yourself out of action. Perhaps we…”

“Good evening Archon!” came a shout from the end of the path.

Three minutes? Already? Kyra thought as they leapt apart, Kassandra taking up a position behind Kyra for a little camouflage.

“Ah Misthios Kassandra!” the guard grinned as she approached. “It’s you.”

Kyra was half tempted to ask who the hell *else* the guard had thought the Archon might be standing here embracing in the dark!

She decided against it.

“Indeed it am,” Kassandra nodded solemnly. “I is.” she corrected.

“Absolutely,” Kyra reached behind and took her hand. “We were simply out taking a little air before we ate.”

“Which we have,” Kassandra grinned. “Ate I mean. No, not ate, breathed. Now we eat,” she nodded, satisfied she’d made herself clear. “I like your helmet,” she nodded, eyeing the intricate tooling. “Kyra isn’t that a nice hel…”

“Yes, its beautiful,” Kyra gave her hand a tug. “And now time for supper. I have no doubt that there will be boar stew for you and the other guards later,” she gave a nod. “I’ll have one of the house maids bring it over to the guard house.”
There was every chance she was going to be correct, because the pot of bubbling stew was enormous. Cymone was standing over it, stirring rhythmically.

“Beef! I ask you!” she snorted. “Oh! Speaking of beef, look who’s here!” she smiled as Kassandra ambled in after Kyra, squinting a little in the brighter light of the kitchen.

Kyra considered for a moment but decided to let the irreverence pass, they were in an “off duty” situation and Cymone had been enormously accommodating about sending meals to their bedroom for those three days after all.

She took a seat next to Savina and watched as Kassandra walked over to the stove with the deliberate precision of one who knows she’s drunk.

She leaned over Cymone’s shoulder and sniffed deeply.

“That smells so good,” she breathed, placing an arm around the cook’s shoulders. “You are a magnificent woman Cymone,” she pressed a kiss to her cheek. “A goddess amongst women.”

“And you are an incorrigible flirt, misthios,” Cymone laughed, “and a little the worse for honey wine by the smell of it.”

“I thought as much,” Phoibe was chopping herbs, scraping the resultant mix into a bowl of olive oil. “Though now I come to think of it...you don’t normally come back drunk from Ophelia’s cos she doesn’t pour for anyone else you always say.”

“No,” Cymone wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. “You have to make do with the residual fumes with that one,” she nodded towards a platter of bread. “Put that on the table would you, young Phoibe, get the bowls, we’re good to go here.”

“Savina!” Kassandra beamed, turning and registering her sitting at the table. “How lovely to see you here. You don’t usually take supper with us,” she pulled out a chair next to Kyra, at the second attempt. “And you put on your other earring!”

“Yes,” Savina took the pile of bowls from Phoibe and began to distribute them. “It was caught in the folds of my chiton. I must have dressed in haste this morning.”

Kyra kicked Kassandra quite hard under the table.

“Not a word!” she hissed.

Kassandra blinked slowly, twice.

“They are very lovely,” she settled. “They bring out the pretty colour of your eyes. Will Kittos not be missing you tonight?”

“He is working late, misthios,” Savina explained. “They have a contract very close to completion and he is working late and early very often. I took the opportunity to stay for Cymone’s excellent stew.”

“Cos she knows what’s good for her,” Phoibe put the dish of herbed oil in the centre of the table and handed out spoons. “And what’s good for her tonight is boar stew.”

“Well Kittos’ loss is our gain,” Kassandra sat back and grinned, taking in the whole room. “So many
of my favourite women in one room.”

Kyra couldn’t help but observe the “so many of” part of the statement.

Many a true word was spoken in your cups, she thought as Kassandra got to her feet, chair scraping loudly and went to take the pot from the stove for Cymone.

“Allow me, please,” she pulled out a chair for Cymone, waited till she was seated.

“Gods!” she breathed deeply. “I love your boar stew,” she hefted the heavy pot into the centre of the table, narrowly missing a bowl of olives that Phoibe managed to slide out of the way at the last second.

“See!” Cymone nodded, gesturing towards Kassandra with her thumb. “Here’s another one who knows what’s good. Beef, I ask you,” she snorted. “What’s wrong with some nice venison for this Arseholios?”

“Arsenios!” Savina corrected quickly.

“He happens to be very partial to beef,” Kyra said with a sigh, watching as Phoibe weaved her bowl around under Kassandra’s wildly swaying ladle trying to make sure most of the stew went in her dish. “So beef it is. It’s just one evening Cymone and I know that you will excel as usual.”

She watched as Kassandra made a touching but futile attempt to clean up a stew splash from the side of Savina’s bowl.

“I’ll...I’ll have that one,” she smiled apologetically and slid it over to her own place.

“Here, let me,” Phoibe sighed, got to her feet and took the ladle from Kassandra’s hand. “You’ve already got more on the table than in the bowl, go sit down and get something inside you...some stew I mean,” she added quickly.

Kassandra weaved a little but made her way to her seat, sat and launched into the steaming stew.

“This is so good Cymone,” she looked up, reaching for a piece of bread. “So who’s this...Arseholio?” she ventured, clearly unsure.

“Arsenios!” Kyra and Savina corrected in perfect unison.

“For gods’ sakes Kassandra, don’t latch onto that or you’ll say it by accident while he’s here and make my job twice as hard,” Kyra poured some wine for herself, some water for Kassandra.

“I thought it was an unfortunate name,” Kassandra mumbled round a mouthful of bread.

“Arsehole by name,” Cymone muttered darkly.

“Cymone” Kyra warned. “I don’t like him myself, but I do want to get my hands on those obsidian deposits. And if we have to serve gorgon to get them then we will,” she finished firmly.

There was an awkward silence broken only by the sound of Kassandra pointedly concentrating on her stew.

Phoibe cleared her throat and carefully dipped a chunk of bread into the bowl of herb oil.

“Kassandra!” she said, brightly. “I wanted to ask you if you would come hunt wolves with me tomorrow...perhaps?”
“Wolves?” Kassandra ventured cautiously. The mood around the table had shifted and she felt a good deal more sober suddenly.

“I wonder if I might speak my mind Archon?” Cymone interrupted.

“I can’t usually prevent it,” Kyra said stiffly, putting down her spoon. “I don’t imagine this time will be any different,” she put her elbows on the table and steepled her fingers.

“He is not a pleasant man, Archon, and perhaps there are more important things than obsidian deposits?” Cymone frowned.

“He is a very un pleasant man actually,” Kyra nodded. “But school rooms and orphanages don’t build and maintain themselves. You’ve made your feelings on this matter known before Cymone. I understand that you don’t approve of some of the things I have to do as Archon. And I’m sorry that I can’t run these islands whilst continually adhering to your surprisingly high minded moral values.”

The tension around the table was crackling now, Kassandra had stopped, mid chew and was glancing cautiously at Kyra’s rigid, thin lipped expression.

Cymone was tapping her spoon distractedly on the rim of her bowl, chewing the inside of her lower lip.

“Nevertheless,” Kyra pushed her bowl slowly to one side and positioned her spoon next to it with studied precision. “The fact remains that a flirtatious smile and a flash of thigh are not going to maintain the temple roof, but they may gain me access to the resources that will. I run these islands Cymone, and I have to work twice as hard to do it as I would have to if I were a man. I have to use every weapon at my disposal and I don’t like it any more than you do, but I do know what the Silver Islands need and I will do what I have to in order to provide it.”

She got to her feet, pushing her chair back carefully.

“I don’t tell you how to cook Cymone,” she said quietly. “Please show me the same courtesy. Thank you for the meal, it was delicious, as always. Savina? Is Kittos coming to walk you home later? Or would you like Kassandra to accompany you? I don’t want you to walk home alone this late at night. You would be happy to do that, Kassandra?” she looked at her.

Kassandra had been holding a mouthful of stew for the whole of this interaction. She swallowed thickly, and nodded, feeling stone cold sober for the moment.

“Gladly, yes, it would be my pleasure Savina,” she looked over. “It can be rowdy by the taverna at this time.”

“Thank you, but Kittos will be here shortly,” she smiled carefully.

“Then I think I shall retire for the night,” Kyra made her way to the door, turned at the last moment.

“We need to begin making preparations for Arsenios’ visit starting tomorrow. Praxos will be at the docks first thing to collect the provisions. I hope I can rely on everyone’s cooperation?” She said “everyone” but looked at Cymone.

“Of course, Archon,” she sighed. “I would never do anything to jeopardize your hard work. I hope you know that?” she met Kyra’s eyes. “I hope I didn’t speak too much out of turn Archon, I...I worry about your well being is all.”

Kyra pursed her lips, took a deep breath, her voice was a little softer when she spoke again.
“I understand Cymone,” she nodded. “It’s...valuable for an Archon to have someone who is not afraid to speak their mind. Kassandra, Phoibe?” she turned to them. “It would be enormously valuable to me if you would take care of those wolves tomorrow. They’ve been making considerable inroads into the livestock over there and the farmers can ill afford it.”

“Yeah, yes,” Phoibe said brightly. “We’ll sort that out for you, won’t we Kassandra? You can rely on us. And you’ll even have a load of wolf pelts by the end of the day. That’ll help, no?”

“Very much, thank you Phoibe,” she gave a weary smile. “Good night everyone, till the morning.”

There was a long, awkward silence as they heard her walk down the corridor in the direction of the stairs.

“Well Kassandra,” Cymone said at last. “I think I may have scuppered your plans for the evening. I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh don’t worry about it,” Phoibe patted her shoulder. “Kassandra has a way with the ladies, it’ll be fine.”

Kassandra wished she shared Phoibe’s confidence as she tapped on the bedroom door some time later.

Kyra was dressed for bed and standing on the balcony, leaning on the balustrade looking out at the stars.

“Can you see Orion the Hunter from here?” Kassandra walked over to stand behind her and wrapped her in a gentle hug. She felt her relax a little.

“Not quite,” Kyra breathed. “We’d have to go on the roof for that.”

“We can do that,” Kassandra smiled and rested her head against Kyra’s. “Shall we?”

“No, not tonight,” Kyra sighed. “I suppose Cymone’s furious?”

“Not really,” Kassandra shrugged. “Apologetic that I’m not going to get laid tonight,” she teased.

Kyra heaved a sigh.

“That’s exactly the problem,” she grumbled. “She forgets her place.”

Kassandra drew back a little, frowning.

“Her place?” she ventured. “And where is her place?”

“In the kitchen, obviously,” Kyra responded without much hesitation.

“Kyra? Gods!” Kassandra withdrew a pace or two.

“No, no, wait,” Kyra turned, frowning a little. “I didn’t mean it to sound quite like that. She’s an important member of the household, of course, the place wouldn’t run half as smoothly without her. But that is her job Kassandra, to run that side of the household. Not to question political decisions.”

“She has a right to express an opinion though, surely?” Kassandra tilted her head, looking cautious.
“Did I prevent her?” Kyra held out her hands. “You can’t stop her expressing her bloody opinions. I give her far more leeway than she would receive under any other Archon I assure you. I leave her to more or less run the kitchen and the domestic staff as she sees fit.”

“You make it sound like she’s just a member of the staff,” Kassandra sat on the edge of the bed, hands between knees.

“She is,” Kyra responded reasonably. “I pay her wages, Kassandra. And I pay her well. I appreciate all she does, and I know that you and Phoibe are fond of her.”

She walked over to Kassandra, took hold of her hands and stepped between her parted knees.

“I understand that you have less...patience,” she placed Kassandra’s hands on her hips. “With the...political side of our life. You want to treat everyone like a family member. I understand. It’s a very engaging aspect of your personality.”

“So you’re nice to your staff to keep me and Phoibe happy?” Kassandra frowned, not tightening her grip at all.

“No, no, it’s not that,” Kyra protested. “It makes sense. It inspires loyalty. My staff never leave, Kassandra. They aren’t looking for better positions. Because they know they won’t find them. And it’s the right thing to do. I’ve known a lot of these people from even before I was Archon. I know their lives. It’s my duty to do right by them. But it doesn’t mean they’re all my family.”

Kassandra looked down thoughtfully, rubbing gentle circles on Kyra’s hip bones with her thumbs.

“I can’t suddenly just treat her like the cook, Kyra,” she glanced up.

“I haven’t asked you to, have I?” Kyra smiled. “I don’t expect you to. But I don’t expect you to side with her against me either.”

“Side?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows. “Gods Kyra, it’s not about “sides”. You’re my wife. You’re the woman I love. The woman I’m trying to have a baby with,” she reminded her. “The only “side” I’m interested in is the one with you and Phoibe on it. But you know what? If... when we have this baby, I’d like Cymone to be the one mashing up carrots and peaches for it, because she’s a decent woman...and she cares about you, even if she expresses it a little...awkwardly at times.”

Kyra heaved a huge sigh, leaned into Kassandra’s embrace and rested her forehead against hers.

“I know,” she said softly. “I know Kassandra. I’m just so tense about this visit, there’s so much riding on it.”

“This arsehole fellow?” Kassandra smiled.

“Seriously Kassandra, don’t,” Kyra warned. “He’s sensitive about it.”

Yeah , I’d be sensitive too,” Kassandra laughed. “Is he though?” she arched an eyebrow.

“Totally!” Kyra laughed after a pause. “He’s awful. Which is why I have no qualms about trying to seduce my way into his obsidian seams.”

“Well, there were some things in that sentence that I’m not thrilled about,” Kassandra frowned, “But the “seduce” part was the main one.”

“Not literally,” Kyra turned to sit on her lap. “Just a little calculated flirtation. Nothing I haven’t done
before, nothing to look so concerned about,” she kissed the crease that had formed between Kassandra’s brows.

“I’ve done it before and we’ve laughed about it, no? Ochos and his interminable donkey story?” she smiled. “Which wasn’t dirty by the way, just never-ending and devoid of a punchline.”

This was true enough Kassandra realised, so why did it feel so different now?

Why was she feeling tense and concerned? Why was she jealous of a man she’d never even met?

She knew full well that Kyra was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. She’d worked this all out while Kassandra had been away. She had a plan.

“Well didn’t you mention this visit?” she stroked Kyra’s knee absently. “Why am I only finding out about it now because Cymone doesn’t happen to like beef!”

“Because I knew you wouldn’t be happy about it,” Kyra sighed. “He’s an unpleasant man. No question about it. Likes wine and women, doesn’t like hearing “no”. Pompous, self important. Everything you don’t like, my love. And that is why...you will be attending supper as...my misthios...and not as my wife,” she said carefully, watching Kassandra’s expression closely.

“Excuse me?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows.

“I can’t be laying it on thick with my wife sitting glowering at him from across the table,” Kyra reasoned. “You can sit and brood silently as my personal bodyguard. But only as my bodyguard Kassandra. I need you to let me work, my love. He’s only here overnight on his way to Kos. He’ll be gone in the morning, leaving me with a licence to access his obsidian deposits at a considerably lower price than his usual going rate. That’s the plan at least.”

“And how far are you prepared to go to access his...obsidian deposits, if it comes right down to it? Just how much do you have riding on this deal?” Kassandra asked stiffly.

“Gods Kassandra!” Kyra drew back. “What kind of question is that?”

“A pretty simple one I think,” Kassandra frowned, “you’re the one who’s using words like seduce, after all.”

Kyra pulled herself out of Kassandra’s arms and stood, frowning at her.

“I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt and put that down to the wine talking,” she began to get into bed. “And Cymone was right, you aren’t getting laid tonight. But it’s got nothing to do with her.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Sex. Drama. Pastries.

The sound of Kyra dressing woke Kassandra in the morning. Judging by the light it was still early.

She sat up blearily, head a little thick, mouth dry.

Oh gods yes, Ophelia and that damn honey wine. She reached over to pour herself a cup of water.

“Good morning,” Kyra said over her shoulder, she was lightly smudging her eyeliner, checking her hair. “Did you sleep well? You snored like a bear I have to tell you. Which was good. It meant I could tell you were still alive.”

“Did we...did we have a row last night?” Kassandra frowned, emptying the cup in one draught.

“A bit of one, yes,” Kyra nodded, getting to her feet and walking over to the bed.

“I think I’ll have to stop you from going to play with Ophelia, she’s a bad influence on you,” she smiled and bent to kiss her. “Probably a good idea to steer clear of hydromeli in future as well.”

“I can’t even remember what it was about,” Kassandra sat up, brushing her messy hair out of her eyes.

“If I say Arseholio? “ Kyra smiled.

“Oh shit...yes...I...I’m sorry Kyra,” Kassandra sighed. “I don’t know why I...why I even felt that way...” she frowned, seeming genuinely puzzled, Kyra realised.

“And I thought we weren’t allowed to call him that?” she arched an eyebrow, refilled her cup, drained it, put it aside.

“I said you weren’t allowed to call him that,” Kyra winked.

“Let’s forget it, anyway,” she shook her head. “I’m pretty sure it was the wine talking. You know that you have absolutely no reason to be jealous of anyone, surely?” she sat on the edge of the bed, reached for Kassandra’s hand.

She looked lovely like this Kyra thought, half asleep and tousled, a shade confused.

“Absolutely no reason at all. Whatever I might have to say tomorrow, whatever the two of us might have to pretend. You do know that I am yours? Don’t you?” She leaned forward slipped a hand around Kassandra's neck, knitted her fingers into her hair and pulled her in for a long, slow kiss.

“It feels very early,” Kassandra traced the line of Kyra’s jaw, nipped teasingly at her lower lip. “Are you sure you couldn’t slip back into bed, just for a little while?”

Kyra gave a thoughtful sigh, glanced out at the rising sun, back over at Kassandra.
“I have a very busy day ahead,” she smiled. “And so do you actually, my valiant wolf hunter.”

Kassandra kissed teasingly along Kyra’s jaw, caught her hand and eased it under the sheet.

Kyra felt her begin to stiffen, watched Kassandra arch an expressive eyebrow, gave a sigh, and seemed to come to a decision.

“But you do make a persuasive argument. Here’s what we’re going to do,” she stood up and looked down at Kassandra who was smiling up at her with a hopeful, sleepy expression.

“Lie back for me, keep your hands on the bar at the top of the bed, and don’t let go till I say,” she arched an eyebrow. “Think you can manage that?”

She pulled aside the sheet and watched as Kassandra obediently reclined and reached up for the top of the bed, still smiling sleepily.

“Well done,” Kyra winked, “we don’t have long though.”

Kassandra had been too drowsy to imagine any very complicated scenarios. Nevertheless if she’d been asked to come up with some prediction it would not have been Kyra giving her a few quick, firm strokes before pulling up the skirts of her chiton, easing aside the folds of her perizoma and mounting her with business-like efficiency.

The gasp she drew forth from Kassandra was as much surprise as arousal.

That couldn’t have been comfortable for Kyra, she thought, it had barely been comfortable for her. All the same Kyra was now moving atop her, briskly and rhythmically, one hand placed firmly on Kassandra’s breast, kneading hard, pinching her nipple to the brink of pain, the other holding aside her own skirts.

Kassandra was embarrassed to find she was close to release already. Something about the swift, impersonal nature of this was working despite it all.

She breathed Kyra’s name and reached for her hips to slow things down a little.

Kyra stopped dead.

“What did I say?” she glanced down at Kassandra’s hands.

“I know,” she ventured a smile. “But Kyra, can we not …”

“What did I say?” Kyra smiled slowly, glancing from her hands to the top of the bed. “I’m going to end up thinking you can’t follow simple instructions.”

She watched as Kassandra reluctantly let go and resumed her grip on the wooden bar.

“Sorry,” she gave a brief, apologetic smile. “I just thought that…”

“I don’t need you to think right now, handsome,” Kyra leaned over and rewarded her with a brief, hard kiss before she resumed her brisk, efficient movements, frowning with concentration, eyes locked on Kassandra, watching the grimace of tension as her breathing quickened and became ragged.

“That’s it,” Kyra growled as Kassandra began to make whimpering little groans and thrust urgently against her. “You’re doing so well, you can let go now, Kassandra.”
Kassandra kept hold of the bed rail, but she did let go, muscles spasming in a scalding orgasm that came too soon and was over too quickly.

“Well done,” Kyra bent and kissed her, much more tenderly now. “You did so well,” she raised herself and sat perfectly still, head tilted back a little, eyes closed, letting her breath steady, straddling Kassandra as she softened inside her.

After a few moments Kyra rolled off to lie flat beside her.

As Kassandra regained her breath she could feel Kyra adjusting her clothing, beginning to move.

“Just give me a moment,” Kassandra raised herself on one elbow, “and I’ll make sure that you go to work with a smile on your face, my love, that was just a little...unexpected,” she smiled wryly.

“But not unpleasant?” Kyra reached out to cup her jaw, tracing the line with her thumb and kissed Kassandra softly.

“Gods, no, not unpleasant,” Kassandra shook her head. “A little “odd” maybe but..wait? Are you going? But you didn’t even...”

Kyra was on her feet now, shaking down the skirts of her chiton, running a last minute check for any creases or stains.

Evidently satisfied, she looked over at Kassandra and smiled apologetically.

“I have to, love,” she reached out and stroked her cheek. “I want to check in with Praxos before he leaves and I’ve got to make peace with Cymone,” she smiled ruefully. “There are a couple of girls from the town coming to help her out in the kitchen, she’s going to be busy today. Oh don’t pout, Kassandra,” she leaned over and kissed her.

“I would love nothing more than to climb back into bed with you,” she assured her.” But it’s just not possible today, or tomorrow either, which was why I wanted to take the opportunity for us to have sex while we did have a few minutes. After all, we don’t have forever, we can’t afford to miss too many opportunities. Is my hair all right still?”

“I…it’s lovely,” Kassandra was a bit dazed. “So you mean that was just….we just…” she frowned. “That was just...business?”

“That sounds a bit...cold,” Kyra gave her laurels a final check. “After all, you didn’t risk bargaining with a sphinx so that we could miss a chance just because there isn’t time for “tender ministrations”, surely?” she tilted her head.

“Well...no...I suppose,” Kassandra could see the pragmatism of Kyra’s argument but all the same, she felt...uncomfortable. It wasn’t how she’d imagined them making their baby.

“And Phoibe is bound to be here any minute to take you out hunting,” Kyra made for the door. “So, maybe cover the evidence?” she grinned, nodding at Kassandra’s lap. “You two have a good time and please be careful? The both of you? I love you. See you tonight,” she opened the door and took a step out.

“What did I say?” she called back over her shoulder, a little more loudly than necessary.”Here’s Phoibe! Good morning sweetheart.”

Kassandra heard them greeting, embracing, and took the chance to sit up, the sheets carefully crumpled about her hips.
“Hello Kassandra!” Phoibe’s head appeared round the door, beaming. “Oh come on! You’re not even up yet!”

“Oh...she’s half up,” Kyra leaned back around the door, winked archly at Kassandra and ruffled Phoibe’s hair. “Have fun, take care, save those sheep!”

“Being awake doesn’t count as being up, you know?” Phoibe sat on the end of the bed with a bounce. “Are you ready?”

“Well I need to...get washed, dressed...” Kassandra realised that she would usually do all this while chatting to Phoibe, but that now she was going to have to come up with an excuse for privacy. “And...I really need some food.”

“Oh okay!” Phoibe sighed hugely. “The hangover eh? Look you get washed, dressed, take a leak, sort your hair out. I’ll go get Cymone to fry you some nice greasy eggs, slap them in some bread, that’ll put hair on your chest. She said she’d sort something for us eat while we’re out today, Praxos helped me load the packs for the horses, I’m just waiting for you. He gave me a new skinning knife by the way. Come on,” she slapped Kassandra’s leg. “Let’s get a move on, it’s going to be a madhouse here today. We’re better off out of it.”

Phoibe wasn’t wrong, the place was already bustling and Kassandra was glad to be away as they rode out on their wolf hunt.

“I feel sorry for these poor wolves actually,” Phoibe was gnawing on a stick of celery and eyeing the scenery.

“They were here first, after all. Want some?” she offered a second stick to Kassandra. “It can float on top of those runny eggs. You’ve a bit of yolk on your tunic there by the way. Good job Kyra didn’t spot that. Still at least she’s made it up with Cymone, so that’s a relief. I tell you what though! Kyra is properly scary when she’s like that. I don’t know if it’s a turn on for you, but honestly I can’t tell if she’s scarier when she’s shouting or when she’s all “calm” like that. I’m staying overnight at Savina’s tomorrow by the way,” she threw in casually.

“Why does celery have all these stringy b…” Kassandra was chewing resolutely, but stopped at this. “What do you mean you’re staying at Savina’s?” she frowned.

“Never mind why, just get it down you,” Phoibe nodded. “It’s good for you. Dion says it keeps you regular and you’ll be glad of it later in life. I mean I’m going round to Savina’s house and spending the night there, then coming back the next day. Kittos has been making me a model of the Adrestia, he’s going to show me how to rig it.”

Kassandra rode in silence for a while, spat out a wad of celery string, despite Phoibe’s protests that “that” was the good stuff.

“That’s nice of him,” she looked over quizzically. “Do you go round often?”

“Often enough,” Phoibe rummaged in her pack for more celery, “here. Don’t spit out the chewy bits, you big baby. Kittos is nice. He’s very sweet with Savina, I like him. You know,” she tossed the celery over to Kassandra and continued with unconvincing casualness. “You should come round too. You could learn how to rig sails.”

Kassandra snorted, pulled out her skinning knife and began to string the celery much to Phoibe’s disgust.
“I know how to rig sails.”

Phoibe gave a derisive laugh.

“You absolutely do not! You know how to help someone who knows how to rig sails, there’s a big difference. Come with me. We’ll have fun. You can share my bed. It’ll be like old times. Kittos makes these little biscuits that have lemon in and a bit of salt, sounds weird, but they’re really nice. And they have a dog, Spiros, big shaggy black and white thing, he’s one of Aegeus’ puppies. Well not Aegeus’ obviously, one of his dog’s puppies.”

“Why are you so keen to get me to come over?” Kassandra frowned curiously. “Did Kyra ask you to?”

“No!” Phoibe replied defensively. “It’s just...well I’m getting out of the way of this obsidian dick who’s coming to visit. I think you should too. I don’t think we should be under the feet, we should get out of the way, let Kyra work. Turns out it really is a big stinking deal, this visit. She’s already worked like a donkey to even get him to stop off overnight. See him and these three other blokes...well I say blokes but I don’t know if they said actually, so I suppose there could be women as well, I bet it’s blokes though, it’s always bloody blokes isn’t it?”

“Phoibe, get to the point would you?” Kassandra slowed her horse to keep pace with her.

“I’ll get to the point when you eat your celery,” Phoibe nodded.

Kassandra took an aggressive bite and chewed theatrically.

“Well they, the three...or maybe it's four with the arsehole fellah? I’m not sure,” she caught Kassandra’s frustrated scowl.

“Doesn’t matter anyway. Between them they own so much obsidian and the places where you find obsidian, there a name for them, I forget, like mines I suppose, and there’s gemstones and ore there as well obviously, but it’s the obsidian Kyra’s interested in mainly. Cos these blokes own so much of it, that they pretty much decide what gets charged for it. Like if you go to a trader and buy a honking great cart full or if you go to the blacksmith and buy one chunk? The price you pay? These rich blokes have decided that! Imagine! It never occurred to me,” she shook her head, smiling in disbelief.

“How do you know all this?” Kassandra frowned, tossing the last of the celery aside while Phoibe wasn't looking.

“It’s amazing what you can find out if you sit in the corner, eating a carrot and minding your own business,” Phoibe tapped the side of her nose. “Well if you’re a kid anyway,” she side-eyed Kassandra. “Bit more difficult for you I suppose. You’re a very noticeable individual Kassandra. Useful in your line of work. Not so much for lurking.”

“Then I shall have to rely on you for all my lurking needs,” Kassandra smiled. “Anything else?”

“Phh, donkey loads,” Phoibe laughed. “Turns out obsidian’s just like eggs really. How much you can charge depends on how much you’ve got...or how much you let people think you’ve got. Markos wasn’t so far off the mark about some things after all it turns out. Kyra’s got big plans. She wants to get hold of this arsehole’s obsidian, but for closer to the price he pays than the price you’d pay at the blacksmiths. If she flashes a bit of thigh, there’s a chance he’ll roll over because apparently he’s one of those blokes that just follows his dick around a lot of the time”

“I see,” Kassandra scowled. She still didn’t like the last bit of information but it seemed this actually was a bigger deal than she’d imagined, or than Cymone realised either, she thought.
“If she manages it, then it’ll be a hell of a big deal it sounds like,“ Phoibe nodded. “She’s got plans to build a new school house on Delos, repairs to the temple roofs, bit of a brush and clean up for Artemis herself, expansion of the docks on both islands.”

Kassandra considered this in silence for a few minutes. Phoibe allowed her to digest the new information before she finally spoke up.

“Which is why I think it might be a good idea if we kept out from under her feet while she works,” she ventured.

“She’s going to have to charm the chiton off him... in a manner of speaking,” she caught Kassandra’s frown. “She’s going to lay on the charm, fill him full of delicious food, flash her tits a little, pour some of the good wine down his throat and…”

“I thought you said “thigh” before?” Kassandra said sharply.

“What?” Phoibe frowned, puzzled.

“Earlier you said, flash a bit of thigh,” Kassandra explained. “Not tits, you defin…”

“You know it’s funny that your take away from everything I’ve said is the tits and thigh bit,” Phoibe sighed.

“It was a figure of speech Kassandra, she’s not really going to let him see anything, gods! Credit her with a bit of sense why don’t you? Well a bit of leg perhaps, no harm in that. Imagine!” she laughed. “Being so dick-led that you’d roll over just on the off chance of a….” she tailed off, looking at Kassandra wryly.

“Actually, now I come to think of it, it’s a good job you weren’t an obsidian trader,” she shook her head.

“Hey!” Kassandra caught her drift.

Phoibe laughed. “Let’s face it Kassandra, you did some pretty ridiculous things in your youth on the off chance of a chance! Anyway I’m going to make myself scarce while he’s here, I don’t want to risk messing anything up...and, honestly, I’m just not sure I want to be around for any of it. I think you should consider it, maybe?”

“I hear you Phoibe,” Kassandra sighed. “But...I just don’t trust him.”

“I don’t think you should. Not at all,” Phoibe, glanced about her, spotted a couple of farmhouses off in the distance, “but you should trust Kyra,” she shrugged. “We’re here!”

Three hours later they were sitting eating and contentedly observing the row of five, large wolves they’d killed.

“They’re big buggers aren’t they?” Phoibe smiled. “Biggest I’ve ever seen, fat as butter too, for wolves.”

“No wonder,” Kassandra was rolling a hard boiled egg between her palms, in preparation for peeling it. “They were trotting over to the farms and picking off a nice juicy ewe whenever they felt like it? Are you all right there?”
Phoibe’s shelling was leaving her egg dismally pockmarked.

“Here,” she grumbled, holding it out. “Do it for me will you? You’re good with your fingers.”

Kassandra eyed her warily.

“No, I meant you genuinely are good with your fingers,” Phoibe laughed. “Not that I’ve ever heard any complaints about them, mind,” she shrugged amiably.

“Here,” Kassandra handed Phoibe her own smooth glassy egg. “Have this. I’ll eat this tragic thing that you’ve butchered. I hope you’re bit more adept skinning these wolves than you were this egg, you’ve pulled more off than you’ve left to eat.”

“You had an easy one,” Phoibe smiled round a mouthful. “We’d better get cracking, no? It’s going to take a while.”

“Yeah, we’ll drag them down to that little stream there,” Kassandra nodded. “It’ll be good to have a bit of water to clean up in. Slow down a bit there, you’re going to get indigestion.”

“Never have yet,” Phoibe brushed her hands. “And you’re one to talk! There’s some of those nut pastry things too, Cymone’s made them for tonight, but I managed to charm a couple out of her,” she grinned. “We should save them for after we’re finished, it’s going to take a while.”

“Good plan,” Kassandra licked her thumb clean, brushed crumbs off her tunic, got to her feet and offered Phoibe her hand. “Ready? Let’s try out that new knife of yours.”

“Sure, I just need to pee first,” Phoibe looked for an appropriate clump of bushes and set off.

“Yeah, me too,” Kassandra realised. “I’ll meet you by the wolves.”

“Huh?” Phoibe turned, puzzled, and watched Kassandra stride off in the direction of a small stand of trees. She wasn’t usually bashful about such things, and it was a odd choice of spot she thought. But then she’d been a little bit odd since she got back, now that she thought about it.

Kassandra chose a suitable tree, with a sharp eye for remaining hidden from the nearby farm buildings. A minute later she was standing, enjoying the sun on her back and thinking about tomorrow.

She was going to stay in the villa, just for safety’s sake, she told herself. Not to interfere. Someone should be around just to keep an eye on things if this Arsenios was as much of a snake as everyone seemed to think. But she definitely wasn’t going to get in the way of...

“I was thinking we should take the paws back cos...oh my GODS!” it was Phoibe. “How are you doing that?! You have got to teach me!”

Kassandra gave a startled yelp and inadvertently spun to face her, saw Phoibe’s expression change from wonder to puzzlement to...horrified disbelief.

“What the fuck is that ?!” she pointed an accusatory finger.

“Language Phoibe. I can...,” Kassandra turned her back, fumbled clumsily, trying to tuck herself away and calm Phoibe over her shoulder.

“Don’t “language Phoibe” me!” she yelled. “I have seen you naked almost as often as I’ve seen myself and that has never been there. What the hell Kassandra! And why is it...”shimmery” like
that?"

“I can explain,” Kassandra held out conciliatory hands. “It was the sphinx. The sphinx gave it to me.”

“You what?” Phoibe frowned, baffled, backing away from Kassandra’s cautious advance.

“I thought the sphinx gave you a feather? Is that the feather?!” she tilted her head, struggling to make sense of the development. “Is it some kind of weird...transforming feather? Why’s it not copper then? Why the hell would it…”

“No, no,” Kassandra tried to derail Phoibe’s train of speculation which was becoming stranger than the already bizarre truth, she decided.

“The feather was incidental, it just fell out,” she shrugged. “I wasn’t going to just leave it, obviously. This,” she nodded downwards. “Is what I really went for.”

Phoibe looked up at her, she looked angry, but sad also.

“Why Kassandra?” she shook her head. “Why didn’t you tell me? I never knew you...you weren’t...happy? That you wanted to change. I thought we could tell each other any…”

“No, no, Phoibe, no,” Kassandra took a slow step forward. Phoibe didn’t back away any further.

“It’s not anything like that. This isn’t a permanent thing. At least I don’t think so. I hope not. At the next full moon it’ll be back to usual. Everything will be like it was before. It’s just for one cycle.”

“Then why the fuck would you do that?” Phoibe flung out her hands in the direction of Kassandra’s hips. “And don’t even give me the “language” face Kassandra, not under the circumstances. Did you just want to see what it was like? You just wanted to cock your leg against a tree, like Orion!”

“No, of course not!” Kassandra shook her head. “What kind of an idiot do you take me for?”

Phoibe’s look spoke volumes. She folded her arms.

“Then what? Why? Make me understand Kassandra!” she frowned. “And I suppose this means you can’t teach me to pee standing up either!”

“Well, I can...after a fashion,” Kassandra said thoughtfully, shrugging a little. “It’s not anything like as easy, but if you practise enough, you can sort of…”

“Just stop!” Phoibe held up her hand. “Why would you even do that? Just out of idle curi....” she tailed off suddenly, gaped at Kassandra, open mouthed.

“Oh gods!” she breathed at last. “You’re trying to get Kyra pregnant!”

Phoibe stood staring at her, hand to mouth. Kassandra shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. Then she nodded mutely.

“Oh gods!” Phoibe dropped her hands to her sides, shook her head in disbelief. “We’re not adopting a baby. You’re trying to make one?! Only you Kassandra! Only you would think they wanted a baby and decide that the best way to do it was to sail halfway across the Aegean to ask a sphinx for a magic cock, and don’t look at me like that. You could have been fucking killed! Your ship could have sunk. Pirates! The bloody sphinx could have eaten you!”

“Why is everyone obsessed with the idea of this sphinx eating me?!” Kassandra threw out her arms.
“Every single person has…”

“Stop changing the subject!” Phoibe snapped. “This! This is what you went away for? Right from the very beginning. You knew all along that this was what you were going for?”

Kassandra nodded as Phoibe strode over and glared up at her. “It...it was all in the scroll...the one that Ophelia translated?” she began.

“Fuck Ophelia!” Phoibe yelled.

“Phoibe!” Kassandra reproved halfheartedly. “She is a Pries…”

“Don’t start with me, Kassandra,” Phoibe pushed her in the chest. “Don’t fucking start! Because I’m really bloody angry with you. Searching for pots!” she snorted.

“Everyone knows the only pots you’ve ever been interested in have wine on the inside! No one believed you, you know,” she scowled up at her. “All around town. No one really believed your stupid pot story you know! It was a stupid story Kassandra,” she was pacing furiously now.

“I can understand you coming up with a lame excuse like that, but it was the best Kyra could come up with as well?” she shook her head. “Turns out, you two really are made for each other.”

Kassandra rather wanted to protest this, but the voice of reason in the back of her head warned against it.

“Everyone thought you’d left us, you know that?!” Phoibe, turned, glowered at her. Her eyes were suspiciously bright. “They thought you’d got bored with Mykonos. Got bored with Kyra. Everyone thought you were catting around Lesbos cos you’d got wind of a handful of women in the Aegean you hadn’t fucked yet!”

“Phoibe…” Kassandra began automatically.

“Shut up!” Phoibe shouted. “You can just shut up and listen! I thought you’d gone. I thought that was what you and Kyra were arguing about! I thought that was why you’d said I could call you mater! Because you knew you were taking off again.”

“Phoibe!” Kassandra took the two steps forward that brought her right up to Phoibe, crouched down on her haunches. “I would never abandon you.”

“No?” Phoibe shouted. “Cos you used to!”

It felt like a slap, Kassandra recoiled a little.

“You were always taking off, for a few days, a few weeks, a few months!” Phoibe was struggling not to crumple. “Then you’d come swaggering back in with some bloody bear paw or a rusty old helmet. Like that made up for you not being there.”

“But Phoibe,” Kassandra held out her hands. “I never left you alone. You always had Selene and the others. Markos even, in a pinch.”

“I didn’t want them!” Phoibe sobbed, turning and hitting Kassandra in the chest.

“I wanted you. I wanted you, Kassandra,” she pounded against her, making her work to keep her balance. “I kept wanting you, and you kept not being there!”

She broke suddenly, sobbing and slumping into Kassandra’s embrace. She wrapped Phoibe close
and stood up, feeling her cling to her shoulders, lock her legs about her waist. Felt her hot tears against her neck.

“Oh Phoibe,” she breathed at last, stroking her hair softly, pressing gentle kisses to her head. “I’m so sorry. You’re right. I was stupid and unkind. And I’m sorry. I’m trying to get better, I swear. I was trying this time...but I even did this all wrong,” she shook her head.

“I should have told you what we were doing. I shouldn’t have given you the stupid pots story. You of all people. You’re right...it was a stupid story. You’d have thought of a much better one,” this suddenly occurred to her.

“I was so scared Kassandra,” Phoibe sniffed. “I’d still have been scared, but at least I’d have known why. I’d have known you were doing it for something important.”

“My Phoibe,” Kassandra buried her face in Phoibe’s hair, breathed in the scent of her.

“I’m so sorry, my love. I keep thinking of you as a child. A little child I mean. I was scared to tell you what we were doing. It sounded...it sounded so ridiculous, all of it. Part of me didn’t believe it would work, myself. I was scared to sound like an idiot...but I am an idiot,” she sank to her knees, looked tearfully at Phoibe.

“I’m an idiot and we were unkind,” she shook her head. “You deserved to know about it all from the very beginning, that we were thinking of giving you a little sister or brother. We weren’t kind Phoibe, and I’m so sorry.”

Phoibe began to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand. Kassandra stopped her, unclipped her shawl and used the end of it to dry Phoibe’s eyes, wipe her face.

“I seem to always be asking you to forgive me, little one,” Kassandra sighed. “But do you think…”

“I can do it again,” Phoibe interrupted. “You do your best Kassandra, you can’t help being an idiot,” she reached out and brushed the tears from her cheek.

A little while later, they sat on the grassy slope, Phoibe sitting between Kassandra’s knees, leaning back against her chest.

They were eating the pastries that Cymone had packed, the wolves still wore their skins.

“What are you going to tell people?” Phoibe asked, peeling off a layer of the sticky pastry and rolling it up before popping the whole thing in her mouth.

“About what?” Kassandra mumbled, spilling crumbs on Phoibe’s head.

“The baby, you fool,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “Assuming it works and you get Kyra pregnant, what are you going to tell people?”

Kassandra was quietly picking crumbs out of Phoibe’s hair, avoiding the question.

“Oh shit!” she sighed. “You haven’t thought of anything have you? Not even a stupid pots story? Gods Kassandra, I can get my head round the sphinx. I can get my head round the magic pool. I can even get my head round your shimmery magic cock…” there was an uncomfortable pause. Kassandra stopped brushing crumbs.
“Yeah,” Phoibe blushed. “I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. Can we just forget I ever said that?”

“Already forgotten,” Kassandra gave a shudder.

“What I can’t get my head round though,” Phoibe continued. “Is how two intelligent women...well one intelligent woman and you.” she felt Kassandra nudge her. “Can have organised all this. The sea voyage. Being there at the right time. Finding a tiny island in the middle of the sea. Dealing with the sphinx. And then not have thought about what you’re going to say when Kyra starts to show? I mean I know you can be a dolt. But Kyra hasn’t thought about it?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Kassandra licked her fingers, glanced over Phoibe’s shoulders. “Are you going to finish that?” she eyed the partially eaten pastry.

“Yes, I am,” Phoibe moved it out of Kassandra’s reach. “I’m savouring it. We don’t all eat like hungry dogs! So what? You were just going to keep her inside, out of sight for a year and then unveil the baby and say an eagle dropped it in the courtyard?”

Kassandra considered this.

“Actually, that’s a better idea than anything I’ve come up with so far,” she said, half serious.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “Well you’re going to have to do something, assuming it works. I mean I know it works obviously, you weren’t in the bedroom playing marbles for three days, I don’t suppose. But I mean assuming you do make her pregnant. Cos otherwise folks are going to think that Kyra cheated on you while you were away.”

“What, while I was “catting around Lesbos”?” Kassandra raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that,” Phoibe defended, “I was just letting you know what people were saying. Though I suppose if they already think that you could just go with it, sauce for the goose after all.”

“I don’t like that idea,” Kassandra frowned thoughtfully.

“Well you two had better consider it,” Phoibe sighed. “You could go to the public bath house I suppose. Wander in about mid afternoon, give the ladies of Mykonos a formal unveiling, the whole of the Silver Islands would know by the next morning.”

“I’ll keep that one up my sleeve eh?” Kassandra smiled.

“Yeah,” Phoibe nodded. “Put it on the short list. I mean there are some folks who think you’ve already got…” she tailed off.

“Really?” Kassandra looked down.

“Not everyone obviously,” Phoibe said soothingly. “And it’s not the weirdest gossip about you by a long way, don’t worry.”

“Wait...not the…” Kassandra frowned. “Then what is?”

“The weirdest?” Phoibe crammed the last of the pastry in her mouth. “Gods, where to begin! The one about how you defeated the gorgon is pretty bloody weird. People are filthy sometimes,” she raised her eyebrows and shook her head.

“How do they think I defeated the gorgon?” Kassandra asked curiously, as Phoibe got to her feet in a
shower of pastry crumbs.

“We should crack on with these wolves, no?” Phoibe said evasively. “It’s going to take a while. We’ll lose the light before we’ve done if we don’t make a start.”

“Wait, Phoibe,” Kassandra followed her. “How do they say I beat the gorgon?!"

“Kassandra I think I have used enough bad words for one day and it would be impossible to tell you without them,” Phoibe called over her shoulder. “You’ll have to ask Cymone!”
It's only fair to point out that while fishbone76 has made massive contributions to this story from the word go, not least their incredible artworks (and wait till you see what she’s got lined up for later...I almost want to post the whole damn thing in one fell swoop so people can see!), their help only became more and more valuable as we began to reach the finishing straight.
So "thank you buddy!"

The place was much quieter when they returned.

Cymone was still working, the kitchen was full of covered plates and platters and bowls. Piles of dishes and cups that Kassandra had never seen before covered the table. Amphorae of wine stood outside the kitchen door. The hallways and public rooms were glistening. Floral arrangements and lamps had been placed, cushions and coverings laid out.

Kyra was nowhere to be seen.

When asked, Cymone explained that she was at the dressmaker’s having some last minute alterations made to her “seduction dress”.

Kassandra failed to see the funny side.

“She’s just joking Kassandra,” Phoibe took her hand and led her up to the bedrooms. “It’s a really pretty dress actually, unusual colour for her but I think she makes it work. She ordered one for Savina as well while we were there, as a thankyou present, it’s not quite the same, it’s got...”

“Since when are you an expert on women’s fashions?” Kassandra interrupted, a little sourly.

“Ey don’t be snippy with me,” Phoibe protested, “I know a lot of stuff on the quiet. Knowledge is...”

“Power, yes,” Kassandra recalled. “I’m sorry Phoibe, I didn’t mean to be short with you.”

“You’d have a job being short with anyone, eh?” Phoibe punched her arm good-naturedly. “It’s going to be all right Kassandra, it’s just one night and think about it like this. It’s like watching her fighting in a way, no? This is Kyra doing something she’s really good at. And you can always come stay at Savina’s with me if you change your mind?” she reached up to give Kassandra a hug.

“Don’t worry mater,” she kissed her quickly. “When she’s got the obsidian in the bank, we can all get back to normal, and all that leftover food will be going to the orphanage, so it’s win-win, no?”

Kassandra was far from convinced.

The bedroom seemed empty and quiet without Kyra.

She poured herself a cup of wine and dragged a chair out onto the balcony intending to keep an eye out for her return, but was soon sprawled, asleep, empty cup fallen from her hand.
The sun had barely risen when she woke but Kyra had clearly been and gone in the meantime.

She’d covered Kassandra with a blanket and tucked a pillow between her head and shoulder, picked up the cup, cleaned the spilled drops.

The table by the window was covered in scattered papyri detailing procedures for mining and processing obsidian. There was a cup containing the dried remains of what smelt like a mint infusion and a plate with a half eaten meat pastry.

Downstairs the household was bustling with activity again. Kassandra dodged house servants rushing back and forth with flowers and drapes, chairs and cushions.

“Kassandra, my sweet,” Kyra emerged from the dining room. “Are you well? Praxos has taken the wolf pelts to the tanner for you, thank you for taking care of that. Is Phoibe all right? I haven’t seen her this morning and she’s staying at Savina’s tonight I believe?”

“Yes, actually, we should probably talk about something, come to think of it,” yesterday’s events suddenly loomed large in Kassandra’s mind.

“Of course,” Kyra reached up, pressed a soft kiss to her cheek. “Can it wait till all this is over? Please?” she looked tired and her hair was a little messy.

Kassandra wanted to take her away from all this frantic activity, just for an hour, let her rest, make her sit and eat something.

“You are being so patient, and I know you aren’t happy,” Kyra took her hand, lowered her voice. “I promise you Kassandra, when this is done with we will spend some time together, just the two of us, or the three of us? We can go to the beach with Phoibe and Orion? As a family? I just need your help a little bit longer? Please?”

Despite the presence of the bustling staff, she tilted her head to invite a kiss and Kassandra obliged.

For a few moments she forgot where she was, tuned out all the bustle around them, it was just Kyra and the softness of her mouth, the warmth of her body in Kassandra’s arms.

“Would you do me a favour, please?” Kyra breathed as they drew apart. “It’s okay to say no, I can ask Savina if you can’t.”

“Anything,” Kassandra nodded, resting her forehead against Kyra’s.

“Anything” turned out to be collecting Kyra’s dress from the dressmaker and picking up an order of fish from the dock.

Kassandra stomped rather broodily into town, trying to raise her mood by reminding herself that it was far from the first time she’d been a glorified errand girl. This time she was just running errands for the Silver Islands.

It worked reasonably well till she reached the dressmaker. The owner was clearly amused by the idea of the Archon’s personal misthios coming to collect her alterations.

“You may as well take Savina’s too while you’re here,” she placed a second parcel in Kassandra’s arms. “Save you a second visit. Unless you’d like to come back to order something,” she eyed her up and down appreciatively. “I could make you look spectacular you know,” she smiled.

“Yes, thank you, leave that with me, perhaps,” Kassandra nodded politely, making her way out.
The sun was well up now, it was going to be another hot day she thought as she went in search of the other half of her errand.

“Oooh Misthios,” the fish trader eyed the delicately wrapped packages and sucked his teeth.

“You won’t want to be carrying this on top of your ladies niceties there,” he shook his head. “It’s not that its not fresh, don’t get me wrong, its barely dead, but it’s still fish all the same!”

It was an unnecessarily large basket of fish, Kassandra thought gloomily. Clearly the quicker she delivered it the better for everyone on such a warm day.

Kyra would surely have to bathe and have her hair dressed before her robe was required? She would leave the dress at the shop, come back for the fish and take that to the villa first, before returning for the dress.

By the time her errands were run she was hot, sweaty and ill-humoured.

Cymone plied her with a mug of water infused with some lemon slices and one of the meat pastries that Kassandra had eaten the remains of that morning in the bedroom.

“You look hot and bothered Kassandra,” she tilted her head, looking rather hot and bothered herself.

“Why don’t you go to the little bathhouse and relax, I’ll send one of the girls over with some warm water. Make yourself handsome for tonight,” she winked, or she may have been getting sweat out of her eye, Kassandra wasn’t sure. “Let arsehole fella see what he’s competing against.

“Yes...I will,” Kassandra tried not to focus on the “competing” part of the suggestion. “Where’s Phoibe? Have you seen her yet?”

“Oh she left for Savina’s as soon as she’d had her breakfast, took the dog and skedaddled,” Cymone laughed. “And I don’t blame her. She’s spending the day at the shipbuilders with Kittos, they’re testing that new fishing boat today, so I think she’s hoping for a sail. She said to remind you that you can always go there and spend the night yourself.”

She began to scale an impressive looking fish. Pearly scales flew everywhere, catching the light. Kassandra knew from past experience that if she got covered in those then she’d be picking them off for the rest of the day.

“I imagine you’ll be staying here though eh?” Cymone didn’t look round. “Keeping an eye on your wife? I think we’ll all feel more comfortable if you’re here as well, Kassandra.”

She stopped working, her hands and arms were shimmering with scales like some domesticated siren.

“You should wear your sexy armour to supper,” she smiled archly.

“Sexy armour?” Kassandra raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, you know, the one with the shoulders, and the dark red shawl,” Cymone grinned.

“You look very well in that one. There’s a good reason it’s the one the Archon always gets you to wear when you’re being her “official bodyguard” you know? It shows a bit of leg, but I fancy you’re aware of that,” she smiled suggestively.

Kassandra knew the armour she meant. She did look good in it.
Kyra herself had said as much on a number of occasions, and had gone a good deal further to demonstrate her appreciation once or twice. She smiled to herself. Kyra hadn’t told her what to wear, so the “sexy” armour it was.

She’d been planning to go and get ready after her bath, but once she’d barred the door and then propped a chair against it, just to be on the safe side, and was relaxing in the cool water, she lost track of time.

An urgent rapping on the door some time later woke her.

It was Kyra’s maid. Kassandra was needed quickly. The Archon was bathing and preparing to greet the visitors and had requested her presence.

Kassandra was a little hastily put together when she entered the room where Kyra was bathing.

She stopped in the doorway and swallowed.

Kyra was reclining in the bath, eyes closed, one of the maids was filing her nails and massaging her hands and arms with oil. Her hair had been washed and dried and a second maid was carefully brushing it out in preparation for arranging it when she got out of the bath.

Kassandra stepped into the room, it seemed too long since she’d seen Kyra naked and here, like this, her dark skin flushed from the warm bath, eyes closed, relaxing at last under the attentions of the maids, the effect was potent.

Kassandra couldn’t take her eyes off her.

“Oh..Archon,” the maid treating her hands glanced up, saw Kassandra standing slack jawed just inside the doorway. “Your Misthios is here.”

Kyra opened her eyes, sat up and turned. Kassandra tried to draw her gaze away from the movement of her breasts, tried to concentrate on her face. She looked much better than she had earlier, less tired, more relaxed.

“Kassandra,” she smiled, holding out a hand towards her.

“Thank you for coming. Word is that Arsenios’ ship is approaching dock...I was going….is that what you’re going to wear by the way?” she eyed the light leather armour Kassandra had redressed in.

“For the moment,” Kassandra glanced down. “I’ll change this evening.”

“Very well,” Kyra seemed to be hiding disappointment. “There’s no time to change now. I need you and Praxos to go to the dock, please? Greet Arsenios and Iphiclus.”

“Iphiclus?” Kassandra frowned, watching a bead of sweat form, swell, break and run down the curve of Kyra’s breast. She licked her lips, forced herself to look up and meet Kyra’s eyes.

“His personal secretary, never goes anywhere without him, treat him with respect too...please?” she emphasized the plea with her expression.

“Of course...Archon,” Kassandra gave her a meaningful smile and was pleased to see the look of relief that flitted across Kyra’s face. “Should we go now?”

“Please Kassandra, Praxos is waiting outside,” Kyra reached up and gave Kassandra’s hand a
squeeze. “Thank you for all your help.”

“My duty and my pleasure, Archon,” Kassandra bent, pressed Kyra’s fingers to her lips, slyly dipped the tip of her tongue between them, too discreetly for the maids to notice. “Till later.”

“Oh Kassandra!” Kyra’s call stopped her at the door. “I wonder if you would be so good as to wear...perhaps a...slightly heavier armour tonight? Something a little more...ceremonial as it were?” she glanced archly at her.

“I think I know the very one,” Kassandra grinned.

“You’re going to be with her tonight?” Praxos looked down at Kassandra as they stood at the dock, watching the very expensive looking ship tie up. “Just to keep an eye on things?”

“I intend to be, Praxos,” she nodded. “Do I need to be worried?”

“Well, yes and no I suppose,” he frowned. “No, in so far as Kyra could gut him before he could drop his perizoma. We both know that.”

“Except that she can’t,” Kassandra sighed.

“Exactly,” Praxos put his hands on his hips, stepped back out of the way of a scurrying dock hand.

“You can’t either of course!” he looked down at her sharply. “We don’t need a diplomatic incident. But you can...look like you would?” he raised his brows.

“I feel it already, my friend,” she nodded. “Oh! Is this him?!”

A slightly tubby, rather over-oiled man in a very expensive looking chiton was making his cautious way down the gangplank. He was bald as an egg, the sun glinted off his shiny scalp and his eyes darted about the quay.

“You there!” he waved his fingers at a nearby dock-hand. “Here, man,” he gestured him over, “quickly now.”

The dock-hand ambled over, probably a lot more slowly that he would have done under other circumstances, Kassandra thought with a quiet chuckle.

“You there!” he waved his fingers at a nearby dock-hand. “Here, man,” he gestured him over, “quickly now.”

The dock-hand ambled over, probably a lot more slowly that he would have done under other circumstances, Kassandra thought with a quiet chuckle.

“You hand, man, your hand!” the newcomer whined. “Why are there no guard ropes on this gangplank? A person could tumble to their death,” he grabbed hold of the dock-hand’s reluctant arm and made the rest of the way down onto the dockside in tiny, rapid steps.

“You may go now, go, off with you!” he waved the grumbling man away, produced a large handkerchief from the recesses of his chiton and wiped his hands, before holding it to his nose and casting a disdainful look about the dock.

His gaze landed on Praxos and Kassandra who had been watching this whole performance with poorly concealed amusement.

“Ah! There you are Praxos my good fellow,” he trotted over.

Kassandra was hit by an over generous waft of perfume.
“A familiar face at least, even if I cannot go so far as to classify it as a friendly one. The Archon is not here?” he cast a theatrical eye around the dock.

“Naturally not,” Praxos frowned. “She is at the villa, overseeing the final preparations for your visit.”

“And horses? Some form of transportation?” he sniffed.

“It’s just a few minutes walk and the day is pleasant, we felt it would be an excellent opportunity for you to see a little of Mykonos,” Praxos folded his arms, gazed down at the perfumed little fellow.

“Well, a stinking dock is a poor first impression,” he sighed, “but I suppose we..ah!” he caught sight of activity at the top of the gangway.

“Here he is, my illustrious master, Arsenios himself!”

Kassandra turned, astonished, in the direction he indicated, so that was *Iphiclus*?

Then Arsenios was…

Shit! She frowned.

Standing at the top of the gangway, hands on hips was one of the most handsome men she had ever seen.

He appeared to be almost as tall as Kassandra, broad shouldered, slim hipped, well muscled. His neatly groomed black curls glistened with a little oil and his dense beard was fussily clipped and oiled into forked points at his chin.

He grinned broadly at Praxos and descended the gangway in long, confident strides, swaggered across the dock and stopped a couple of steps away from them.

Kassandra gazed disconsolately at him.

He had the palest green eyes she had ever seen, and with his darkly tanned skin and black hair, the effect was striking.

He grinned at Praxos revealing straight, white teeth.

Because of course his teeth would be excellent, Kassandra thought sourly.

He even smelt good.

“Prixas my friend!” he beamed. “Island life seems to suit you,” he reached out and slapped Praxos’ solid belly.

“You know you’d get many more second glances from the ladies if you dropped a bit of that,” he winked.

“Praxos,” Kassandra corrected. “And he does just fine with the ladies.”

Arsenios turned his gaze on her, eyed her slowly up and down, then grinned widely.

“And just what do we have here?” he stroked the end of his beard.
“Arsenios,” Praxos put a hand on Kassandra’s shoulder. “I have the honour to present Kassandra of Sparta, The Eagle Bearer, Messenger Of Zeus, the Archon’s...” he hesitated, swallowed awkwardly. “The Archon’s personal Misthios!” he gave her an apologetic glance.

“Ah, yes, her mercenary,” Arsenios smiled.

“The Archon has been generous enough to send her hired muscle to escort us to the villa, Iphiclus. We shall be completely safe with these two by our sides, no?” he ran an appraising hand down Kassandra’s arm, testing her bicep, pressing his fingers firmly into her tricep.

“In fact Kassiopia here will provide you with a little interesting female companionship on our stroll, I’m sure,” he turned to look at Iphiclus.

To Kassandra’s surprise Iphiclus was casting an appreciative eye over the length of thigh revealed by her pteruges. She’d clearly misread him, she thought.

“Here, Iphiclus don’t stand there like a country bumpkin, come introduce yourself to Kassiopia. He may call you Kassiopia?” Arsenios smiled insinuatingly.

“He may call me by it,” Kassandra said dryly, “but I trust he won’t be surprised if I don’t answer. As it’s not my name.”

“I do apologise,” Arsenios spread his arms, not at all apologetic. “A long journey, forgive my weary lack of attention. Run it by me again?”

“Kassandra of Sparta!” Praxos intervened sharply.

Arsenios tapped his sharp white teeth with a neatly manicured thumb nail.

“Kassandra of Sparta? Kassandra of Spar...oh yes, now I place you. I’ve heard tales. But then I’m sure we all have,” he winked. “Iphiclus you lucky dog, come say hello to Sandra, she’ll be the most entertaining companion for you at supper. Do tell me you’ll be attending supper my dear?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Kassandra replied through gritted teeth.

When they arrived at the villa Kyra was at the door to greet them. To Kassandra’s surprise she was dressed attractively but professionally, her hair was a little more elaborately arranged but she looked very much as she would for any other diplomatic visit.

She relaxed a little. It didn’t last long, however.

Her hackles rose as Arsenios took Kyra’s outstretched hand, turned it in his and pressed a lingering kiss to her palm.

“The lovely Kyra,” he smirked. “And even more beautiful than I remembered. Thank you so much for receiving us, and sending your muscle to meet us. We’ve never felt safer, have we Iphiclus? You remember Iphiclus?”

Kyra nodded, allowed Iphiclus to kiss the back of her hand. As he did so she shot an apologetic glance at Kassandra, whose jaw muscles were rigid as she gritted her teeth.

Arsenios followed Kyra’s gaze and smiled to himself.

“And what a lovely necklace, Archon,” he said archly, reaching out and running a finger along her collarbone. “A gift from an admirer, no doubt.”
It had been a wedding gift from Kassandra and she had been touched to see her wearing it, recognising the message Kyra was giving her.

Watching Arsenios’ fingers tracing the line of it now, her whole body tensed.

She felt Praxos’ solid hand between her shoulder blades and glanced up at him. He gave her a reassuring nod, patted her back softly.

“And who is this lovely creature?” Arsenios spotted Savina who was standing a couple of paces behind Kyra at her left.

“Please meet Savina, my personal assistant,” Kyra ushered her forward.

“Savina!” Arsenios pressed her fingers to his lips.

“How absolutely charming. The Archon’s...right hand woman, no doubt?” he said leeringly.

“Iphiclus!” he called without taking his eyes off her. “Come,” he waved his hand without turning.

Iphiclus trotted up, took Savina’s hand.

“Is she not lovely?” Arsenios smirked. “You’ve been rather barking up the wrong tree with Sandra there,” Kassandra saw Kyra wince. “Savina looks much better company. Make sure you look pretty for her tonight, my friend.”

“Alas,” Kyra took Savina’s arm, moved to her side, inserting herself between Savina and Iphiclus.

“Savina has a very important prior engagement tonight. She will unable to attend supper.”

“No?” Arsenios pouted. “Now that is very bad news,” he fixed his gaze on Savina.

Kassandra could see her swallow, felt Praxos’ warning hand between her shoulders.

“Are you absolutely sure that we cannot persuade you to join us, my dear? Iphiclus is far more entertaining than he appears at first glance.”

Savina took an audible breath, glanced at Kyra, raised her chin.

“I am very sorry,” she said steadily. “This arrangement was made some time ago. I am unable to cancel.”

“Really?” Arsenios looked at Kyra. “I am sorry to hear that. Are you sure your Archon cannot prevail upon you to change your mind?” he said coolly.

Kassandra could see Kyra’s jaw muscles working, watched a flicker of annoyance cross her face so swiftly that she doubted anyone other than her had seen it.

“It’s an enormous pity, I know,” Kyra said firmly. “But Savina is not available.”

She held Arsenios’ gaze for an uncomfortably long time.

Kassandra could feel the tension crackling between them, felt her own fingers itching to reach for her sword. Even Praxos’ hand was tensing a little on her back.

Kyra held her chin high, didn’t flinch. And suddenly the mood broke.

Arsenios laughed, slapped Iphiclus on the shoulder.
“Well, I tried, my friend,” he chuckled. “You saw me try. But the Archon is a woman who knows her own mind.”

“Sadly,” Kassandra took a long stride forward to stand beside Iphiclus, glowered down at him. “You will have to make do with my companionship for the evening.”

“There you are Iphi,” Arsenios laughed. “Sandra shall be your companion. Nothing like as pretty as the lovely Savina,” he gave her a sidelong look.

“But she has other things to recommend her I’m sure,” he slapped her on the arm.

“Kassandra has a wealth of fascinating tales from her many adventures,” Kyra shot Kassandra an apologetic look.

“You will not be deprived of entertainment while we dine, I assure you Iphiclus. But you must both be tired and thirsty? The day is very warm, no? Please. Come inside and take some refreshment before we discuss business. Kassandra, Praxos, thank you for your assistance. We will not be needing your services any further. Till this evening.”

As she led them inside she took the opportunity to brush Kassandra’s hand lightly and briefly with her fingers.

It clearly did not escape Arsenios’ notice.

As they entered the villa, he glanced over his shoulder directly at Kassandra and placed his hand deliberately in the small of Kyra’s back.

“I’m going to kill him, Praxos,” she hissed as they disappeared inside.

“Understandable my friend,” he patted her shoulder. “But you can’t do it till the deal is in the bag.”

Kassandra went to brood on the wall outside the kitchen door, kicking over a water jug on the way.

“Ey!” Cymone heard the noise and peered out. “Oh it’s you”, she looked at the pooling water at Kassandra’s feet.

“I’m sorry,” she picked up the empty jug. “I’ll refill it.”

“You’ve met him then I take it?” Cymone watched her working the pump.

“He’s a charmer, no?” she laughed. “And that little egg headed twerp with him?” she snorted. “Where are they now?”

“Taking refreshments!” said Kassandra sourly, as a servant bustled in asking for wine and biscuits.

“Want me to spit in it?” Cymone arched an eyebrow as she filled a decorative amphora.

Kassandra seriously contemplated this for a moment.

“Better not,” she decided. “Kyra and Savina are going to be drinking it too.”

“And poor Aegeus,” Cymone arranged the biscuits on a plate, handed one to Kassandra. “They’ll be making his life a misery about now I imagine. He’s not “manly” enough for them.”

“Not manly enough for the little bald fellow?” Kassandra crunched the biscuit and sneaked a second off the plate.

They watched the anxious looking servant rush off with the refreshments.

Cymone stood quietly for a moment. The kitchen was suddenly still after two days of activity. She went over to the table and filled two cups with a very good wine and handed one to Kassandra.

“Do you need a hand getting ready?” she gave Kassandra a sidelong glance.

“Sorry?” she glanced down at her, a little puzzled.

“There’s nothing here now that really needs me, those lasses from town are very good, they’ve got everything under control,” she took a sip of wine.

“And I was a ladies maid before I was a cook. Admittedly none of my ladies needed armouring,” she laughed. “But I reckon the principle is very much the same. And I’d like to help.”

Kassandra looked down at her, curiously.

Then she surprised herself by putting her hand on Cymone’s shoulder and saying “Yes, thank you.”

“Excellent,” Cymone nodded. “I’ll meet you in your room an hour or so before supper eh?”
When you think about it, this isn’t even the worst party that Kyra has invited Kassandra to. She needs to decline the next time.

In the bedroom later that evening, Kassandra followed Cymone’s instructions to undress, stopping awkwardly at her underwear.

“Bashful, suddenly?” Cymone laughed. “I’ve helped fill the bath often enough,” she caught Kassandra’s uncomfortable grimace and raised her eyebrows knowingly.

“Oh! Your visitor!” she smiled sympathetically and went over to Kyra’s dressing table.

“Well the Archon picked a fine time to spring obsidian dick on you then,” she laughed. “Now, where’s that fancy ass oil, she uses?”

Kassandra indicated the small, decorative vial, watched Cymone uncork it and sniff appreciatively.

“Sit down now, let’s get cracking,” she took a brush and unbraided Kassandra’s hair.

“You need to remember something, Kassandra,” she began to brush a little coconut oil through her hair.

“Whatever happens at the table tonight,” she brushed steadily. “You need to remember that you are going to finish the night in this room, with your wife in your arms. He is going to end the night in the guest room, burning our beeswax candles, tucked up in our best sheets with nothing but his hand for company.”

Kassandra snorted a little and shook her head.

“You’re going to have to sit there and bite your tongue,” Cymone rummaged in her pocket and pulled out a length of deep wine-red ribbon. “Saw this at the market the other morning,” she smiled, “thought of you.”

She began to braid the ribbon into Kassandra’s hair.

“And he’s going to try his best to get a rise out of you,” she tied off the end of the braid and poured a little oil into her hands.

“Here,” she handed the vial to Kassandra. “Oil your legs. We want you to be smelling of her when you walk in that room. He’s not going to acknowledge that she’s your wife, but we can make sure he smells her on you from the word go, and I didn’t mean that to sound quite as vulgar as it did,” she lightly oiled Kassandra’s shoulders and arms, massaging firmly.

Cymone sorted through Kassandra’s clean tunics and selected a deep red one, slit to the hips on either side.
“You want to know why I think he’s such an arsehole, Kassandra? Arms up!” she drew the tunic down over her head.

“It’s kind of self evident I think,” Kassandra stood up, straightened the tunic and smiled down at Cymone who was standing by her armour rack with a cloth in her hand.

“Yes, there’s the obvious reasons,” she began to lightly polish the breast plate and the metal trims of the pteruges, then looked over her shoulder at Kassandra.

“But really think about it sweetheart. The archon doesn’t want this deal so she can get rich. She doesn’t want the money to buy fancy clothes or jewelry. She’s not going to buy you three a house in the country. Gods this stuff is heavy,” she handed Kassandra the armoured skirt, “no wonder you’re built like that.”

She watched Kassandra fasten the pteruges about her hips, settle them comfortably and then hefted the breast and back plates and went over to help her fasten them.

“No, she wants to improve the orphanage, build a new school room, repair the temples,” Cymone frowned, tugging at the ties.

“If this Arsenios was any sort of a man at all, he’d be wanting to help her, no? She would name the bloody schoolroom after him... which would be unfortunate,” she laughed. “But no, he’s going to make her work for every drachma.”

Kassandra hadn’t even considered this aspect of it, she sat down and began to put on her boots as Cymone sorted the bracers.

“You’re right!” she looked up. “He is an arsehole!”

“Absolutely,” Cymone nodded, watched Kassandra finish tying her boots and shrugged. “So when she’s robbing him blind tonight, none of us need feel bad about it at all, here you go, your..arm thingies.”

She began to rummage on Kyra’s dressing table.

“Now, I know you don’t usually bother,” she found the eyeliner. “But you’ve got very few weapons at your disposal tonight, and if you’re going to glower broodingly across the table, you’ll look more impressive doing it with a smokey eye.”

Kassandra withdrew a little nervously, but Cymone gave her a reassuring smile.

“Ladies maid, remember,” she bent down and frowned with concentration. “I’ve got you covered. Chin up!.”

Twenty minutes later Kassandra was ready, Cymone had carefully picked and plucked every stray hair and fleck of lint from the deep red chlamys, every exposed inch of skin glowed, her armour glistened, her hair shone, her gaze was intense.

Cymone stood back and smiled proudly.

“Gods help him,” she shook her head, laughing. “I think we may have made the Archon’s job a bit more testing for her.”

“Remember Kassandra,” she reached up and placed a gentle hand on her cheek.
“Whatever she might say tonight, whatever you might have to put up with. She’s yours! And you’re hers! And any fool with eyes to see can tell that. This idiot, he wouldn’t know what to do with her if she was his. You just remember that.”

Kassandra took a huge breath, gave Cymone a brief hug and walked to the door. As she opened it she heard a bell ring. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Cymone laughing.

“Supper’s served,” she grinned. “You didn’t even knew we had a bell did you?”

Despite the summons Kassandra was still the first one in the hallway. She paced a little, watching the servants opening the doors to the dining room, catching the scent of food wafting out.

The sound of footsteps caught her attention and she turned to see Arsenios striding down the stairs, grinning broadly.

He had changed into a very short chiton of expensive looking fabric, half his hairy, muscular thighs and most of his chest were revealed. He had clearly even oiled his chest hair Kassandra observed, gaping a little.

“Ah, Sandra,” he strode over and slapped her shoulder hard.

“You’ve changed, how sporting of you. Iphi!” he shouted over his shoulder. “Do come see, Sandra has tried to make herself pretty for you.”

Kassandra could feel the tension in her shoulders growing as she took a step back from him and looked up to the stairs.

Iphiclus came sashaying down in an ostentatious himation over a long robe, she wasn’t sure that he had burnished his bald head, it was positively gleaming.

“He’s made an effort for you,” Arsenios leaned over and hissed conspiratorially. “I think he’s rather taken with you actually Sandra, against all odds,” he grinned.

“He rather likes the idea of a big strong woman putting him in his place, I think...even if her tastes don’t generally run in... that direction?” he arched an eyebrow. “Unless I’ve heard wrongly of course? People do love to gossip, no? Jump to conclusions?”

Kassandra was momentarily at a loss as to how to respond to his insinuations.

He’d delivered it in such a manner that she felt she somehow ought to be defending herself against what was, after all, the truth.

She frowned, confused and wrong footed and was saved by the sound of one of the servants clearing his throat and announcing Kyra’s arrival. She and Arsenios turned, as one, to look towards the stairs.

Kassandra’s mouth fell open.

This was clearly the dress she had been sent to collect, she realised.

Phoibe was right, it was a colour she’d never seen Kyra wear before, a rich mid green and a fabric so fine that she could make out the smooth curve of Kyra’s belly and the soft peaks of her nipples through it.
The tight girdle below her breasts pushed them up enticingly and the low neckline revealed more of the resulting cleavage than Kyra generally displayed.

Nestling between her breasts was Kassandra’s necklace.

The earrings she wore matched the two clasps that held the narrow shoulders of the gown together.

As she descended, each step revealed that the skirts were slit to her hip on the left hand side, every step she took revealed a breathtaking flash of dark thigh.

Kassandra licked her lips, swallowed with a little difficulty, felt the first awkward stirrings of arousal and was grateful she was wearing a much more heavily armoured skirt that would hopefully disguise any evidence.

She took a step towards the foot of the stairs, gazing wide eyed and reverent, holding out a hand towards Kyra as she approached.

Reaching the lowest steps Kyra looked up, took in Kassandra’s glowing magnificence with darkening eyes. She smiled a little, parted her lips to speak.

“Archon!” Arsenios shouldered Kassandra aside.

“Why, it is as though blessed Aphrodite herself has graced us with her presence,” he took Kyra’s hand and pressed it lingeringly to his lips. “You are...breathtaking my dear.”

He kept hold of Kyra’s hand, shoved his way past Kassandra towards the open doors of the dining room.

“Iphiclus!” he waved him over.

“Perhaps your...handsome bodyguard will be kind enough to escort you in.” He tucked Kyra’s arm through his, placing her hand on his forearm, pressing his own over it in a proprietorial fashion, stroking her wrist with his thumb.

“Sandra!” he called, eyes fixed on Kyra. “Give Iphi your arm my dear, he’s done his best to look pretty for you.”

Kassandra glowered after them as they walked to the doors, she could see the sway of Kyra’s hips, the flow of the fabric at each step, watched her lean into Arsenios’ side a little.

When she came downstairs she had been determined to remember Cymone’s advice, to keep herself calm, to shrug off Arsenios’ obvious baiting.

Right now though she could feel every muscle of her body tensing as he reached over and brushed a non-existent strand of hair from Kyra’s cheek.

She was finally distracted by the sound of Iphiclus clearing his throat next to her.

She unclenched her fists, and looked down. He was looking at her legs again she realised, it was considerably more awkward at such close range.

“You...coughed? “ she settled, watching as he jumped a little and looked up at her with a leeringly hopeful smile.

“You are looking very...dashing tonight, my dear,” he licked his lips. “Most...assertive.”
Kassandra took an involuntary step back, grimacing a little.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see Arsenios leading Kyra through the door. She didn’t want them getting out of sight.

“We should catch up,” she grabbed Iphiclus’ arm and dragged him squeaking into the dining room just in time to see Arsenios dismiss the waiting servant and pull out Kyra’s chair for her.

To Kassandra’s fury he placed a lingering hand on her back, allowing it to drift down, stopping just above the swell of Kyra’s ass.

“This fabric,” he smiled, rubbing gently. “So very soft and fine. It must feel like wearing nothing at all,” he glanced up at Kassandra who had left Iphiclus unceremoniously by the doors and was stalking over to the table with a face like fury.

The urge to take him by his curly hair and smash his leering face into the table, over and over, was almost overwhelming.

Kyra clearly saw that something was wrong.

She took her seat, gestured to Arsenios to sit and fixed Kassandra with a steady gaze.

“Eagle Bearer?” she said quietly but firmly.

“Eagle Bearer... Kassandra!” she managed to call her back to the room.

“Perhaps?” she smiled reassuringly. “You would be so good as to seat Iphiclus for us and then we may begin. I’m sure everyone is hungry, we have had a long day of negotiations.”

“Indeed,” Arsenios placed his hand over Kyra’s.

“An afternoon working under the lovely Archon has certainly roused my appetites,” he grinned. “Do go bring Iphiclus over Sandra or he’ll spend all evening standing by the door gazing at your muscular thighs like a love sick schoolboy.”

“If you would, please, Kassandra?” Kyra gave her a discreetly pleading look.

Kassandra was gritting her teeth so hard she could feel them squeaking as she strode over to the door, grabbed the arm of the simpering Iphiclus and hauled him over to the table.

“No, no, please, Kassandra,” he waved his hands as she pulled out his chair, glowering over at the table. “Please, do allow me,” he squeezed around her and pulled out her seat.

“Oh look at him being gallant,” Arsenios laughed.

“Do humour him Sandra. You know Kyra,” he turned to her, filled her cup with wine, then his own. “Your good health my dear,” he took a sip.

“You know, I did wonder if we would ever find the woman who could raise Iphi’s... interest,” he smiled, watching Iphiclus make a hamfisted attempt to push Kassandra’s chair in for her.

Arsenios clapped his hands delightedly, refilled his cup.

“And yet,” he grinned. “Sandra here has done in an afternoon what half the women of the Aegean have failed to do. Clearly we should have been looking on Lesbos all along. How delightful!”
“Kas-sandra,” Kyra emphasised. “Is one of the most charming women you could ever hope to meet. But she is not, alas for Iphiclus, in the market for a partner.”

“Oh never say never,” Arsenios smirked. “Iphiclus has...hidden assets. Iphi, my friend, you must ask Sandra to accompany you on a stroll about lovely Mykonos after supper. Kyra and I will not be requiring your services for the rest of the night.”

“I am sorry to disappoint you,” Kassandra said stiffly, paying no heed to Iphiclus who was loading her plate with what he hoped were tempting tidbits.

“But my duty is first and always to my...Archon,” she struggled. “I will not leave her unguarded.”

“Really!” Arsenios steepled his fingers and gazed hard at her. “Why Sandra! It’s almost as though you don’t trust me? It cannot be that you do not trust me? Or the Archon? Surely you don’t mistrust the..”

There was a dull clink as the delicate fork that Kassandra had been clenching in her fist snapped in two and the tines fell onto the plate.

She looked down then glanced up apologetically to Kyra.

“I am so sorry Ky..Archon,” she picked up the fallen half and placed both pieces neatly by her plate.

Iphiclus swallowed audibly and cautiously offered Kassandra a rather heftier implement from one of the serving dishes.

Arsenios threw back his head and roared delightedly.

“Ah Iphiclus my friend, for the love of Aphrodite, play carefully with the lovely Sandra,” he wiped his eyes. “Though your own shaft is not quite so delicate, I seem to recall.”

“This is hardly an appropriate conversation to hold before the Archon,” Kassandra hissed.

“Really?” Arsenios cocked an elegantly groomed eyebrow. “I rather get the impression that the Archon is a...woman of the world?”

Kassandra could feel her hackles rising.

She gritted her teeth and clenched her fist around the replacement fork so hard that her knuckles whitened.

To her astonishment Iphiclus reached out a soft, perfumed hand and rested it soothingly over her fist, patting gently.

Kassandra turned to glower at him, eyebrows knitted and he swallowed audibly, removed his hand slowly, placed it on his knee.

“Indeed,” Kyra took Arsenios’ hand and smiled archly. “It is no secret I’m sure that I have had a far from sheltered upbringing. Kassandra is very devoted to my well-being, however, and I’m sure we don’t want to make Iphiclus feel in any way uncomfortable.”

“Ah Kyra,” Arsenios smiled, leaning over to kiss her cheek, “Most charming and thoughtful of women, to consider Iphi’s feelings so. He’s harder than he looks though I assure you. Goodness! Whatever is that delightful scent?”

He leaned in closer, bent his head to Kyra’s neck. “Absolutely delectable! Or is that your natural...
“I believe it is the scent of an exotic fruit known as a coconut,” Iphiclus chimed in, sniffing deeply.
“Surely you are wearing it yourself Kassandra? It suits you very much if you will permit me to observe?”

“Really?” Arsenios tilted his head, smiled coolly.

“Sharing your... mistress’ scent? How very... devoted you are, Sandra.” He dropped his hand below the table.

Kassandra saw Kyra jump a little as he settled his hand on her thigh.

“You must be aware though,” he frowned. “Of the impression such a thing could give. If you are so very protective of your mistress’ reputa....”

“Take your fucking hand off her right this instant,” Kassandra leapt to her feet, knocking over her chair.

Iphiclus jumped back, startled.

Kyra’s eyes widened, she frowned at Kassandra, nodding fiercely at her to sit down.

“I beg your pardon?” Arsenios kept his hand right where it was.

“I said, take your hand off my wife,” Kassandra snarled. “Or I will snap it off at the wrist and shove it so far up your arse that you’ll be tickling your own tonsils.”

“Kassandra!” Kyra snapped. “Sit down this minute, and apologise.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Kassandra glowered. “He’s been riding me ever since he set foot on the island, and you’re allowing it! How dare you touch her!” she made to stride around the table towards Arsenios.

His face paled and for the first time that day his composure fled. He pushed back his chair, flinching.

Before she could reach him Kassandra found herself face to face with Kyra.

She had got to her feet and braced herself between them. She was frowning furiously at Kassandra, and seeing that she was about to step around her to reach Arsenios she put a solid hand square on Kassandra's breast plate, pushing her back firmly.

“You may apologise and sit down,” she said calmly, but her nostrils flared. “Or you may leave the room.”

Kassandra looked down, astonished and disbelieving. She tilted her head, blinking repeatedly and raised her eyebrows questioningly, unable to form words.

“I believe you heard me perfectly well,” Kyra scowled, correctly reading the stunned question in her expression. “Make your decision, Misthios.”

Over Kyra’s shoulder, Kassandra could see Arsenios smirking widely, tongue obviously in his cheek.

“I will die before I apologise to this...this katapygon!” she snapped.
“Then you may leave the room!” Kyra drew herself up to her full height, tilted her head back, looked Kassandra right in the eye.

She swallowed and looked down at Kyra with a wounded expression.

“I...Kyra?” she said quietly with a hint of plea in her voice.

“Please?” she whispered. “Don’t do this.”

“You heard me, Misthios!” Kyra swallowed hard, blinked a couple of times. “You have made your decision. Leave. Now.”

There was a long pause, Kassandra looked pleadingly at Kyra, but she held her gaze resolutely and Kassandra conceded.

She looked down, feeling Arsenios’ smirking gaze upon her back as she made her way to the door. As she opened it and stepped out she heard Kyra’s conciliatory voice.

“I apologise for my Misthios’ behaviour, Arsenios. I can only assume she is...overtired.”

“Who would have imagined her to be such an...emotional creature” she heard Arsenios laughing, his nerve returned now that she was well out of reach.

“That is what you risk though I imagine, when you employ a woman to do the...work of a man, in any department.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

You know, Kyra never gets around to filing away that obsidian licence. Let's assume Savina takes care of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kassandra was at the front door before she realised that it would be a bad move to follow her instinct and go to the tavern to get drunk and brood.

She was, after all, wearing full armour, the armour moreover that she wore when representing Kyra on official business and half of Mykonos knew about Arsenios’ visit.

For her to been seen in Mikis’ in dress armour with a face like thunder would only attract attention. And going to see if Nike was available so she could metaphorically weep on her shoulder would only give rise to salacious speculation.

Kassandra spun on her heel and stomped upstairs, grateful that the servants were all either gone for the day, or otherwise engaged. She stormed into the bedroom, slamming the door after her with such force that the wall shook a little, and marched out onto the balcony. She braced herself on the balustrade, knuckles white as she clutched at the the stonework.

Why has she done that? Lost control of herself like that? She’d gone down fully intending to follow Cymone’s advice, drink the expensive wine, eat the over-rich food, laugh up her sleeve at stupid, perfumed Arsenios. Instead she’d been ready to beat him to within an inch of his life from the moment she clapped eyes on him.

The urge to beat his leering face to a mess had been barely controllable and she was a little shocked by the ferocity of her reaction. If Kyra hadn’t intervened she would certainly have attacked him, and for all his showy muscles he had the ostentatious posture and soft, lotioned hands of a man who had never had to raise a fist to defend himself, much less do a day’s hard work.

She would have likely killed him.

She’d have killed, or at least seriously injured him and ruined not only Kyra’s current plans, but her future as Archon, and by extension the well-being of the Silver Islands. To mention nothing of the bounty on her own head. She’d likely have had to flee again, at least for a little while, to sort it out. What in Hades would Phoibe have said?

Kassandra stalked over to the table and poured herself a cup of wine, draining half of it in one go. It was quite clearly a cheaper, more utilitarian vintage than was being served downstairs, but if she was honest, Kassandra preferred it. It was more like what she’d drunk growing up, and she’d been glad enough of it. Anything had been a step up from Markos’ foul concoctions.

She walked back out onto the balcony, looked up at the stars, searched around for Orion the Hunter. Kyra had said they’d need to be on the roof to see it she remembered.

Her mind drifted back to what was going on downstairs. Kassandra had sworn she would be there,
had told Praxos and Cymone that she’d be there to keep an eye on things and now Kyra was down there on her own after all.

Just what was Kassandra worried about? Kyra could handle herself if it came to it. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her, despite what Arsenios had insinuated. There was no way she would even contemplate letting a shifty letch like Arsenios...do what?

Lay hands on her? Because she’d already done more than contemplate that. She’d let him practically fondle her ass, right in front of Kassandra. Allowed him to kiss her cheek, slobber over her hand, run his fingers along her collar bone, place his soft fingers on her naked thigh.

Fury overwhelmed her and she spun, swung her arm and flung the cup she was holding with such force that it hit the opposite wall and shattered into a dozen pieces, splashing the plaster with the remains of the wine.

“A fork downstairs, a cup up here, I should have brought a plate with me. You could have smashed a whole place setting,” Kyra stood in the doorway, face pale.

Kassandra looked a little shamefaced at having a witness to her loss of control. She watched her step inside and close the door firmly behind her.

“I asked you to do one thing Kassandra,” Kyra stopped a couple of paces from her. “Sit quietly and observe. You were there because you told me that you could do that. That you could remain calm and keep an eye on things. And now you’re up here, where you’re no use at all.”

“Yes because you told me to leave!” Kassandra fumed, flinging her arms wide. ”In front of those malakes, as though I was some misbehaving dog.”

“Because you were behaving like one!” Kyra shouted. “What on earth were you thinking? What possessed you to get into some pissing contest with Arsenios for god’s sake? Is that it? You suddenly feel like you have to measure up in some way? You’ve never been like this before?”

“He was all over you Kyra,” Kassandra reached out for her, but she stepped back out of her range. “He was pawing and sniffing at you, just to provoke me!”

“And you let him!” Kyra hissed. “You walked right into it, like an fool! You did just what he wanted. I had everything under control. I knew what I was doing.”

“Did you?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows. “Because you let him sit there and touch you, let him treat me like your hired muscle, let him sneer at our relationship at the same time as he refused to acknowledge it. You knew you were doing that, did you? You sat there and said nothing and let him talk to me as though I was your whore and not your wife!”

“Your pride was wounded? Is that it?” Kyra gave an angry, defensive huff. “That’s why you were a minute away from pissing all over your territory like a dog! Your pride came before my work? Before the well-being of the islands? I was this close to getting this wrapped up and calling it a night. Do you have any idea how bloody tired I am, Kassandra?” she sighed wearily, shoulders slumping.

Kassandra saw it now, saw how hard she’d been working to hold it together, to disguise her fatigue. She had worked ceaselessly over the past couple of days, barely sleeping.

“Look, Kyra,” she walked over to her, reached out to take her arms, stroking them gently. “I..overreacted a little maybe. You’re right. My pride was wounded. But I get tired of being treated like your hired muscle. And not just tonight. I get tired of this... game you play...only ever half admitting you’re my wife. Everyone on the Islands knows but they’re all afraid to say it out
loud...because you don’t.”

She sighed heavily. “Look, come to bed now, get some sleep. In the morning I’ll…” she swallowed hard. “I’ll talk with him...calmly, if that’s what you want. We’ll make it right.”

“Come to bed!” Kyra shook her off. “I won’t be getting to bed at all tonight at this rate. I have to go back down there and try to save this. They think I’m out sorting dessert right now!” she gave a mirthless laugh.

She strode to the door, stopped with her hand on the handle and looked back at Kassandra.

“You can stay here and think about how many people were involved in this,” she frowned. “How hard they worked, for how long. How much money I invested in this evening so that we could come out victors! Think about just what you jeopardised tonight. Perhaps lie back and give yourself the most expensive handjob in the history of the Silver Islands, because I’m not going to be here to do it!”

She slammed the door after her and Kassandra stood looking at it, stunned for a moment, before lashing out and kicking over a nearby stool. How much worse could this evening get?

A not insignificant part of her wanted to stalk out after Kyra, overtake her, drag her back to their room, push her down on the bed, tear that expensive dress from her body, fuck her hard, mark her as her own, make her whimper Kassandra’s name.

She strode over to the door, grasped the handle with enough force to whiten her knuckles. She was on the verge of pulling it open when she stopped suddenly.

Where the hell had that come from, she thought? She was a little taken aback by the force of her imaginings. Shocked, she realised that she was aroused and recoiled, disturbed by her body’s treacherous reactions.

The sphinx hadn’t lied, had it? About anything? It had warned her. When it spoke of there being more to endure she’d naively assumed it was referring to the painful change she’d undergone.

Was it this though? These wild mood swings, the unnecessary jealousy, the possessive desire? She’d even pushed Aegeus away from Kyra she remembered. Aegeus of all people! Had it gifted her with more than an occasionally unruly lump of flesh? Things Kassandra had learned to keep concealed, caged, under control felt as though they were bubbling to the surface more often.

Kassandra paced furiously around the room, rubbing her face abstractedly.

She loved Kyra, she’d gone through all this for Kyra, for them, for their love. She wanted to have a child with her. For all she knew her seed could be quickening in Kyra’s belly even now as she flirted and teased with that ridiculous man.

She threw herself down on the bed, gazing up at the ceiling, taking slow deep breaths. She wanted to march down there, knock Arsenios and Iphiclus’ smug, conceited heads together, drag Kyra back up here, remind her just whose wife she was.

Create a diplomatic incident she laughed bitterly, feeling furious tears running down, wetting her hairline, trickling into her ears.
When she woke, the sun was warming the room and Kyra was standing over her, smiling wryly.

“Didn’t even take your boots off I see,” she eyed her up and down. “But the wine jug is still full,” she grinned.

Kassandra blinked awake, raised herself on her elbows, confused. Kyra should have looked exhausted surely, but she looked bright, energised, her eyes sparkled. Kassandra hauled herself into a sitting position.


“Actually my handsome misthios, you saved it.” Kyra sat down on the bed facing her. She was still wearing the green dress, the skirt fell open to reveal the full length of her leanly muscled thigh. Kassandra swallowed, as the images from last night resurfaced. She made herself concentrate on her face.

“I did?” she frowned, puzzled.

“Yes, my love,” Kyra laughed. “It turns out that for all his ostentatious lechery, Arsenios is one of those men who much prefers it when a woman takes control. Throws her weight a little you might say?” she smiled meaningfully.

“He practically came on himself when he watched us facing off. I suspect he’d have enjoyed it if you’d put up a little more resistance actually. He has some quite specific needs on the quiet,” she tilted her head, eyes shining with delight. “In the end I pretty much told him what he was going to charge me for obsidian, and he said “yes ma’am”.”

Kassandra gazed at her, astonished. She was clearly delighted with her success, excitement crackled off her.

“And there is definitely something going on with him and Iphiclus,” Kyra frowned thoughtfully, “but I was too tired and preoccupied with getting the paperwork arranged to work that out.”

“So...everything?” Kassandra was still trying to take in the full import of what Kyra was telling her.

“Everything is perfect,” Kyra laughed. “I got a slightly better price than I could have anticipated and all that was really required was some rather...specific...stern language and an assertive posture. I don’t think even you would have objected Kassandra,” she grinned.

Kassandra gazed at her, tired and a little puzzled. She shook her head and laughed a little.

“You are a remarkable woman,” she squeezed her hand. “And I love you very much. And I’m relieved it all worked out.”

Kyra smiled and grabbed the edge of Kassandra’s breastplate, pulling her closer and leaned in to kiss her, with a mouth that tasted of honey and expensive wine. She laughed into the kiss.

“Now, you may like to know,” she got to her feet, “that I’ve given everyone the rest of the day off. I let you sleep late. I didn’t think you’d really want to be there to wave off our visitors.” she grinned. “Also I was a little concerned that you might kill him before he could get off the island.”

“I’ve killed men for less,” Kassandra pointed out, truthfully.

Kyra knew this full well. Honestly, she had no idea how many people Kassandra had killed, or indeed how recently. Had that been part of the thrill of provoking her last night, the knowledge that
she had a potentially lethal beast on the end of the chain?

It could all have gone horribly wrong and, now it was done with Kyra suddenly realised it. Wrong in any number of ways.

When she’d walked up the stairs last night she was only half expecting Kassandra to be in the bedroom. Part of her thought that she’d pushed things so far at last that she must have stormed out. Gone to seek solace in the arms of Nike perhaps, the only woman on Mykonos that Kyra could imagine Kassandra revealing her secret to.

And then Kyra would have been proved right. She’d have tempted The Fates sufficiently that they would at last confirm what she’d suspected for so long. That for reasons best known to themselves the gods had decided that Kyra was unworthy. Not unworthy of love, but unworthy of holding onto it.

Her mother, her begetter, her lover, the poor bloody Daughters of Artemis who had sealed their fates by taking her in. It was only a matter of time before Kassandra joined their ranks, surely? A person like Kyra wasn’t worthy of a person like Kassandra.

And yet here she was... still. Reining herself in for Kyra over and over, making allowances time and again for the misery of her youth and the pain of her adulthood. Pain that she knew Kassandra fretted over having added to.

Everything Kyra had ever asked of her she’d done. Right down to turning away that night long ago when Kyra had told her to leave. She’d had no right to expect her to ever return after that.

And yet she had, and she’d fought to stay this time. Fought by not fighting back. Fought by allowing Kyra to vent all her pain and rage about the past. Fought by being there to pick her up when eventually she had fallen, weary and broken.

It had been what Kyra needed at the time, but now she found she wanted more sometimes than this carefully tame Kassandra, but she didn’t know how to ask or even what to really ask for.

What she did know was that part of her had been disappointed last night when Kassandra hadn’t stormed out of the room after her. Hadn’t dragged her back to their bedroom. Hadn’t taken her furiously with none of her usual tender consideration. Hadn’t sent her back to Arsenios branded with the marks of Kassandra’s passion.

Kyra had played with fire last night and she was lucky that no one else had been burned, but was it wrong to wish that her own fingers could have been a little singed at least?

Kassandra was sitting now, brooding thoughtfully, but looking at Kyra’s bared thigh all the same. Looking with a darkening hunger that made Kyra’s chest tighten.

“So, perhaps I can thank you for your remarkable restraint?” she leaned over and the low cut neck of her robe fell forward, allowing Kassandra to catch a glimpse of her breasts, the dark nipples taut. She saw her lick her lips, watched her eyes narrow a little, her nostrils flare.

“We have the place to ourselves for the rest of the day,” she breathed. “I just need to tidy up a couple of things first. I want to secure the copy of the agreement before anything else. And then we have the rest of the day to ourselves.”

Kassandra swung her legs round to get out of bed as Kyra made her way to the door. She pulled it open and stepped out into the hallway, stopping and edging back, showing a little of her bare leg around the door, winking archly at Kassandra.
“Why not get out of that armour?” she smiled. “Save me a job later. Gods know how you sleep in it.”

Kassandra stood frozen for a few moments looking blankly at the door. She wasn’t sure how any of that had happened. If anyone could turn it round though it was Kyra, she reasoned.

She was always exhilarated and buoyant when she felt that she’d performed well around the negotiating table and she clearly thought this was as well as she’d ever performed. Kassandra could almost taste the nervous energy crackling off her. She would crash later surely enough, but in the meantime she would be aflame with it, edgy and volatile.

This was the very last thing Kassandra had anticipated last night when she’d flopped fully armoured on the bed furious, frustrated and confused.

She got out of her armour a good deal more quickly than she’d got into it the night before, despite the fact that she was working alone this time. She hung everything neatly on the rack, placed her boots carefully behind it, out of the way. It seemed a waste of time to put on sandals she reasoned, she’d only be taking them back off in a little while.

Grinning in anticipation she made her way downstairs. The place was incredibly quiet. Usually there was some activity during the day, even if it was just quiet chatter from the kitchens, the low murmur of voices from the office. Now, presumably, just the guards remained and they never entered the villa unless instructed to.

She began to consider how long it had been since she’d been able to relax with Kyra, take her time making love with her. Their last encounter had been brisk and utilitarian to say the least. More than a little bit insulting if she was quite honest.

Today though, today Kassandra would take her time, they had all day. She would make love to Kyra till she was hoarse from screaming Kassandra’s name, pleasure her with a thought to the baby that might result, drive away the troubles of the last couple of days.

The office door was open and Kassandra padded in silently on bare feet. In fact there was Kyra now, rummaging around on the floor behind the desk for some reason. Kassandra couldn’t stop the hungry grin that spread across her face as she tiptoed over.

She could just see Kyra’s ass around the edge of the desk. Gods, however much that dress had cost, it was worth every drachma. It looked a couple of shades lighter in the daylight she realised but the fabric, gods that fabric was incredible, and the dressmaker was a genius clearly. The way it clung to her ass was breathtaking, it somehow made it seem a little more generously curved than usual.

Kassandra felt the first stirrings of arousal, and this time she welcomed them. Stepping around the desk she licked her lips.

“Gods Kyra, my love,” she growled. “Are you rummaging around under there just for me? Because you look incredible, and to be quite honest, I think I’ve earned it,” she drew back her hand and gave Kyra’s ass a sound slap and was rewarded with an unusually high pitched squeak of surprise and then a little grunt as she jumped and hit her head under the desk.

“Oh shit, Kyra!” Kassandra was immediately remorseful. “I’m so sorry, my love,” she grabbed hold of her hips and began to pull her out from under the desk and up to her feet.

“I found it, it was….Take your bloody hands off her this instant!”

Kassandra spun, startled, to look at the door. There stood Kyra, face livid.
She turned more slowly back round to see whose hips she was holding. She already knew what she was going to see though.

It was a startled looking Savina, struggling to her feet, blushing hotly. Wearing a dress made of the same fabric as Kyra’s but a paler shade to better match her complexion and of a much more modest cut, suitable for work.

“Oh...shit..” Kassandra withdrew her hands immediately. Savina lost her balance a little and Kassandra reached out, caught her about the waist, held her up to regain her feet.

“I said take your hands off her,” Kyra flew across the room, slapped Kassandra’s hands away.

“I’m so sorry, Archon,” Savina tried to ease between Kassandra and the chair.

“You have nothing to apologise for Savina,” Kyra shook her head. “Get out of the bloody way, Kassandra,” she pushed her aside, took Savina’s arm. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, quite, Archon,” she blushed, avoided her gaze. “A misunderstanding. I wonder if I might...” she glanced over to the door.

“Of course, Savina,” Kyra smiled apologetically. “I can deal with the agreement myself, you go home now, please. Take the rest of the day.”

“Savina,” Kassandra said pleadingly. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea.”

“It’s quite all right Eagle Bearer,” Savina couldn’t meet her eyes. “I shall see you tomorrow Archon. I’m so pleased that everything has worked out so satisfactorily.” She made her way to the door.

“I didn’t realise it was you...” Kassandra called after her.

“Oh just stop!” Kyra hissed, walking after Savina, closing the door behind her and turning to face Kassandra.

“So was this to teach me a lesson for last night? What’s sauce for the goose after all,” she glowered. “With Savina of all people! You have no conception of what she has been through. I never imagined you would treat her with such disrespect.”

“I had no idea it was Savina!” Kassandra defended. “I like Savina.”

“I like Savina” Kassandra defended. “I like Savina.”

“Evidently!” Kyra stalked over, face pale. “You know I could have seen you putting me in my place with one of the girls from Mikis’ or that girl from the bakery. I’ve seen how she looks at you. But Savina, Kassandra?!?”

“I swear, I didn’t realise it was her,” Kassandra protested. “That dress is so similar to yours. You said everyone had left. I thought she was you.”

“Really? She’s a half head taller than me and blonde?” Kyra raised her eyebrows. “Of course, we’re practically indistinguishable from each other, just like Nike and me eh? You’ve an eye for similarities clearly,” she sneered, watching Kassandra flinch at the implication.

“She was kneeling down under the desk, wearing a green dress, you’d said we were alone,” Kassandra held out her arms. “I could only see her ass, I assumed it was you.”

“Oddly, that’s not actually flattering, to me or Savina,” Kyra shook her head. “Gods know I’d have thought you have enough experience of the female form to be considered something of an expert on
the matter, surely?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kassandra scowled, losing patience.

“Really?” Kyra arched an eyebrow. “Pleading ignorance? The mighty Kassandra of Sparta, whose sexual exploits rival those of Zeus himself?”

“Gods, Kyra, this again?” Kassandra frowned. “In the past, yes. I can’t change the past.”

“You don’t actually try very hard to, do you?” Kyra sneered. She had been holding the heavy intaglio ring she used as a personal seal and placed it carefully on the desk, took a deep breath. “You think I don’t know that half the crew of the Adrestia is women you’ve fucked?”

“Not half!” protested Kassandra, a little unwisely.

“Oh, a slightly smaller fraction then?” Kyra spun on her. “Tell me, does the pretty Odessa still warm your bed on those long nights at sea? Did you take your new addition out for a practise run on the way back, perhaps?”

“Fuck you, Kyra!” Kassandra spat, angry and wounded. “I have not been with another woman since we got back together, and you know it!”

“How do I know it?” Kyra stepped right up to her, snarling. “Do I take your word for it?” she advanced frowning, driving Kassandra back before her, retreating towards the wall.

“I’ve never lied to you, Kyra,” she shook her head.

“Not even about the woman from the fish stall in Kephallonia,” Kyra sneered, then laughed at Kassandra’s look of astonishment. “Tell me, were there any women on Kephallonia who didn’t get the benefit of your attentions?”

“For gods’ sakes Kyra. I was just a girl!” Kassandra felt affronted rage building. Was she supposed to spend the rest of her life apologising for things she’d done before she’d even met Kyra? “I can’t keep saying sorry for the things I did before I even knew you existed. I’m yours now Kyra.”

“And that’s why you flirt with other women right in front of me? Flirt with Savina, right in front of me?” Kyra pushed her in the chest.

“It’s just playing!” Kassandra protested, voice raising. “You’d only have to worry if I was doing it while you weren’t there!”

“And of course, you assure me that you’re not!” Kyra gave a bark of humourless laughter.

“So, you are calling me a liar?” Kassandra was outraged. “Would I have married you if I wanted other women? Would I want to have a baby with you if I wanted other women? Would I have traveled halfway across the fucking Aegean and faced down a sphinx, if I still wanted other women? This from the woman who let some obsidian trader run his hand up her naked thigh last night, right in front of me!”

“That was business!” Kyra snapped.

“So that was worth letting him sneer at me all night! Worth making me sit there as your hired muscle instead of your wife?” Kassandra glowered furiously.

Suddenly she was overwhelmed by it all. The arduous journey, the agonizing transformation, the
insults of the previous evening, the humiliation of Kyra mounting her like some stud animal and then walking away.

"So I’m still supposed to be apologising for Odessa and some woman back on Kephallonia when I was practically a girl, but I’ve got to swallow it when you’re shoving your tits in some trader’s face to make a better deal?” she snarled.

The speed and noise of the slap she received startled her even more than the impact. She drew back instinctively, eyes widening with the initial shock. She almost raised her hand to her stinging cheek but managed to stop herself just in time, determined to retain her dignity. She swallowed her fury and glared at Kyra through narrowed eyes.

“You have no idea the things I’ve had to do to get here, to stay here, how hard I’ve worked, the insults I’ve endured, the sneers and gossiping,” Kyra hissed. “An orphaned street urchin. A woman getting ideas above her station. About the two of us!”

“So tell me about it,” Kassandra yelled. “Tell me Kyra, instead of treating me like some meat-headed dimwit who can’t understand!”

“I never thought you couldn’t understand,” Kyra snapped. “Just that you couldn’t be bothered to try. If it’s not hunting or fucking, you don’t want to know.”

“What the fuck, Kyra!” Kassandra grabbed her arms. “I did all this for you! For us! You have no idea what this has all been like. Have you any idea how I felt the other morning, when you used me like some stud beast?”

“That again?” Kyra snorted. “Were your delicate sensibilities offended? I explained what that was about. Gods know you’ve never been one to turn your nose up at a quick fuck before Kassandra! Why suddenly so precious?” she arched an eyebrow.

“And this from a woman who was opening proceedings with a slap on the ass, let’s not forget? The great romantic!” she laughed. “And I’ll tell you something else,” she sneered. “I bet your mother wouldn’t have mistaken Savina’s ass for mine!”

Chapter End Notes

I feel I should point out that I was totally wrong about the Arsenios thing. He deserved to die, or at least a sound thrashing.

fishbone76 had your backs from the word go, however. She wanted him dead from the moment he laid hands on Savina. It’s a while back since this was written and I honestly can’t remember what my reason for arguing the point was. It certainly wasn’t that I liked him.

Possibly I was concerned that, knowing me, I’d have got side-tracked into some Midsummer Mykonos Murder subplot where Kassandra and Praxos sneak into his room and kill him and Cymone disposes of the evidence in everyone’s packed lunches for a week and a half. I was thinking we needed to get the baby plot underway I imagine.
However a number of people have voiced their distaste for Arsenios in no uncertain terms, and not a single one has ever said "get on with the damn baby plot for feck's sake!" so maybe I *should* have spent a chapter lovingly describing him being eaten alive by hagfish.

If we were doing it again...I'd kill him for sure. Feel free to imagine your own lingering, painful death for him on the way to Kos.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Basically just the angry sex scene that was bound to follow the mother-in-law quip from hell. It's skippable.
Please read the notes, if you're wondering whether to read or not.

Chapter Notes

Okay, this is basically just a moderately angry sex scene, and we filleted it out of the following chapter so that readers can avoid it if they think that it's something that might disturb them.

Initially my plan was to post this and the next as one chapter, just to stick a string of hyphens in after the sex scene and advise readers to scroll down fast to rejoin the plot.

But after discussion we decided that was a bit lazy and inconsiderate so I've split it into two shorter chapters. It was a long scroll I decided

If you're on the fence about it, there's nothing *awful* happens, nothing non consensual, just a little rough.

But readers know themselves best, so if you're not sure please skip it. Any character/plot development stuff is referenced in the following chapter I'm pretty sure, you won't be left wondering "when did *that* happen?"

The instant the words were past her lips she regretted them, but before she could open her mouth to apologise Kassandra had tightened her grip on Kyra’s arms, spun her round and shoved her against the wall with such force it drove the air from her lungs, made her incapable of speech for a moment.

“Leave my fucking mother out of this!” Kassandra bent so close Kyra could feel the heat of her breath against her face, a slight mist of spittle as she hissed, face white with rage.

She was suddenly aware of just how big Kassandra was, how powerful. Of how much she kept herself in check all the time. How she made herself smaller, less intimidating about the place.

She wasn’t doing it now though. She towered over Kyra, her strong fingers gripping her upper arms painfully tight, the full weight of her magnificent body pressing her against the wall, making it difficult to breath.

She was so close, Kyra could see herself reflected in her gaze. There seemed to be nothing there of Kyra’s Kassandra, her usually soft, tender gaze was intense, dark with...Anger? Lust?

For a moment Kyra felt an involuntary shiver of fear as she was held beneath Kassandra’s stare, trembled at the sight of her lowered brows, narrowed eyes, her snarling lips.
Kyra had never feared Kassandra before, never felt anything other than safe and protected in her arms, but right now she seemed so close to revealing a side of herself that Kyra had never witnessed.

If Kyra lowered her gaze, breathed Kassandra's name, yielded, would she cool? Soften?

Kyra felt her fear condense into a hot, tight throb of arousal, felt herself becoming wet, felt a desperate ache for her. She didn’t want Kassandra to cool and soften. Kyra wanted to see what she was about to reveal.

She felt her pulse racing, her mouth was dry, and she struggled to catch her breath beneath the relentless pressure of Kassandra’s body. She ran her tongue quickly over her dry lips, inclined her head imperceptibly, baring her neck, inviting.

And then suddenly, to her dismay, Kassandra’s grip began to gentle.

“Really?” Kyra sighed softly, feeling the first hint of disappointment.

She pushed her hips up against Kassandra. She could feel how hard she was, see the muscles in her jaw working, feel her struggling to regain control. Kyra didn’t want her to regain it. She wanted her to lose it at last.

Just once she wanted to feel the sheer unrestrained power of her, to see what she was really capable of, to discover what she kept hidden in the deepest, darkest part of herself. To know all of her, not just the tame parts.

“Coward!” she whispered low in her ear.

Kassandra clamped a sudden hand around Kyra’s throat, holding her firm.

“What did you say?” she hissed, eyes narrowed.

Kyra met her gaze, challenged her.

“I said, fuck me, you coward,” she said quietly.

Kassandra gave a low animal growl, pressed her full weight against Kyra, pinned her to the wall drawing a startled gasp from her.

Kyra’s heart leapt painfully for an instant, desire and fear coiled like snakes tight and sudden, low in her belly. She could feel the slow seep of arousal wetting her inner thighs, saw Kassandra’s nostrils flare, wondered if she could smell it on her.

“Say that again,” Kassandra snarled, thrusting her hips hard against Kyra’s lower belly, letting her feel just how hard she was.

Was she giving her one last chance to back out, Kyra wondered? To come to her senses? To think better of it?

“You heard me,” Kyra leaned up, bit the lobe of Kassandra’s ear hard, heard her hiss, felt the hand tighten on her throat. “Do it, Spartan! Or do I have to do it myself?”

Kassandra’s next sudden thrust against Kyra drove the air from her lungs.

Outside of combat she had never heard her make the low guttural snarl she gave as she tore at the shoulders of Kyra’s dress. The clasps snapped open, Kassandra tugged them free, tossed them to the floor behind her.
One hand was still clamped about Kyra’s throat, pressing hard enough to make her head swim a little. With the other she tore down the fabric of the bodice, drew back a little, stared hungrily at Kyra’s breasts. Nostrils flared, eyes narrowed, she looked up at Kyra from beneath lowered brows.

She’d never seen this look on Kassandra’s face before. It was wild, dangerous, nothing like her normally soft, reverent gaze. It was exhilarating.

This was what she had guiltily imagined last night, she realised.

This was what she’d wanted for so long now, the desire she’d not known how to voice.

Kassandra released Kyra’s throat and bent her head to her breast. She took the taut nipple in her mouth, biting hard enough to draw a startled yelp, then a low moan, felt her buck up against her hips. She thrust back, hard, shoving Kyra against the wall, making her gasp, clawing at her other breast with powerful fingers as she released her nipple and bit into the flesh of her breast hard enough to bruise, feeling Kyra’s hands clutching at her shoulders.

She straightened a little, eyes wild, lust drunk and turned her attention to Kyra’s shoulder, bit and sucked at the soft flesh in the crook of her neck. She made to protest, tried to push her away. She never wanted to be marked where it would show and Kassandra knew it.

But for once this wasn’t about what Kyra wanted.

Kyra pushed ineffectually against her powerful shoulders, not moving her an inch. Kassandra snarled and caught her wrists, clasping them tightly in one strong hand as she forced her arms up above her head, holding them there as she marked Kyra as hers.

Reaching down with her free hand Kassandra tugged rough and clumsy at the slit skirt of Kyra’s dress, dragging it to one side, struggling to hold it clear.

She drew back from her neck, looked down to see what she was doing and roughly tucked the fabric up into the lowered bodice, tore at Kyra’s perizoma dragging it loose, tossing it aside. She pushed her thigh hard between her legs and thrust it against her, driving Kyra up against the wall with every rough shove.

Soon Kyra was whimpering and rubbing against her, searching for more friction, for some sort of rhythm.

Kassandra pulled back, laughing low, watched her buck impotently against the air, narrowing her eyes at the sight of Kyra’s grimace of need.

“Beg me,” she growled.

Kyra looked desperately at her for a moment, quailed beneath the intensity of her gaze, turned her head.

“I said, beg me,” Kassandra grabbed her chin with strong fingers, turned Kyra’s head to face her, held her gaze firm.

“Beg me... Archon ,” she sneered the last word.

Kyra shivered, closed her eyes, swallowed hard.

“No?” Kassandra released her grip on Kyra’s jaw, dragged up the front of her own tunic, began to fumble one handed with her perizoma, loosening it just enough to free herself.
“Now who’s a fucking coward?” she snarled, grabbing hold of Kyra’s thigh with a rough hand, raising and pushing it to one side as she thrust against her sex, hitting clumsily wide of the mark, driving awkwardly into her groin, cursing under her breath.

Kyra tried to move, struggling awkwardly with her arms pinned above her head. She tried to tilt her hips to help Kassandra enter her, but she dropped her leg, put a firm hand on her hip and shoved her back hard against the wall.

“You had your chance,” she growled, taking hold of herself, parting Kyra’s legs with a rough sweep of her thigh. She bent her knees to get the right angle, driving home in one hard, deep motion, groaning with pleasure, hearing Kyra’s startled gasp and not caring.

Deep inside her now she lifted Kyra’s leg again with her free hand and began to thrust against her, shoving her hips hard against the wall with every stroke. It was awkward though one handed and she quickly realised it.

She dropped Kyra’s wrists and grabbed hold of her ass, lifting her off the floor to a more comfortable height for herself, thrusting hard and fast, adding a sharp little kick of her hips at the end of every stroke.

Sure now that she had her secure, feeling Kyra’s arms clutching about her shoulders, legs locked about her hips Kassandra let go with one hand. She grabbed Kyra’s jaw again turned her face to hers, locked eyes with her as she fucked her.

Trembling beneath her gaze Kyra glanced away. Unable to turn her head in Kassandra’s relentless grip, she closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the sheer power of her.

“Look at me,” Kassandra snarled. “You need to stop treating me like the fucking dog, Kyra. I’m not your pet!”

Kyra could feel her breath hot against her face, hear the animal grunt she gave at every thrust, felt herself rocking, shifting as Kassandra drove into her and against her with her entire body.

“Look at me!” she growled, shaking Kyra’s chin a little.

Kyra looked at her. Kassandra was gazing desperately into her eyes as she thrust fast and hard, she could feel every powerful muscle clenching and tensing as Kassandra’s orgasm roared towards her.

Kassandra could find no words, doubted that she had the breadth to form them even if she could, so she kept her eyes locked on Kyra’s, tried to convey everything in her look; anger, confusion, frustration, humiliation, lust, love, as she came with a roar, her head sinking against Kyra’s shoulder, onto the already reddening bruise there.

She stood, panting breathlessly, pulse pounding in her ears, loosened her hold on Kyra, and lowered her to the floor. Wrapping her arms about her tightly and pulling her in close against her, she buried her face against the crook of her neck, unable to meet her eyes.

She could feel Kyra still moving against her, whimpering softly, her hips surging against Kassandra even as she softened inside her, slowly pulled out.

“Please,” Kyra breathed. “I’m sorry Kassandra, do you want me to beg still? I’ll beg for you Kassandra,” she clawed at her neck, desperately grinding against her. “Please love, I’m sorry. I’m sorry about all of it. You’re right. I have no right to treat you like that. I’m yours Kassandra, always yours. Take me however you like, just…”
Kassandra stopped her with a deep, messy kiss. Breaking it and drawing back she knotted her hand in Kyra’s hair, pulled her head back and kissed along her jaw, soothing with her tongue the fingermarks she had left.

“Stop Kyra,” she murmured low in her ear. “I don’t need you to beg, I don’t want you to apologise. I just want you to respect me. Acknowledge me. Like I do you.”

She ran a rough calloused hand down the hard muscle of Kyra’s lower belly, scraped her nails through the short, neat hair of her sex, groaned a little as she registered just how very wet she was.

“I love you Kyra,” she slid three fingers deep into her, pressed the solid heel of her hand over her clit and rubbed firmly, heard Kyra groan and sigh as she worked against her.

“And only you Kyra,” she breathed in her ear. “I’m not going to keep apologising for my past. It’s you now.”

She felt Kyra rutting against the flat of her hand, held firm till she felt the signal muscular flutter around her fingers. Three, four hard thrusts and Kyra pulsed wet and tight around Kassandra’s fingers, clawed at the back of her neck hard enough to break skin, came, sobbing and whimpering Kassandra’s name against her shoulder.

“It will always be you, Kyra,” she kept her fingers inside her, pulled her tightly to her with her other arm. “Always you, and you need to believe that. I’m not going anywhere,” she breathed.

They stood like this for a few moments, locked together, breathing each other’s air, feeling each other’s slowing pulse.

“Oh, fuck, Kassandra,” Kyra breathed at last, barely audible. She reached up, took Kassandra’s chin in her hand, raised her head to look into her eyes.

There she was, Kassandra again, soft amber eyes looking a little dazed. Kyra met her mouth with a long, soft kiss, knotted her fingers in her hair, pulled her head back and kissed her throat hard, putting her teeth into it, sucking fiercely at the hard corded muscles of her neck, smiling as she heard her groan.

“I love you so. And I’m so sorry,” Kyra sighed, releasing her hold on her hair, grabbing fistfuls of the front of her tunic. She dragged her round, switching their positions. “I’m so sorry. For everything.”

Kassandra allowed it, suddenly biddable, gazing devotedly at Kyra, as soft and gentle now as she had been wild and fierce, minutes before.

Kyra wasn’t sure which excited her more. That dangerous, overwhelming animal ferocity or the willingly restrained power of this tender, reverent Kassandra.

She wanted them both she realised.

She was excited to have seen what lay hidden within, to know Kassandra unleashed at last. But right now she wanted her wife, wanted to be held in those powerful arms, to feel all that strength, tempered for her, for Kyra.

“Come here, my love,” she breathed, pulling Kassandra gently away from the wall, across the room a little way.

“You are far too dressed, Kassandra, I need to see you,” she smiled tentatively, sinking to her knees,
settling back, drawing aside the loosened skirts of her dress as she reclined, allowing her thighs to fall apart, letting Kassandra see how wet and ready she still was.

“Come? Please?” she held up an inviting hand, watched Kassandra drag her hungry gaze from her exposed sex to her hopeful smiling face. She could see her vaguely troubled look as she took in the darkening bites at Kyra’s breast and neck, saw her frown as she sank to her knees between Kyra’s thighs.

Kassandra leaned forward, braced herself on her hands either side of Kyra’s shoulders, bent low, kissed her breast softly, lingeringly, soothing the reddened flesh with her tongue before moving up to her neck and repeating the procedure on the forming bruise there.

“Kyra, my love,” she sighed.

“Oh Kassandra, whatever you do, don’t apologise, please,” Kyra smiled breathlessly, grabbing the root of Kassandra’s braid and pulling her down into a deep, messy kiss.

“Gods, Kyra,” Kassandra broke it, pressed her face into the crook of Kyra’s neck. “I don’t know why… why did you want that?” she looked up, confused.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

In which Kyra learns that apologising won't usually kill you. Kassandra learns that every day can be a school day. And Savina learns that knocking before entering is never optional.

And "what lion attack?!", the answer is in fishbone76's, Until We Meet Again, if you haven't already read it go do so..."Lion Attack!!"

“I’ve wanted that for a long time Kassandra, and I’ve not known how to ask,” Kyra took Kassandra’s face in her hands, turned her and looked deep into her perplexed amber eyes.

“To feel you uncaged,” she kissed along the line of her jaw. “To feel the raw power of you,” she breathed. “I love that you’re tender, my love, but sometimes...just sometimes,” she bit hard at her earlobe, drawing a hiss. “I just want to feel the mighty Kassandra unleash herself. And it was magnificent.”

Kyra grabbed the back of Kassandra’s tunic, began to tug it up, hauling it around her chest, scraping her flanks with her nails as she went.

“You’re right you know, my love,” she breathed. “I’ve not been fair. I’ve taken liberties...and I’m sorry love. I truly am.”

“Hush Kyra,” Kassandra braced herself on one hand, caressed the line of her jaw with the other. “Not right now,” she ran the rough pad of her thumb across Kyra’s lips.

Kassandra pushed herself upright, kneeling up between Kyra’s thighs and reaching down to untie her perizoma.

There was a brief, poorly coordinated struggle as they got in each other’s way.

“Swap!” Kyra hissed, reaching down for the knot of Kassandra’s perizoma.

“Back to issuing orders again already, are we?” Kassandra grabbed Kyra’s jaw again, gently this time, smiling playfully.

She lowered her eyes, gave Kassandra a teasing smile.

“Please, mighty Eagle Bearer,” she ran the tip of her tongue slowly across her upper lip, “please may we swap?”

Kassandra grinned hungrily, grabbed hold of the hem of her tunic and began to haul it over her head, growling as she felt Kyra fumbling roughly with the knot of her perizoma, loosening it, dragging it down her thighs a little, freeing her stiffening cock, reaching out, taking it in a firm, lightly calloused hand.

It was at this moment with Kassandra’s head caught awkwardly in her tunic, her loosened perizoma about her thighs, with Kyra half sitting, chiton lowered, breasts bared, Kassandra’s cock in her hand
that the door swung open.

“Please forgive me bursting in like this Archon, but I had to come back, I feel that I really must explain that…” it was Savina.

Kassandra couldn’t see her face but she could totally imagine what her expression was like. Not dissimilar to Phoibe’s the previous day, she fancied. Possibly a little more shocked even?

Kyra, on the other hand, got the full benefit. Turning, startled, she saw Savina standing open mouthed in the doorway.

The room was silent, save for the soft susurration of falling papyri as the large pile of documents that Savina had been holding began to cascade out of her slackening grip, drifting back and forth as they fell, sliding out to carpet the floor.

“I am so sorry, Archon,” her expression went from shock to recognition before settling on genuinely startled astonishment as she saw exactly what Kyra was doing.

“Oh Gods! Please forgive me, I was...I wanted to assure you that it was a genuine mistake...I should leave,” she finished shakily, turning on her heel.

“No, no, Savina, no,” Kyra began to pull up the bodice of her chiton, fumbling with the straps, looking around for the discarded clasps, pushing Kassandra aside as she reached for them, tripping over her legs as she scrambled to her feet.

“Gods, get out of the bloody way, Kassandra,” she sighed, struggling up, lowering her skirts as Kassandra lost her balance and tumbled sideways struggling to disentangle herself from her tunic and loose perizoma.

Kyra strode over to the door, slipped on a sheet of papyrus, quickly regained her balance, turned to look at Kassandra.

She’d managed to pull down her tunic by now and was sitting disheveled and shocked, looking out dismally over the carpet of fallen documents as she realised that this was, no doubt, all going to turn out to be her fault somehow.

“Pick these up would you, please?” Kyra waved at the papyri. “I’ll try and sort this out,” she gave her skirts a final shake and rushed out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Kassandra gave a huge sigh and leaned back on her hands to survey the mess. This was the second time in as many days that she had provided someone with a shocking revelation she reflected miserably.

At this rate she may as well just follow Phoibe’s suggestion of going and publicly unveiling herself at the bath house, it would be preferable to drip feeding the truth to the whole of the island one person at a time.

She got to her feet and made her way over to the carpet of documents. The least she could do for poor Savina was to pick these up, she reasoned.

She sank to her knees and began to gather them together. Quite quickly, she realised that Savina had clearly had them in some sort of order.
Kassandra frowned and looked at the sheets she had in her hands, before casting a miserable glance over the others. Some looked pretty easy to link, ending in mid sentence on one sheet and picking up on another. She could sort these first she decided and felt a bit better.

The rest looked a lot more difficult. She didn’t understand half of the terminology used for a start and some seemed to be just figures. She really should have spent more time paying attention in those meetings, she reflected. Still, it was never too late to learn.

She gave a weary sigh, rubbed her face roughly and settled herself cross legged on the floor, scraping together the rest of the sheets into a loose pile in front of her.

Gods, it had been a funny old day, she thought, and she hadn’t even had any breakfast yet.

Frowning with concentration she settled down to try her best at the task before her. It was the least she owed Savina, she decided.

Kyra raced out of the office and looked about the hallway. There was no sign of Savina. She went to the door and bumped into a guard who was passing on patrol.

“Has Savina passed this way, do you know?” she frowned, looking along the path.

“No, Archon,” he made a point of gazing about him with the air of a man determined to be seen performing due diligence. “I haven’t seen her at all today, Archon, I’m afraid.”

“Very well, thank you,” Kyra sighed, turning to go back inside.”Should you see her, please let her know that I am looking for her.”

Back inside she stopped and considered more calmly. Could she have gone to collect her cloak before leaving, she wondered? She kept her cloak in the store cupboard in the kitchen. Kyra headed that way.

Sure enough, Savina was there, fastening her cloak about her shoulders. Kyra saw with dismay that she was crying. It had been some time since she had last seen Savina weep and it made her heart ache to be the cause of it now.

“Oh, Savina!” she sighed sadly. “I’m so sorry…”

“No, Archon, I’m sorry,” she interrupted. "I should never have blundered in like that, unannounced. It was unforgivable. I was so preoccupied with what I wanted to tell you, that I quite forgot myself. I wanted to assure you that your wife genuinely thought that I was you. She used your name. Said words..” she stopped, blushing. “Words that she would only use with you, Archon.”

“I know, Savina,” Kyra stepped towards her. “And I know that she’s sorry. And we’re both sorry that you had to see... that... just now,” she finished, awkwardly.

“I swear Archon,” Savina’s voice shook and Kyra watched in dismay as her eyes filled with tears. “I swear that your secret is safe with me, I will take it to my grave and never breathe a word. But I completely understand if you feel unable to keep me in your employ any longer,” her gaze fell to the floor. “I only ask that you please give me a suitable recommendation…”

“Savina! Gods, no,” Kyra reached out and took hold of her shaking hands. “No, how would I ever run things without you, sweet Savina? Unless…” she asked, tentatively. “Unless you feel that you
“No, Archon,” Savina shook her head. “I have never in my life been as happy as I am here.”

“Good, thank the gods. Then let’s stop that kind of talk,” Kyra gave a sigh of relief. “I’m so sorry about what happened today. About all of it. I know that Kassandra wants to apologise, if you’ll allow her?”

“There is really no need for that,” Savina sniffed and reached into the folds of her chiton to find a handkerchief. “It was a complete misunderstanding. I have had far worse done on purpose with no thought given to apology,” she reminded Kyra.

“I know that,” Kyra reached out and cradled Savina’s cheek in a gentle hand. “But I didn’t bring you here so that your life could be “not so bad as it was”. I wanted better for you, my friend.”

“And you have given it to me,” Savina assured her. “Both you and your wife, Archon, and I am so sorry that I have stumbled onto your secret. I had no idea. No one would have the slightest suspicion I’m sure,” she looked down, blushing.

“Savina,” Kyra sighed. “Will you sit and speak with me as your friend, as Kyra? Please? There is something that I need to explain to you.”

She pulled out a chair and looked hopefully over to her. Savina nodded, took a seat and watched as Kyra began to examine the remnants of the dishes from the previous night.

The vast majority of the leftovers had been taken to the orphanage first thing and just a couple of platters of sweet and savoury pastries, some cheese and a little fruit remained. Things that the servants had clearly imagined the household might eat during the day.

Kyra examined the two jugs of wine that stood on the workbench. Whoever had tidied had obviously made the practical decision to combine whatever leftovers remained into the two vessels. It was good enough, she thought, taking a jug and two cups over to the table and setting a plate of pastries beside it.

She filled two cups and offered one to Savina. She initially demurred but Kyra insisted.

“I think you may change your mind when you hear my story,” she sat down and sighed.

“Arch.. Kyra,” Savina turned the cup slowly between her hands. “You don’t owe me any sort of explanation I assure you. I have heard of such cases before now. But I never once suspected though, that your wife...and truly, it is of no concern to me, much less any of my business, but...may I ask you something?” she glanced up and waited for Kyra’s nod of confirmation.

She sipped her wine, took a moment to compose herself.

“I helped nurse Kassandra, after...after the lion attack,” she ventured awkwardly, they rarely spoke of those days. “I saw her then. Saw her...body. It was not...as it is now. I know that I asked you this question then. And I know you answered me. It’s not that I think you were being untruthful, I swear. But perhaps you didn’t know yourself at the time? It’s...Is...is your wife, is Kassandra...?” she swallowed hard, clearly working up the nerve to ask her question. “Is Kassandra...truly a goddess?” she managed at last.

Whatever Kyra had been expecting, it hadn’t been that. She tried to drag her eyebrows back down.

“Is she..what? No! No, no, no. It’s nothing like that, I assure you. In fact none of it is anything like
you imagine,” she looked up at Savina’s increasingly confused expression.

“We haven’t been hiding anything Savina,” she sighed. “At least not until Kassandra returned from her trip,” she refilled their cups.

“I’m not sure that I understand,” Savina was beginning to realise why Kyra had encouraged her to have a drink.

“It’s going to sound unlikely,” Kyra paused, considering where to begin. ”But at least you’ve seen the evidence I suppose, perhaps that will make it easier to believe. Very well. Do you remember the day some weeks back when Phoibe fell into that underground chamber?”

Kassandra looked intently at the final sheet in her hand. It was something about grain. She read on. It seemed that the major grain producers were required to set aside an annually negotiated portion of their harvest to be supplied at a preferential rate to the widows and orphans of the Silver Islands. Such a thing had never occurred to Kassandra she thought, guiltily.

Now, where was the pile with all the grain related documents? There! On her left. She added the last sheet to the stack and sat upright to survey the fruits of her hard work. She had a newfound respect for Savina, she thought, stretching out her cramped shoulders, even for fussy Aegeus if it came to it.

There was no way her rather rough classifications were going to be as helpful as Savina’s she realised. But she had tried her level best, and had even learned a few things about the day to day running of the islands in the process. To her surprise it had actually turned out to be more interesting than she’d anticipated.

“Well, it’s definitely better than it was before anyway,” she looked at the stacks, quietly proud of herself.

“Oh...shit!”, she exclaimed miserably as the door opened and knocked over two piles of papyri that she had foolishly left within its arc.

She watched despondently as the sheets drifted across the floor.

“Oh!...Kassandra...I’m so sorry, I didn’t see them there,” it was Kyra, looking much calmer than she had when she’d stormed out. “Oh but look at how well you’ve got it all organised.”

“Well I’m no Savina,” Kassandra got to her feet, ready to go gather up the scattered sheets and spotted the woman of the hour stepping around Kyra and eyeing the piles of documents.

“Oh! Savina,” Kassandra stopped in her tracks, feeling a hot blush rising. “I am so very sorry about...everything. I swear Savina, I…”

To her astonishment Savina stepped carefully over a pile of papyri, dock tax records if Kassandra remembered correctly, and placed her fingers against Kassandra’s lips to shush her. She couldn’t remember another moment of such intimacy between them and was a little thunderstruck.

“There is no need to apologise,” Savina said, quietly.

She’d clearly been crying Kassandra realised sadly, but she didn’t seem upset now. Her pretty green eyes glistened a little with unshed tears, but she was smiling fondly at Kassandra. Her astonishment doubled when Savina leaned up and pressed a soft kiss to the angle of her jaw.
What in Hades had gone on while Kassandra had been sorting these damn documents, she wondered? She shot a puzzled, questioning glance at Kyra, who stood in the doorway, a soft half smile on her face.

“Thank you so much for your hard work here,” Savina was gathering up the spilled sheets, piling them carefully, arranging the other stacks into one neat pile, scooping them all expertly into her arms. “I’m very grateful,” she smiled over her shoulder at Kassandra, then made her way to the door. “If you’ll permit me Archon, I’ll put these in store and then leave for home?”

“Of course,” Kyra touched her arm as she passed. “Thank you Savina, for everything.”

“No at all Archon,” Savina stopped at the door, turned to look at them both. “I wonder, Misthios?” she asked quietly, “if it would be all right if I were to ask Phoibe to stay with us for the evening meal, Kittos is so fond of her and they don’t get to spend time together very often?”

“I...yes...of course...any time, any time you wish to have Phoibe, you need only ask her,” Kassandra was struggling to make sense of any of this.

“Till tomorrow then,” Savina turned her glance on Kassandra and smiled cautiously. “If I may, Misthios? I have already said as much to your wife, but if there is anything...anything at all that I can do to be of assistance? You have only to ask.” she nodded slightly as she left, closing the door behind her leaving Kassandra staring dumbstruck at Kyra.

“I didn’t understand any of that,” she shook her head.

Kyra walked over to her, smiling fondly.

“Well first of all. Lower your eyebrows,” she laughed. “When she said assistance, she meant rumour control, my love. It could be very helpful. People trust Savina and just as importantly, they like her. Far more than they like me.”

Kassandra’s baffled expression hadn’t eased very much, she noticed with a smile.

“I explained everything to her. The sphinx, the pool, the...magical addition,” she glanced down playfully. “The...the baby,” she ran a finger down Kassandra’s throat coming to rest on her chest, between her breasts. “And fortunately for us she thought it was the most romantic thing she had ever heard. You’re her new hero, just like in the epic tales. And that was before you did her filing.”

“I don’t recall there being much accidental ass slapping in the epic poems,” Kassandra smiled, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly.

“I think they tend to leave those parts out of the tales,” Kyra laughed. “But I bet more of it went on than they tell. And you do have the arduous quest part under your belt,” she took Kassandra’s hand and led her to the door.

“Where are we going?” she arched an eyebrow as Kyra pulled her towards the stairs.

“Bed?” Kyra looked over her shoulder. “Unless you object?”
Chapter Notes

There's a very little sex at the end of the chapter, you can skip it if you like, you won't miss anything.
And Kyra, seriously, like you're ever going to be able to wear that dress again!

The villa was totally silent now as Kyra led Kassandra upstairs and into the bedroom, closing the door after them.

“You must be exhausted?” Kassandra watched as Kyra went over to her dressing table and began to remove her jewelry.

She looked back over her shoulder and smiled at Kassandra.

“A little,” she conceded. “I will be soon. The exhilaration is still carrying me, just,” she got to her feet and made her way over to the bed, tracing the straps of her chiton with the tips of her fingers.

Kyra made to unfasten one of the clasps but stopped and looked over, one eyebrow raised, a teasing glint in her eye.

“Would you like to take this off me?” she tilted her head, narrowed her eyes a little. ”Preferably a little more carefully this time, it was expensive and I may want to wear it again. Hopefully under much more agreeable circumstances.”

Kassandra looked abashed as she made her way over, and Kyra was a little sorry she’d teased her.

“It’s a gorgeous dress,” Kassandra breathed, stopping in front of her, reaching out with gentle fingers, tracing along the thin straps. “You look gorgeous in it,” she said softly.

“And out of it?” Kyra smiled, slipping one strap off her shoulder as encouragement.

Kassandra frowned a little as her eyes settled on the reddening bruise at the crook of Kyra’s neck.

“Kyra,” she sighed, bowing her head. “I could have hurt you and I..” she reached out gentle fingers to brush against Kyra’s shoulder.

“But you didn’t, you’ve nothing to feel sorry for,” Kyra shook her head, slipped the other strap from her shoulder and then reached for Kassandra’s hands, guiding them to ease the dress down her body.

Kassandra sank to her knees as she followed it. She caught sight of the darkening bite on Kyra’s breast and frowned a little.

“I did though,” she looked up.”I could have…”

“Kassandra, my love,” Kyra reached down and cradled her face, stroked her thumbs along the line of Kassandra’s cheekbones. “You didn’t hurt me any more than I wanted you to. You were glorious,” she bent and kissed her tenderly.
“I don’t know that there’s much glory in it,” Kassandra brushed the tips of her calloused fingers over Kyra’s breast, resting over the bite mark. “It could have been dangerous,” she said quietly.

“It felt dangerous,” Kyra laughed softly. “That’s why it was so exciting. I swear Kassandra, living with you is like having a magnificent leopard roaming the villa, but you keep yourself leashed all the time, my love. You gentle yourself so much, with me...with all of us. Sometimes. Just sometimes, I ache to see you break free. You are glorious, unleashed.”

She placed one hand on Kassandra’s shoulder to balance herself as she stepped out of her dress. “Never apologise for it. For who you are.”

She watched in quiet amusement as Kassandra picked up the dress, and getting to her feet, shook it out, before placing it carefully over the back of the chair.

“You’re always so careful with clothing,” she smiled. “Well, most of the time,” she laughed a little at Kassandra’s raised eyebrows. “That was a special occasion just before, obviously.”

“I didn’t have much in the way of spare clothes growing up,” Kassandra stood, gazing reverently at Kyra.

“Much like you, I imagine?” she smiled ruefully as she walked over, took her gently in her arms. “I grew like a weed though” she laughed. “It was always a struggle keeping me clothed, so I had to try to look after what I had, even if I didn’t always make a good job of it.”

“Of course,” Kyra nodded, thoughtfully. She sometimes forgot that Kassandra’s upbringing had, in part at least, been as rough and ready as her own.

“And I bet you thought that I was going to say it makes it easy to grab your clothes if you have to leave a woman’s room in a hurry?” Kassandra gave a wry grin, and tilted her head to meet Kyra’s gaze, smiling more comfortably when she heard her laugh.

“I imagine that’s been a useful bonus at times?” Kyra shook her head, relieved to see Kassandra’s mood lifting a little.

“It didn’t hurt,” she grinned. “I did once lose a brand new perizoma in my youth,” Kassandra laughed. “Never did get that back.”

“No, you wouldn’t have got it back from me, either,” Kyra smiled archly. “I notice though, that you’re overdressed still,” she gave the front of Kassandra’s tunic a little tug. “I’ve been trying to get this off you for a while now.”

She took a step back and watched hungrily as Kassandra hauled the tunic over her head and laughed quietly as, sure enough, she folded it neatly and placed it on the armour rack.

“Don’t stop there,” she smiled, sitting down on the bed to watch Kassandra remove her underwear. She stood, warmed by the afternoon sun, fussily rolling the cloth.

“You are so beautiful Kassandra,” Kyra leaned back on her hands, ran her eyes over the whole of her, the broad shoulders and powerful arms, the hardness of her muscle and the softness of her breasts, the curve of her ass and the cut of her hips.

As she strode over towards the bed Kyra watched the twitching sway of that strange, miraculous cock, the sun suddenly caught the opalescent skin on her belly and thighs and it glowed warmly, shining like polished shell.
“What are we doing, Kassandra?” she breathed, suddenly crashingly tired and overwhelmed by the sheer, bloody weirdness of it all.

A sphinx? Some magical transforming pool? If it weren’t for the feather that she’d held in her own hands, and the gradually swelling evidence before her eyes right now, she wouldn’t believe any of it. Would this? Could this? Could it actually result in a baby? And if it did? Would it even be a regular human baby?

She felt her heart begin to race, a chill run down through her chest to her belly, felt her breathing quicken. Her expression must have changed, perhaps her face looked as pale as it felt, because Kassandra took two large strides to reach her, dropped to her knees in front of her, took Kyra’s hands in hers.

“Hey, hey,” she reached up, stroked Kyra’s hair gently. “What is, my love? What do you mean, what are we doing?” she asked softly, tilting her head to meet Kyra’s panicked eyes.

“We don’t have to do anything, you’re exhausted, we can just go to bed, sleep,” she got up and sat on the bed next to Kyra, pulled her into a firm, comforting embrace, kissed her hair softly. “You’ve worked so hard, been stressed about this whole visit, I didn’t truly realise. But you’ve done it, you did it all.”

“No Kassandra,” Kyra rested her head against the comforting warmth of her chest, tried to relax into her strong, reassuring hold. She took a deep breath, steeled herself to ask the question that was tightening her throat.

“Should we even be trying to have a baby?” she asked quietly.

She felt Kassandra’s hold stiffen, her body become tense. There was a long, awkward silence before she answered.

“Kyra,” her voice was quiet and shaky. “Gods. It’s a bit late to be asking that question.”

“I know, I know,” Kyra kept her head down, not daring to meet her eyes. “I’ve no right to even think it. Not after everything you went through to…”

“It’s not even that, Kyra,” Kassandra swallowed, tried to steady her voice. “That’s not the issue,” she took a breath. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve come inside you since I got back?” she felt Kyra’s body tense. “Because neither do I. But it’s a lot!”

They sat quietly for a while, Kassandra took a deep, slow breath, resumed stroking Kyra’s hair gently.

“Why are you thinking this now?” she asked softly, waited patiently for the answer.

“Gods, there’s so much we should have talked about before now…” Kyra swallowed. “I want to remain as Archon.”

There was no response from Kassandra so she steeled herself and looked up to meet her eyes. She looked perplexed. Not angry or hurt, just puzzled.

“No. Actually I don’t think there’s any sort of rule, because it never occurred to anyone that it might
happen. So that’s lucky, actually,” Kyra sat up a little, looked anxiously at Kassandra.

“I mean when I’ve had the baby. I want to remain Archon. I’ve got so many plans Kassandra. I got here almost by accident really. People were drunk with relief that...that Podarkes was dead. Of the heroes that had freed them, one was,” she looked down, fully aware of the awkwardness of what she was about to say. They’d steered well clear of this topic after the initial rocky reunion.

“One was dead, and as far as anyone knew, the other had fled. I was the only one left. I was swept into the leader house on a wave of euphoria. They practically carried me there on their shoulders. But you can’t coast on euphoria for very long.”

Kassandra moved her arm to circle her shoulders, eased her close, listened quietly.

“At first I could do no wrong, just by virtue of not being Podarkes,” Kyra continued, gaze far away as she cast her mind back to the early days of her governance. “I didn’t have rotting corpses swinging from the walls of the villa for a start. But people need things, they want things. Roads, schools, temples, secure homes, cheap bread, safe streets. But they don’t really want to pay for them,” she rested her head against the solid warmth of Kassandra’s shoulder.

“After the initial good will dies down, then it’s hard work, and...it’s so much harder as a woman, Kass,” she sighed.”We lost a trade ship on the way back from Korinth. That was because Poseidon was angry at the Silver Islands for having a woman as Archon. The grain blight? Demeter’s vengeance for having a woman Archon. That bout of the sleeping disease that took so much livestock? The gods’ wrath on us because I was...bedding another woman, upsetting the natural order of things.”

“But they have accepted you now.” Kassandra said softly. “The islands are prospering. When the profits from this obsidian deal start to roll in...they’ll love you,” she tried to sound reassuring.

“They’ll love me so long as things go well,” Kyra sighed. “But I don’t need to be loved Kassandra, not by the islanders anyway. I want to make the islands a better place, for everyone to live, not just the rich and privileged, and I have plans to do it. The schoolroom, the docks. It’s just the beginning, I want to build for the future. I want the Silver Islands to be a better place for the next generation. I want Phoibe to grow up to see this become the sort of place where she might grow up to be Archon.”

Kassandra had rather suspected this last piece of information, though she wasn’t sure Phoibe had realised it yet.

“I don’t understand why this has anything to do with our baby though?” she asked, still puzzled.

“Because I can’t abandon things half done,” Kyra sighed. “And I’m...oh gods, I’m going to be a terrible mother Kassandra,” she gazed up with guilt written on her face.

“What? No? Why would you think that?” Kassandra frowned. “ I know it will be hard work...nursing a baby and working at the same time but...”

“But I can’t do it all Kass. I can’t be Archon and be nursing, and changing and getting up during the nights and...and be there for it,” Kyra began. “We’ll have nursemaids Kassandra, but...I should be there really, shouldn’t I? I never had...I know what it’s like to not have your mother there Kass. I’ve been so selfish. I didn’t think it through. How can I hand my baby off to a nursemaid when I know what it’s like to ache for your mater. To want her and have her not be there? What was I thinking?”

“Wait. Hang on, what am I doing while all this is going on?” Kassandra drew back her head a little
to look at Kyra.

“What?” Kyra looked up, confused.

“Me?” Kassandra shrugged. “While you’re running the islands, and the maids are raising our baby? What am I supposed to be doing?”

“I don’t…” Kyra frowned. “I supposed...what you normally…”

“I can’t nurse her or him, obviously, but...perhaps you’ll be able to do that? You could do that in your office, as you work, no?” Kassandra ventured hopefully. “But if you can’t then we can find a wet-nurse, it won’t be the end of the world. It certainly won’t be anything like what you had to deal with, love. What either of us experienced. You aren’t going to leave our baby to be raised by strangers, to scrape for a living on the streets. It will have two parents after all. I can pace the floor at night singing to a crying baby just as well as anyone else I think. I have a rather nice singing voice, actually.”

Kyra suddenly felt her eyes swimming a little. She mustered a shaky smile.

“The mighty Kassandra of Sparta is going to change nappies?” she asked, tremulously.

“The mighty Kassandra of Sparta has changed a damn sight more nappies than you, oh Archon of the Silver Islands!” Kassandra laughed. “Though Alexi wouldn’t thank me for telling you. It’s been a long time though so I’ll have to practise. But don’t worry, I’ll teach you if you like, you’ll pick it up quickly enough I’m sure,” she teased.

“Are you crying?” she tilted Kyra’s head.

“I just… I didn’t think that…” Kyra shook her head, smiled tearfully. “You didn’t have a...well I know you didn’t have the best examples to draw on growing up.”

“Oh gods!” Kassandra raised her eyebrows, startled. “You really do think I’m an idiot, don’t you?. You didn’t think I’d want to care for my child? My own daughter or son? That I’d leave it all to servants?”

Kyra was suddenly ashamed of being the cause of Kassandra’s wounded expression, but before she could apologise Kassandra continued.

“Look, I’ve obviously not been clear enough Kyra,” she shook her head. “I said I wanted to teach them to run and climb and hunt, but I want the rest of it too, Kyra. All the things I didn’t get to experience. I want our baby to have a better, a more loving childhood than either of us had. I want to get up in the night with them and change them and feed them. I want to tell them stories and sing them songs and teach them to walk and bandage their knees. And I want to do all the things I didn’t get to do with Phoibe or that I made a mess of with Phoibe because I was young and an idiot.”

“Oh gods Kass,” Kyra gave a huge shaky sigh. “I’m so sorry. There is an idiot in this bed, but it’s not you.”

“For once?” Kassandra smiled, reassuringly. “You thought the mighty Eagle Bearer would be afraid of a dirty nappy?” she laughed.

“Not that exactly, no. I think I thought you would be more... Spartan about it,” Kyra admitted hesitantly. “I suppose I thought you would...you’d love it of course, but... You’ve struggled to express love sometimes I know. Not because you don’t love, gods know, you...I think you love more than anyone people I’ve met and no one has any right to expect that of you given the way you grew
up...I suppose I thought you would carry on very much as you are now, that you’d hunt and carry on your misthios duties and in the evenings I imagined you’d spend time with us…”

Kassandra snorted a little, shook her head.

“Next you’ll be telling me you expected me to toss it off a cliff if I didn’t like the look of it,” she teased a little grimly, giving a reassuring smile when she saw Kyra’s shamefaced expression. “That sort of thing will colour your view of a culture, Kyra.”

“Praxos and Phoibe can hunt perfectly well, and Phoibe is getting better every time she goes out. They can very easily share that workload with me,” she smiled. “While I help look after our baby, and we sit and watch their remarkable mater running the islands like the political warrior she is,” she bent and kissed her softly.

“They are going to be so proud of you, because they are going to grow up in a place that you have made better. And when I take them out we will walk around the island and they will ride on my shoulders and I’ll show them the grain silos that their mater ensures are kept full. And I’ll tell them all about the docks that their mater keeps maintained, full of the ships that she has had built. Then we’ll say hello to the guards that their mater makes sure are armed and fed and paid. I may even tell them about the fund she set up to help their families if they’re injured,” she gave her an arch side glance.

Kyra turned a little in her arms, looked up at her, a little surprised.

“You read those documents!” she grinned.

“A few, maybe,” Kassandra shrugged.

“You sly dog!” Kyra laughed.

Kassandra bent her head to Kyra’s, rested their foreheads together, put comforting arms about her.

“That’s better,” she breathed. “Do you feel okay now?”

Kyra nodded, a little embarrassed.

“I’m sorry Kassandra,” she began but was stopped with a kiss.

“You’re forgiven,” Kassandra wiped the tears from her lashes with the back of her finger. “You’ve worked too hard, missed too much sleep, you were fired up from last night and you’ve not eaten for too long.”

“When did you get so smart?” Kyra teased weakly, as Kassandra got to her feet and held out a hand towards her. “And why didn’t I notice earlier?”

“Probably because I spent so much time acting the goat,” Kassandra replied dryly, helping her up and pulling back the covers.

“Get into bed now. I’ll go find us something to eat,” she pulled the sheets up over Kyra’s legs, bent and kissed her fondly.

“I love you so much, Kyra. There’s more than one way to be a good mother I think. And you are going to be a remarkable mater...and so am I,” she grinned. ”And, don’t forget it will have an equally remarkable big sister.”

She had her hand on the door handle when Kyra cleared her throat. She stopped and looked back.
“Clothes?” Kyra arched an eyebrow.

“But everyone’s gone…” Kassandra thought back to the events of the morning.

“Right, good point,” she went in search of a more modest tunic than the one she’d removed. As she pulled it over her head something occurred to her. She turned to look at Kyra, she was lying back against the pillows already looking very sleepy.

“Kyra?” she took a breath. “There was something I tried to tell you yesterday, but...well you were busy...it was the wrong time…”

Kyra sat up a little, looking anxious.

“It’s...well,” Kassandra decided to grasp the nettle. “Phoibe knows,” she stated. ”About this,” she nodded down at her crotch.

Kyra considered this for a moment.

“Good,” she nodded. “We were foolish. And not kind. We should have told her sooner. We should have told her before you set off. Did you tell her?” she looked up, saw Kassandra’s sheepish expression and smiled. “Or did she catch you peeing against a tree?” she watched Kassandra’s face.

“Gods Kassandra,” she laughed. “It’s a wonder half the island hasn’t caught you. You’ve certainly embraced that aspect of your new anatomy wholeheartedly.”

“It’s very convenient,” Kassandra defended. “Honestly! You’d do it yourself.”

Kyra made a show of consideration. “You know, I don’t think I would,” she decided.

“Oh you say you wouldn’t,” Kassandra opened the door, looked back over her shoulder. “But you totally would.”

By the time Kassandra returned upstairs with a tray of food and a couple of jugs containing water and wine, Kyra had curled up with the sheets held up to her chin and was fast asleep.

Kassandra put the tray down and stood gazing fondly at Kyra for a moment. Sleeping now, free of her tensions and worries she looked young, she thought, bending and gently lifting a stray lock of hair off her forehead.

She pulled off her tunic, hung it over the back of the chair and climbed into bed as carefully as she could, not wanting to disturb her. Kyra murmured a little in her sleep, but didn’t stir. She didn’t move at all until Kassandra shifted to lie right behind her and took her in her arms, pulled her in close and pressed her face into her hair.

At that point Kyra stirred a little, half opened her eyes, mumbled Kassandra’s name and wriggled back into her warm embrace before drifting right back to sleep. Kassandra huffed in the warm, comforting scent of her, lay listening to her deep, steady breathing and soon was asleep herself.

When she woke, the room was darkening, the sun had almost set. Kyra slept on in her arms. Kassandra brushed the hair back from the nape of her neck and breathed her in, the rich, warm scent of coconut oil, the familiar musk of her sweat, the faint smell of sex and something else that she couldn’t quite place.

She pressed a soft kiss to the nape of her neck, feeling the warm rush of blood to her crotch as she began to stiffen against the smooth swell of Kyra’s ass. Kassandra felt no urgency though, no desire
to waken her even as she felt herself becoming fully erect.

It was comforting somehow to feel the warm, solid body of her wife in her arms, the strong muscles of her shoulders, the yielding weight of her breasts against Kassandra’s arm, the lean, taut lines of her hips and thigh beneath her hand.

The fury she had felt just hours before seemed like a lifetime away now. She could recall everything she had felt and done, but the catalyst for it all seemed ridiculous now. That stupid man, his cheap, pathetic machinations. Kassandra felt as calm and secure right now as she ever had, swathed in the comfort of her love for Kyra, filled only with the desire to protect her.

Gradually she became aware of Kyra moving against her a little. Rocking her hips back, almost imperceptibly. She’d been so lost in her thoughts that she’d missed the change in her breathing as she began to emerge from sleep. Kyra was moving with more purpose now, as she felt Kassandra's hand caressing her thigh, sensed her smiling into the crook of her neck.

“Hello my love,” Kassandra kissed the shell of her ear, ran her fingers up the taut cords of Kyra’s hips, feeling her twitch a little beneath her touch. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a baby,” Kyra breathed, pressing her ass slowly, insistently, against Kassandra’s crotch giving a little chuckle as she realised how hard she was.

“You seem to have woken with something on your mind,” she placed her hand over Kassandra’s guided it up to her breast, urged her to cup it in her strong, weapon calloused palm.

“There’s no hurry, my love,” Kassandra rocked against her ass, slow, steady, strangely relaxed.

Kyra kept her hand over Kassandra’s urged it to caress, to palm and knead her breast with increasing pressure, gradually rocking her hips more insistently back against her, raising her upper leg enough to allow Kassandra to slip between her legs, to ease back and forward, slowly, steadily as though they had all the time in the world.

They lay there quietly, Kassandra peppering Kyra’s shoulders and neck with light, butterfly kisses, teasing her nipple increasingly sharply, stroking back and forth against the wet heat of her sex, brushing against her twitching clit with every leisurely thrust.

Kassandra felt lost in the sensations of Kyra’s body, the softness of her hair against her face, the scent of her skin, the hard, pebbled nipple between her fingers, the slippery heat of Kyra’s cunt against her cock. She almost felt like she could stay here forever, as calm and serene as she had been vigorous and aggressive hours earlier.

Kyra clearly had other plans though. Eventually she began to tilt her hips back with a little more urgency. Kassandra heard the soft whimpering sounds of her growing need, heard her breathy pleading.

“What is it, my love?” Kassandra traced the whorls of Kyra’s ear with the tip of her tongue. “How would you like me?”

“Please, Kass,” Kyra whispered as though she was afraid that raising her voice would shatter the mood. “I want to feel you inside me?”

Kassandra had no desire to make her beg now, wanted only her pleasure. She lowered her hand and took a gentle grip of Kyra’s hip, encouraging her to shift a little, to roll her hips towards the bed so that she could mount her from behind without resting her full weight on her.
“Please Kass?” Kyra breathed again, as if the begging was something she needed for herself.

She parted her thighs and sighed with pleasure as Kassandra slid easily into her slippery heat and began to move, still gentle and steady, easing out almost all the way at each stroke before slowly pushing back into her.

Kassandra had no idea how long they lay locked together, moving in gentle unison before Kyra’s whimpering sighs became louder and more urgent. She felt her slip her hand down to work at her clit, till her hips lost rhythm and she came shuddering and pulsing around Kassandra, drawing from her an orgasm that startled her with its unexpected intensity.

She stayed there, inside Kyra, resting her head against the nape of her neck, waiting for her breathing to steady, surrounded by the warm scent of their love, until Kyra calmed, rolled back into Kassandra’s embrace, taking hold of her arms, hugging them more tightly around herself.

They were on the verge of falling asleep again when the mood was broken by the sound of excited barking from downstairs followed by Phoibe’s voice urging quiet.

“They’re back!” Kyra chuckled softly.

“Hmm,” Kassandra raised her head a little and cocked an ear to the door.

“Don’t you dare! Orion, I swear, don’t you dare take that upstairs,” the sound of Phoibe racing down the hallway after Orion’s skittering claws approached. “Downstairs, take it downstairs. Right now. NOT in my room! I swear to Hades Orion I will tell your mother! Shit!”
“He’s taken it in her room,” Kassandra chuckled.

“Don’t ask her what it is, please,” Kyra laughed. “I don’t want to know.”

“I do and I don’t” Kassandra lay her head back.

“Is there anyone here?” they heard Phoibe calling after a minute or two. “Hello?”

“In here sweetheart,” Kyra called, pulling up the sheet a little.

Kassandra thought she made out Phoibe muttering “I might have known.”

The door opened and a cautious head peeped around.

“Oh gods, please tell me you’re not…” Phoibe creased her eyebrows, as she took in their embrace.

“Phoibe!” Kassandra rolled onto her back. “Absolutely not. What kind of animals do you take us for?”

Phoibe considered for a moment, but Kyra interrupted before she could reply.

“Did you have a good time with Kittos?” she sat up, tucking the sheet under her arms. “Come, sit with us, tell us about it.”

“Yeah,” Phoibe ambled in, perched on the edge of the bed. “It was great actually. The yard has just finished that boat, so we got to take it out. Sooo fast!” she grinned happily. “And he finished the model,” she bounced excitedly. “It’s too big for me to carry myself so he’s going to bring it round. It’s incredible. Wait till Barnabas sees it.”

“Come up here,” Kyra patted the bed next to her. “Shift over Kassandra, make a bit of space,” she nudged her with her shoulder.

Kassandra shuffled up to make way as Phoibe scrabbled up and turned to sit between them.

“You’ve caught the sun a little on your nose there,” Kyra touched the pink spot. “Or perhaps it was the wind. Kittos is a very nice fellow, you must let me know when he brings it round so that I can thank him.”

“Oh and he made this chicken thing with lemon and olives, gods, it was so good,” Phoibe flopped back and patted her belly. “I’d have been back sooner, but I was so full.”

It occurred to Kassandra that it was a very good job indeed that she hadn’t returned home more quickly. But Phoibe was sitting frowning thoughtfully now, she seemed to be gearing up to ask something.

“Did...did the deal work out okay?” she looked towards Kyra. “Cos Savina said it did...but she seemed a little bit...I don’t know how to say really...a bit odd somehow.”

“She did?” Kyra swallowed, glanced over Phoibe’s head at Kassandra. “Odd, how? Upset?”

“No, not upset exactly,” Phoibe considered. “More like, ow, move your elbow a bit Kassandra. No, more like she was thinking about something important, like she had something on her mind. That’s
why I wondered if maybe...well she said you made the deal, but I wondered if maybe it wasn’t the deal you wanted.”

“It was better than I expected,” Kyra put an arm around Phoibe’s shoulders, pulled her into a half hug, kissed the top of her head. “It all went really well.”

Great” Phoibe grinned. “New schoolroom for Delos?”

“New schoolroom for Delos,” Kyra nodded.

“New hoist for the dock?” Phoibe raised her eyebrows delightedly.

“New hoists for both docks,” Kyra grinned.

“Scrape the birdshit off Artemis!” Phoibe beamed.

“Scrape the...clean the statue of Artemis,” Kyra amended.

“That’s great,” Phoibe leaned against Kyra. “I wonder what was bothering Savina then?” she pondered.

“Well...Phoibe,” Kassandra took a deep breath.

“Oh gods,” Phoibe sighed. “What have you done?!”

“Well, firstly, Kyra knows,” Kassandra glanced over.

“Well Kyra knows a lot of things,” Phoibe frowned puzzled. “You’ll have to narrow it down.”

“ She knows that you know about…” Kassandra stumbled to a halt. “About,” she nodded towards her crotch.

Phoibe was momentarily perplexed then raised her eyebrows and tilted her head back.

“Oh right!” she nodded. “ She knows that I know about your magic dick?”

“Language Phoibe,” Kassandra reminded her.

“Oh please, that’s barely language at all,” Phoibe sighed. “About your magic embellishment?” she grinned. “That better?”

“I’m not sure, actually,” Kassandra considered.

“She didn’t tell me,” Phoibe glanced at Kyra, clearly unsure if she was going to be pleased about this development or not.

“No, I’m well aware that she was cocking her leg against a tree,” Kyra smiled wryly.

“Well...kind of, yeah,” Phoibe conceded. “But what’s this got to do with Savina being...oh gods Kassandra! Not again? Surely? I mean I totally understand that it must be exciting being able to do it, but you’re worse than Orion, I swear.”

“Hey, hey,” Kassandra protested. “She did not catch me peeing on something!”

It occurred to her even as she was saying it that it might have been a less traumatic method of discovery for everyone.
“Then, what…” Phoibe stopped, considered where she was sitting and what she’d thought was going on when she first opened the door. “Oh gods, no, don’t tell me she caught you two…” she dried up, substituted a hand gesture.

“Phoibe!” Kassandra gasped.

“It’s not language,” Phoibe threw up her hands.

“Where did you pick that up anyway?” Kassandra frowned. “You’re spending too much time round the docks, clearly.”


“We weren’t exactly…” Kassandra shrugged. “It wasn’t as…”

“Oh, don’t Kassandra,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “Someone here has a massive love bite on their neck that says different,” she glanced sideways at Kyra.

“Good luck hiding that at work tomorrow by the way. Aegeus will, actually, have puppies if he sees that, you do know that, right? She totally caught you two fu...ooling around,” she corrected just in time, leaving Kassandra with her mouth open and nothing to say.

“And obviously fooling around with your...embellishment out,” she nodded at Kassandra’s crotch. “No wonder she looked like she’d seen a two headed snake,” she sighed.

“Hey!” Kassandra frowned, clearly a little offended. “It’s not that bad.”

“No, no,” Phoibe waved her hands. “I didn’t get a good look, obviously, but it seemed perfectly fine if you like that kind of thing. But you did show it to entirely the wrong person you know?”

“I didn’t intend to show it to anyone actually Phoibe,” Kassandra defended.

“No, you never do but you’re making a bit of a habit of it all the same,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “But Savina isn’t going to tell anyone. You should have shown it to that woman at the bakery, all the Silver Islands would have known about it by this evening.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Kassandra looked puzzled.

“Well,” Phoibe leaned back, looked from Kyra to Kassandra and back again. “I’m guessing from the fact that you two are naked in bed during the day, that you didn’t get in here to have a serious talk?”

“About?” Kyra frowned cautiously.

“About what you’re going to say to people if and when you do get pregnant,” Phoibe sighed.

“I had this out with Kassandra the other day. I’m not really surprised about her, cos she’s definitely not the best one at planning ahead unless she’s clearing a fort or something...and you know, Kassandra,” she turned to look at her. “You could definitely use that skill in non combat situations too. In fact a lot of your skills are adaptable to daily doings. Dion says adaptability is key to survival after all.”

Kyra gave a delighted chuckle.
“She’s not wrong you know,” she glanced over at Kassandra’s slightly wounded expression.

“Well for once Kyra,” Phoibe turned back to her. “You have nothing to be smug about. Because I totally would have expected you to think about it!”

Kyra looked more than a little shamefaced.

“What were you thinking? Cos it doesn’t seem like you were...at all!” Phoibe sighed, shaking her head. “Were you just hoping that folk wouldn’t notice? Cos I guess you could hide it for a while if you take to wearing a peplos folded down...really low? But the baby is going to be a bit of a giveaway, don’t you think?”

“Honestly Phoibe?” Kyra leaned back and rested her hands on her lap, frowning guiltily. “It didn’t really seem likely. Any of it. Not until Kassandra came back with her…"

“Embellishment,” Phoibe said, dryly. “But you’ve been availing yourself of it often enough to have given a bit of consideration to what was going to happen when something caught, surely? Because you know what people are like.”

“I know,” Kyra sighed. “There’ll be talk, and honestly, I’ve been putting it off. There’s been so much else to think about and...it still seems...I don’t even know if it’s going to work? What if…” she tailed off, glancing anxiously at Kassandra who was looking thoughtful and chewing the inside of her lip.

“What if Kass’ arrows have no heads?” Phoibe glanced over, eyebrow raised. “I suppose it’s possible. Or maybe they don’t take with a human woman?” she considered. “Or you have a little lion cub or something?”

“What the fuck, Phoibe?!” Kassandra reared back a little, appalled.


“Why would you even...gods!…” Kassandra looked stunned. “Where did you get that thought from?”

“Why is that so out of the question?” Phoibe spread her hands. “I mean...it’s not a regular...addition. It doesn’t look completely...run of the mill,” she settled. “I saw enough of it to see that. You got it from a magic pool for gods’ sake. You wheedled it out of a sphinx Kassandra. I just don’t know why this is the thing that suddenly shocks you.”

“Could we maybe not speculate about me...birthing something inhuman?” Kyra swallowed, a little unnerved that the same thought had occurred to her just a little earlier.

Phoibe turned and was about to say something but then noticed her expression.

“Of course,” she curled her arm through Kyra’s, leaned into her side. “I’m sorry, I was just running my mouth, I don’t even know why I said that. I take after Kassandra sometimes. Of course it’s going to be a lovely little baby...baby human that is. I mean you’re both humans, it’ll be fine. Why wouldn’t it be?”

There was a rather uncomfortable silence for a couple of minutes before Phoibe took a breath.

“People are going to talk though,” she said seriously. “They love to gossip. And I don’t know if you know this, but they love to gossip about you two.” she glanced up at Kyra’s anxious face, over to Kassandra. “It’s Kassandra’s fault really.”
“Really?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows, looked defensively down at Phoibe who was snuggled comfortably into Kyra’s side, stroking her hand gently. “How exactly is that my fault?”

“Well it is and it isn’t,” Phoibe explained. “People will gossip no matter what and you’re a very attractive topic of speculation. You did come with...a reputation. And you didn’t always work hard to play it down, let’s face it,” she said carefully.

“And of course, people talk about the Archon too. They would anyway, even if you were some middle aged bloke Kyra. You’re the Archon, people talk about the person in charge, they just do. But you’re a woman, so there’s that. You grew up on the streets, there’s that. And you’re sort of married to another woman. And look who it is,” she cocked a thumb back at Kassandra. “You’re a very...sexy couple, I don’t mean in a sex way even...it’s just that you’re like catmint for gossips.”

Kyra sighed and tilted her head back, looked up at the ceiling.

“Would you like a drink?” Phoibe asked quietly. “I see there’s a tray over there. Maybe you should have something to eat?” she felt Kassandra move to get out of bed and grabbed her arm. “Whoa, whoa, whoa, I’ll go get it,” she sat up and made to clamber over Kyra out of bed.

“You stay where you are,” she held out a hand to Kassandra. “I don’t need to see it again, thanks all the same.” she went and half filled a cup with wine, topped it up with water, brought it over to the bed and handed it to Kyra who took a slightly shaky sip.

“So the minute you start to show,” Phoibe climbed onto the bed, sat cross legged at the foot and looked at them both. “People are going to go to town. First they’re going to...well…” she tailed off.

“No, let’s have it Phoibe,” Kyra sat up a little straighter, looking more resolute. “You’re right,we’ve put it off for too long. People are going to think that… I suppose that I’ve been with a man while Kassandra was away.”

“That’ll be rumour number one,” Phoibe raised a finger. “In a kind of playing around behind her back sort of way. Number two, will be that you did it on purpose so you could have a baby, that this was something the two of you decided on. Do either of those appeal? Cos they’d be really easy to help spread. They’d spread themselves to be quite honest…”

“No!” Kassandra chimed in. “No they don’t. Neither of them appeal. At all,” she scowled.

“No, I didn’t think so,” Phoibe leaned back on her hands, chewed her lip thoughtfully.

“What else have you got, Phoibe?” Kyra tilted her head, sipped the wine.

“Well,” Phoibe frowned. “I did mention to Kassandra that...there is...erm...salacious speculation about her.”

“You do surprise me,” Kyra said dryly. “I could do with something to eat, am I allowed out of bed?”

“Go for it,” Phoibe said absently, lost in thought. “I’m guessing you’ve no decorative new additions?”

“No, you’ve seen it all before,” Kyra walked over to the tray and filled a plate with pastries and fruit and brought it back to bed. “Phoibe?” she offered. “Try not to get crumbs in the bed,” she smiled.

“Me?” Phoibe took a meat pastry and a couple of figs, eyed the bruise on Kyra’s breast and raised an eyebrow. “It’s this one you want to warn, you know what she’s like,” she nodded at Kassandra.
“Mmm, yes, maybe lean over the side to eat that, eh?” Kyra warned as Kassandra took a pastry. “No, seriously,” she nodded, watching as she brought it to her mouth.

Kassandra looked a little hard done by, but leaned over to the side, sure enough a cascade of crumbs fell to the floor.

“You were saying,” Kyra began to pace slowly back and forth, breaking off pieces of pastry, nibbling absently. “Salacious how? In a useful way?”

“Depends,” Phoibe mumbled around a mouthful of meat and fig. “Depends on Kassandra really.”

“Hmmm?” Kassandra looked up, mouth full of pie. “How’s it…”

“Don’t speak,” Kyra shook her head warningly. “There’s already more on the floor than in your stomach, we’ll have to get Orion in here in a minute.”

“He’s eating a rabbit head in my room,” Phoibe cocked her head in the general direction of her bedroom.

“He’s doing what now?” Kyra grimaced.

“He’ll have finished it by now I imagine,” Phoibe shrugged dismissively and popped the last of the fig in her mouth. “Anyway, Kassandra?” she looked over. “What about if we tell people the… sort of truth?”

“Sort of truth?” Kassandra swallowed hard and brushed a few stray crumbs from the sheet onto the floor.

Kyra whistled sharply and after a moment there was the sound of frantic scrabbling and Orion came careering in.

He made to rush over to Kyra but she backed off and held out her hand.

“No way, ” she shook her head. “I know what you’ve been eating! Go over there. Go! Clean up after Kassandra.”

Hearing Kassandra’s name he woofed excitedly, ran over to the bed and launched himself at her, landing squarely in her lap.

“Oooo…shit!” Phoibe winced and clapped her hand to her mouth as Kassandra gave a strangled exclamation and doubled over.

“Here, here boy” she leaned over and grabbed Orion’s collar, hauling him off the bed in the direction of the crumbs.

The sound of happy snuffling followed and almost drowned out Kassandra’s low moaning.

“Oh…Kassandra!” Kyra grimaced sympathetically. “Are you?…well no, you probably aren’t.”

She was looking a little green around the gills and even Phoibe couldn’t find the heart to tease her.

“I think she maybe needs a drink?” she looked up at Kyra.

“I think you may be right,” Kyra filled a cup with wine, decided now wasn’t the time for dilution.

“I’m…fine…” Kassandra swallowed loudly, taking the cup in a slightly trembling hand. “Absolutely
fine,” she mumbled, taking a drink.

“You don’t look fine,” Phoibe shook her head. “I’ve never heard you make that noise before actually. But then I suppose that’s never happened before. That’s probably knocked the heads off a few arrows eh?”

“Are you trying to be comforting in some way?” Kassandra asked with evident lack of amusement as she carefully drew up her knees towards her chest and tried to steady her breath. “Because if you are, I wish you wouldn’t.”

“Think about it this way,” Phoibe said reasonably as Kyra topped up Kassandra’s cup and stroked her back soothingly. “The next time you punt some bloke off a wall with a swift kick to the crotch it will be so much more satisfying, no?”

Kassandra took a large swig, and considered this. She had a point.

Orion had finished licking up the crumbs and decided to climb back on the bed. He was a little astonished and rather chastened as all three humans yelled at him and he went to flop on the floor at the bottom of the bed with a disgruntled sigh.

“Is it still in one piece? Or however many pieces it comes in?” Phoibe tilted her head as Kassandra cupped herself cautiously. “Cos it would be a real shame if you went to all that trouble and then the dog did you a mischief before you could….Kyra?” she frowned and turned to look at her. “How long do we have?”

“Till what?” Kyra looked over.

“Till we know if you’re pregnant?” Phoibe was suddenly thoughtful.

“A...few days,” Kyra considered. “If not, then it will be...another month?”

“Right, okay,” Phoibe chewed her thumbnail absently. “We have to get cracking then really. Kassandra?” she looked up. “I suppose you know that some people already think that you’re not all human? I don’t mean half animal,” she interpreted her startled look.

“They think you’re half god. Well not half of you but half of your parentage. That would give us a lot of wiggle room to explain this. There are probably some people who’ve been expecting something like this now I come to think…”

“No!” Kassandra shook her head. “I’m not spreading that tale. No way. No pretending to be part god. It will only end up causing trouble down the line.”

“There you go Kassandra, thinking ahead!” Phoibe raised her eyebrows. “Utilizing your skills outside of combat situations! And all it took was a punch in the marbles,” she winked.

Kassandra gave her a playful nudge with her foot.

“Phoibe’s not wrong,” Kyra was pacing again, arms folded. “It was the first thought that Savina had too.”

“Actually,” Phoibe watched her. “I’m glad Savina knows. I mean I’m sorry she had to see you...doing whatever you were doing but at least I’ll have someone to talk to who knows what actually happened. And whatever we decide to tell people, Savina is good to have on side. People like her.”
“Why don’t we just tell people what did actually happen?” Kassandra asked suddenly.

Kyra and Phoibe looked first at each other, then at Kassandra and burst out laughing.

“What?” she frowned, puzzled. “I don’t see….”

“Aww Kassandra,” Phoibe wiped her eyes. “People never believe the truth! But…” she grinned slowly. “That means you don’t mind if folk speculate about your….”

“Embellishment?” Kassandra sighed. “No, actually, I find that I couldn’t really care less now. It seemed important at first but now I… I just want them to know that the baby is... ours,” she looked at Kyra.

“The both of us. I don’t want your sister or brother to grow up thinking they’re someone else’s, Phoibe. Someone who isn’t there for them. And I don’t want them hearing that their… mater… pater… whatever… is some sort of demigod…” she tailed off.

“But how about… god adjacent?” Phoibe grinned slowly.

“Go on?” Kyra sat down on the edge of the bed, leaned against Kassandra’s raised knee. “I’m listening.”

“Yes, so am I” Kassandra sounded a little more dubious.

“You’ve just made a load of money,” Phoibe looked intently at Kyra, “and you’re going to devote some of it to Artemis, no? Repairing the roof there. Cleaning up the woman herself? And not before time really because her hair is practically white. Those pigeons have no respect!”

“No, they don’t,” Kyra agreed. “And yes, I am.”

“I bet there’s even enough for a nice little fresco, maybe?” Phoibe smiled cunningly. “Just the sort of thing that the goddess might reward with a little blessing? Like a little “bundle of joy” style blessing? She does smile on the pregnant woman after all. Which I’ve always thought was a little paradoxical myself,” she pondered aloud. “I mean she’s absolutely not all about the…”

“Phoibe?” Kyra intervened. “The point?”

“Oh yeah,” Phoibe nodded. “Well the timeline will sort of match up, if you get cracking on the work and we assume Artemis doesn’t let the grass grow under her feet. Which I don’t suppose she does seeing as how…” she caught Kyra’s slightly frustrated expression.

“Never mind that now anyway,” she carried on. “She’d be bound to bless you with a baby to reward you for your devotion no? We just need someone with… prestige... and influence to let people know that’s what happened. Let people see the hand of the goddess at play, no?”

“Someone,” Kyra grinned slowly. “Like her Elder Priestess?”

“Exactly!” Phoibe tapped her nose. “We just need Ophelia to say a few words in temple and the job’s as good as done!”

“And we happen to have someone right in this very room, who is on excellent terms with the Elder Priestess, despite never attending temple,” Kyra turned to look at Kassandra.

“Indeed,” Phoibe followed her gaze. “Her old drinking buddy, Kassandra of Sparta!”

Kassandra didn’t look fully on board.
“What’s up?” Phoibe shrugged. “No one’s saying you’re a god. There’s no mystery pater. It’s not even really lying to say there’s divine intervention involved, cos are you really telling me there’s no divine intervention in this already? Big old sphinx! Magic pool! Seashell cock!”

“Language Phoibe,” Kyra smiled archly.

“Oh don’t you start as well,” Phoibe laughed. “What’s the problem Kass? Why the mopey face?”

“Well, it’s a blessing for Kyra, sure,“ she said quietly, looking a little sheepish. “But...well... I don’t see how…”

“Aha!” Phoibe raised her eyebrows, raised her chin. “I see. There’s no mention of you in it.”

“I don’t mean like that,” Kassandra said a little defensively. “I just...people will...they still won’t think I had anything to do with it...I know it doesn’t matter, but. No, It doesn’t matter, its fine, it’s a good idea, Phoibe. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks,” she shook her head, mustered a smile. “I can raise the goddess’ child. We’ll know what really happened.”

Kyra and Phoibe shared a look, thought silently for a moment.

“No, it absolutely does matter, Kassandra,” Kyra frowned. “You’re my wife. You’ll be the baby’s mater. I don’t want people thinking you’re raising a baby someone else put in me...even a goddess.”

“You’re right,” Phoibe nodded. “You’re the...pater in a way...you’ve a right to be involved. It’s understandable you’d…”

“And you are deserving of a blessing yourself of course,” Kyra grinned slowly. “For your own offering to the goddess.”

“But none of that is mine,” Kassandra leaned back. “You did all that on your own. Unless you want me to climb Artemis and scrape off some pigeon shit, because I could do that actually. But it seems a bit menial for a blessing this big.”

“She has a point,” Phoibe raised her eyebrows and looked at Kyra who was still grinning. “She could totally do that. Not all on her own I don’t think, there is a lot of shit, but if she starts right away, I suppose…”

“Well, you can do that if you want to, my love,” Kyra laughed, and rubbed Kassandra’s leg fondly. “If it would give you pleasure. But I was thinking that your reward would be for the truly remarkable offering you’ve already made. The offering that no one else could have supplied. The offering that only a truly legendary warrior and adventurer could have claimed. The offering that you have already delivered to the Elder Priestess herself.”


“My love,” Kyra leaned over and kissed Kassandra, then reached out to ruffle Phoibe’s hair. “I am going to have to reconsider my ban on you going to fraternize with Ophelia,” she laughed. “Because you need to go and introduce Phoibe.”
Kassandra and Phoibe decided to strike while the iron was hot and go to the temple the following morning. They left Kyra fussing around with powder and a himation trying to cover the evidence of the previous day's activities.

"I hope you’re proud of yourself?" Phoibe was half hopping along beside Kassandra, securing the strap of her sandal. “Carrying on like some randy goatherd at your age. And you a mater...er... pater? Hey, when you have the baby is it going to call you….oh ey up!"

"Call me what?" Kassandra asked puzzled, as they reached the stairs. Then she saw the cause of Phoibe’s exclamation. Savina was coming upstairs with a tablet and stylus in her hand.

"Ah.." Kassandra felt a hot blush rising. “Good morning Savina…” she mumbled.

"Oh..ah...yes, Kassan, misthio, Eagle Bearer," Savina dithered a little, fuzzed awkwardly with a loose strand of hair. “It’s very nice to see you. You look...rested.”

"And dressed eh?" Phoibe grinned. “It’s a lot less disconcerting when she’s not waving it about, no?”

"I…" Savina struggled for a response for a moment and failed dismally.

"Phoibe!" Kassandra hissed. “Lang…” she realised that Phoibe hadn’t technically said anything she could reprove her for. “I wasn’t waving it about,” she finished weakly.

Phoibe gave her a disbelieving look.

"No, really, she wasn’t,” Savina defended before she could stop herself. “I mean, I have no idea what you’re referring to, Phoibe, but I’m sure she wasn’t,” she corrected swiftly.

"It’s okay Savina,” Phoibe gave her a broad, conspiratorial wink and lowered her voice. “I know her unbelievable secret too.”

Savina, hugged the tablet to her chest and blinked slowly.

"Yes,” Kassandra swallowed, glancing cautiously down at Savina who was a few steps below them, which brought her into unnervingly close proximity to the business end of Kassandra. “Phoibe also knows about the..” she tailed off, awkwardly.

"Temporary divine embellishment,” Phoibe interrupted helpfully. “Weird and wonderful, no?”

"Indeed,” Savina nodded, she actually seemed a little comforted by Phoibe’s good humour.

"And... a baby!” Phoibe hissed quietly, leaning in close to her. “It’s going to be so great, no? I can’t wait.”

"Yes! I know!” Savina smiled despite herself and edged over to the inside of the stair, closer to Phoibe and a little further from Kassandra’s hips, which seemed even more disconcerting than usual in the light of her recent discovery.

“I was thinking about it last night,” she broke into a rare grin. ”It will be so...wait…” she stopped, stunned, looked from Phoibe to Kassandra and back again. “Does this mean?” she gasped, brought a hand to her mouth. “Is the Archon…”
“Oh no, no, no,” Phoibe waved her hands quickly. “No not yet. Well, not that we know,” she glanced sidelong at Kassandra. “Though she could be of course. It wouldn’t be for want of trying, Aphrodite knows!” she raised an eyebrow. “And so do you now of course,” she shrugged.

“Yes, I think we’d all rather like to forget about that, Phoibe,” Kassandra grumbled.

“And no wonder,” Phoibe folded her arms and looked at her. “I bet that’s seared in your mind now eh, Savina?” she didn’t wait for what would, undoubtedly, have been an awkward answer. “Actually, talking about all that, Kyra could do with your help I think Savina. She’s got a slight...cosmetic problem.”

“Oh?” Savina brightened. “Oh, I can help there!”

“I sort of thought you could,” Phoibe stepped out of her way, watched her walk up the stairs with a spring in her step.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she stopped at the top and turned. “Where shall I say you are, should anyone come looking for either of you?”

“You could tell Dion I won’t be available this morning, please?” Phoibe frowned thoughtfully. “Tell him I’ve gone to the temple.”

“But where have you gone?” Savina insisted gently. “In case I need you?”

“Savina” Phoibe gave a mock gasp. “You wound me deeply. We are going to the temple.”

“Oh!” Savina looked stunned. She gazed at Kassandra a shade disbelievingly. “I’m sorry, I just assumed..”

“Perfectly valid assumption under any other circumstance,” Phoibe conceded. “We’re going to see Ophelia, but that’s still technically going to the temple, no?” she grinned.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” she grabbed Kassandra’s arm. “Come on, let’s get going. Oh! We should take some wine!”

“What do you mean she’s not available?” Kassandra frowned, puzzled.

Amyrita, Ophelia’s long suffering, immediate subordinate in the running of the temple, smiled and shrugged. She looked a good deal less harried than she generally did, Kassandra thought.

“She’s out, all day,” Amyrita smiled happily. “A couple of men from the shipyard came yesterday, they wanted a blessing on the new vessel? Ophelia read the sacrifice and it said today was the best day to launch, so…we are muddling through without her for the day.”

She gestured expansively, seeming enormously satisfied with the development.

“Is there something I can help you with Eagle Bearer?” she cocked her head. “Would you like to make an offering? A request of the goddess? Or are you just delivering wine?” she eyed the amphora under Kassandra’s arm.

“No, I really needed to speak to Ophelia,” Kassandra shook her head. She’d never imagined she’d feel deflated at the prospect of not spending an hour perched on that bloody stool, but here she was.
“It was a...private matter,” she finished apologetically.

“Indeed,” Amyrita was spending a rather inappropriate amount of time glancing around the region of Kassandra’s pelvis she thought, shifting uncomfortably.

Suddenly it dawned on her that it was Amyrita who had burst in on Ophelia’s examination of her “shimmer” the other evening. Clearing her throat she thrust the amphora forward.

“Perhaps you could take this for her? Tell her we’ll be over to speak with her tomorrow?”

“Why in Hades did you give her the wine Kassandra!” Phoibe sighed as they made their way out. “We could have used that again tomorrow. Cos you know they’re only going to drink it themselves. It’ll go with their chicken dinner,” she kicked a pebble along the path.

Kassandra gave her a puzzled look before cocking her head and sniffing the air.

“What chicken dinner?” she asked, looking towards the docks.

“The chicken that had its giblets pulled out by Ophelia,” Phoibe sighed. “So that Artemis could tell her it was a good day for a boat trip with a load of burly fishermen!”

Kassandra laughed heartily and shook her head.

“Ah Phoibe!” she wiped her eyes. “Probably a good idea to be a bit more respectful tomorrow. She is the Elder Priestess after all.”

“Are you particularly respectful when you’re with her?” Phoibe cocked an eyebrow. “Just as a matter of interest?”

“That’s a completely different matter,” Kassandra grinned. “Let’s go to the docks eh? I can smell grilled meats.”

“Okay!” Phoibe nodded enthusiastically. “They’ll be having a bit of a celebration for the new boat. Strange Kyra’s not here really.”

“She had the Arsenios thing to deal with,” Kassandra considered. “And the chicken doesn’t seem to have given Ophelia much notice,” she grinned.

“Well it’s a nice day for it,” Phoibe eyed the sky. “By the way, Amyrita was spending a lot of time eyeing your business, for a priestess of Artemis anyway,” she glanced sidelong at Kassandra. “What was that all about?”

“She walked in on me and Ophelia the other evening,” Kassandra was rummaging through her coin purse, speculating on how much grilled meat they could afford with what she’d got on her.

“Hmm, Phoibe did you bring any coin with you? I’ll pay you back when we…” she suddenly realised she was talking to herself, stopped and turned back.

Phoibe was standing open mouthed in the middle of the road. Her expression could best be described as... aghast, Kassandra decided.

“What?” she held her hands out. “What’s the matter?”
“Kassandra!” Phoibe grimaced. “Walked in on you...doing what?”

“Eh?” Kassandra frowned puzzled.

“Is there anyone on the island who hasn’t seen your...embellishment?” Phoibe hissed as she caught up with her.

“What?” realisation suddenly dawned. “Eww. Phoibe! Gods, no. I didn’t have.. that out. She was just...making notes.”

“You know what Kass,” Phoibe held up her hands. “Perhaps you should keep that tale to yourself. At any rate, I wouldn’t share it with Kyra, I don’t think.”

“It was just my leg,” Kassandra defended, as they approached the docks.

“It’s not going to sound any better the more you explain it,” Phoibe shook her head. “I am going to need at least two skewers of grilled chicken to get that image out of my head, I’m telling you that!”

The docks were bustling with excited activity, a few makeshift stalls had been arranged to sell wine, meat and pastries, trinkets and amulets.

Kassandra and Phoibe went to stand on the quayside and looked out over the water. Off in the distance a little way they could see the new boat slicing through the waves.

“Gods, she’s fast for a fishing vessel” Kassandra wondered, shielding her eyes from the sun. “And there’s the Adrestia,” she grinned.

“Yeah, like Barnabas was going to miss the chance for a close up look,” Phoibe nodded. “We could have gone with them if we’d known. It’s funny to think of Ophelia out there, no? I always kind of thought she must have just come with the temple or something.”

Kassandra laughed and punched her arm gently.

“I don’t think she’s as old as...all that?” she considered. “Probably? Find somewhere to sit, I’ll go get us some chicken.”

Phoibe sat on a mooring post and swung her legs as she watched Kassandra stride off, jingling her coin pouch, a bit of a spring in her step.

As she approached the meat stall a group of young women greeted her. Phoibe watched as Kassandra stopped to chat.

She watched her gesturing expressively as she told them some tale. Watched one of the young women move a little closer, touch her arm occasionally. Watched Kassandra shrug and rub the back of her neck as she generally did when she was feeling a little sheepish.

Shaking her head, Phoibe hopped off her perch and skipped over to Kassandra.

“No, wolves aren’t all that dangerous when they’re in the right place,” she was shrugging. “I mean I wouldn’t recommend…”

“Ah here you are, Kassandra” Phoibe said with calculated cheer. “A person could starve to death waiting for you to get them a snack. Hello!” she cast a general grin around the group and took Kassandra’s hand in hers.

“Oh yes, of course,” Kassandra grinned. “Yes, we were just going to have some chicken,” the group
had gradually eased back a pace. “Anyway it was nice to chat with you,” she nodded. “And yes, I’m glad to be back.”

“Well we’re glad to have you back,” the closest woman tilted her head. “The place just isn’t the same without you around Kassandra.”

“And we’re certainly delighted to have her back,” Phoibe hugged her arm. “Her wife and I have really missed her.”

“And I missed you too, little one,” Kassandra ruffled her hair fondly. A dreamy, barely perceptible sigh rippled through the group. “Till later ladies,” she put an arm around Phoibe’s shoulders and they set off in the direction of the savoury smell of grilling meat.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?” Phoibe sighed. “Gods, you’re going to be deadly walking round with a baby in your arms. You don’t even realise you’re doing it.”

“Doing what?” Kassandra looked down and caught Phoibe’s expression. “Oh now wait! I wasn’t flirting. I was just being pleasant. They wanted to welcome me back.”

“Yeah, anyone could see that,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “See this is why Kyra gets like that, sometimes. Chicken for me please,” they were by the stall now.

“Kassandra!” the burly fellow manning the grill beamed expansively. “Good to see you back!” he held out a slightly greasy hand, Kassandra gripped it good-naturedly.

“It’s good to be back,” she grinned. “Two skewers of chicken please,” she asked his wife who was serving customers.

“These are on me love,” he called over his shoulder. “It can be part of Phoibe’s payment.”

Kassandra watched with curious interest as the woman handed over not only the skewers of juicy chicken but a small pouch of coin.

“Thank you very much,” Phoibe tucked it away. “Same again next week?”

She noticed Kassandra’s questioning look as they went to sit at the dockside.

“I get rabbits for him,” she explained. “Just a little side line.”

Kassandra laughed delightedly and lifted Phoibe up onto a waist high wall where they could eat in peace and watch the activity.

“What did you mean before?” she asked as Phoibe chewed busily. “About Kyra? Gets like what?”

“Oh...she just...worries I think,” Phoibe licked a trickle of grease from her thumb. “That you’ll...get bored I suppose.”

“Bored? With what?” Kassandra remembered their conversation while wolf hunting. “With here?” she looked around.

“With her, I think,” Phoibe looked up, chewing carefully. “She...she knows you’ve been with a lot of women and...oh!...yeah...” she looked guilty. “I should probably tell you... she knows about the grilled fish woman...the one with the...”

“Yes, I know who you mean,” Kassandra interrupted swiftly.
“I didn’t flat out, tell her,” Phoibe defended. “We were talking and she...deduced. She’s good at that.”

“I don’t understand why she worries about things that happened before I met her,” Kassandra turned the skewer in her hands. “Before I even knew she existed. I can’t go back and change any of it. And...well, I don’t know if I would, even if I could.”

“I don’t think you should,” Phoibe mumbled around a mouthful of chicken. “It’s all made you who you are, no? All part of life’s rich whatsit. And I know you’re not perfect. In fact you’re a long way off it. But you’re the woman she fell in love with. You wouldn’t be her if it wasn’t for the woman from the fish stall, gods what was her bloody name?...and all the others. And let’s face it you’ve had all sorts!”

“Sophitia,” Kassandra pulled a couple of chunks of meat off her skewer and slid them onto Phoibe’s rapidly emptying one. “And what do you mean, all sorts? She was a perfectly nice woman.”

“I know she was!” Phoibe defended herself. “She always slipped me a bit of fish when I was hungry, which was most of the time. And that was even before you and she...got acquainted. But I mean, you...had a...varied diet. That woman who did the sandal repairs? I mean I heard some stories,” she raised her eyebrows.

Kassandra frowned thoughtfully for a while, a trickle of warm meat juices ran down her wrist. “Pero!” she said at last, a lazy smile creeping over her face. “Yeah, Pero. She was a very skilled craftsman, I’ll have you know.”

“Yes, so I understood, I heard Europa ordering something from her one time,” Phoibe nodded and licked her thumb.

“I’m not criticizing mind you, because I never had to pay for a pair of sandals all the time I was on Kephallonia. So, whatever you did with her, it kept me shod till I came here. But this is why I think Kyra gets...insecure sometimes. But she shouldn’t cos you’ve done all this and you chose her in the end, right? Sophitia and Pero and Odessa and Thyia...all of the others, but you chose Kyra.”

Kassandra looked thoughtfully at the remains of her chicken. She wasn’t hungry suddenly.

“She should be relaxed about it,” Phoibe said thoughtfully. “You’ve done all your...exploring...and you’ve arrived at Kyra. I mean you never went on some sphinx quest to try and give any of them a baby,” she said reasonably.

There was a long, not entirely comfortable silence as Phoibe finished her chicken.

“Just...I think Kyra just needs reassurance now and again,” she said at last, licking the skewer clean. “I mean I don’t think anyone expects you to just stop flirting completely. You don’t even start it half the time to be honest, you’re just...” she looked Kassandra up and down. “You’re just the way you are. But she needs to know that...it’s her, for you...you know?” she frowned. “Especially if she gets pregnant,” she said quietly. “She’ll need you to be...there, you know?”

“I know,” Kassandra leaned against Phoibe a little. “I want to be. I will be. And I’ve got you to kick my ass if I slip up.”

“Yeah,” Phoibe smiled. “And I will do Kassandra. I’m as excited about this...baby,” she whispered the last word. ”As you two. I’ll be watching you like a hawk.”

“When did you get so smart, little one?” Kassandra nudged her. “Here, do you want the rest of this?
I’m not hungry really.”

“Sure?” Phoibe took it cautiously. “Cos I can always get another one?”

“Mmm,” Kassandra nodded and began to lick the trickle of meat juices from her wrist.

“Kassandra!” a woman’s voice rang out and Phoibe looked up to see Elissa and Phile, two of the hetaerae from Mikis’ approaching, arm in arm and clearly dressed for business.

“How lovely to see you’re back!” Elissa led them over.

“And your front is pretty spectacular too,” Phile laughed. “Phoibe, hello sweetheart, how’s the chicken?”

“Delicious,” Phoibe said, a little stunned. She’d never seen either of them except dressed fairly conservatively during the day. They were clearly anticipating that trade would be good at the bustling dock today though.

Elissa, the elder of the two, was wearing a remarkably low cut chiton revealing the most spectacular breasts Phoibe had ever encountered, and she’d seen quite a lot, growing up under Kassandra’s wing. She received an even better view as Elissa bent to give her cheek a swift kiss.

“Bet you’re glad Kassandra is back too?” she smiled. “You two have so much fun together, you must miss her when she’s away?”

Phoibe hadn’t lied when she’d told Kassandra that she hadn’t made up her mind yet about the whole business of sexual attraction. But breasts like that could certainly influence a person’s decision making process, she thought.

She had no idea how poor Phile was going to compete with that today. As she gaped a little, one of the chunks of chicken slid off the skewer onto her knee.

“Oops, careful, little one!” Phile stepped over to pick it up for her, and Phoibe realised just how she was going to compete. Her peplos was completely open down the right hand side, loosely belted about her waist, and she didn’t appear to be wearing anything underneath.

“It looks too good to drop on the floor,” she picked up the piece daintily.

“You can have that piece,” Phoibe swallowed hard.

“Are you sure?” Phile gave her a charming smile. “My fingers are clean, I swear.”

“Currently,” Elissa laughed.

“Yes...really,” Phoibe gathered herself. “Would you like a piece, Elissa?” she held out the skewer.

“You are very kind,” Elissa accepted, as Phile leaned against the wall by Phoibe’s legs, nibbling daintily at her morsel.

Phoibe hauled her eyes away from the inviting expanse of Phile’s flank and turned to Kassandra. Thankfully she’d finished licking grease from her wrist and was, understandably Phoibe had to concede, glancing appreciatively over at Elissa.

“How lovely to see you again, ladies,” she smiled. “And looking spectacular, if I might be so bold?”

Oh, here we go, thought Phoibe. Though, truth be told, she suddenly felt a certain sympathy.
“You certainly may,” Phile leaned forward to look past Phoibe at Kassandra. It did something to the way the skirt of her peplos hung and Phoibe dropped the whole skewer in her lap.

Everyone looked a little concerned.

“Steady there, Phoibe,” Phile smiled kindly, picking it up for her. “Your fingers must be getting slippery, here let me hold it for you and you can just take the chicken off it, no?” she inclined her head and gave Phoibe a charming smile. She nodded back, mute for once.

“The chicken, Phoibe,” Kassandra said at last, giving her a nudge. “Don’t leave Phile standing there like an idiot. No, wait I don’t mean you are an idiot Phile, just that Phoibe…” she floundered a little.

“None taken, Kassandra,” Phile laughed, sliding a lump of chicken off the greasy stick and holding it out for Phoibe. She took it from her with slightly shaky fingers and began to nibble with uncharacteristic daintiness.

“I suppose business will be brisk today?” Kassandra swung her legs and looked around the bustling docks.

“Hay while the sun shines, Kassandra,” Elissa patted her knee. “And we’ll feel safer about it, now that we know you’re back. All the girls feel a lot more secure when we know you’re on the island.”

“I can’t be everywhere,” Kassandra shrugged and laughed.

“No,” Elissa agreed, “But you don’t need to be, just the fact that you’re about helps put off the odd shady character. You’re very much appreciated by all of us hetaerae,” she smiled.

Phoibe recovered enough to ready herself to rein in Kassandra’s response and was surprised to not hear one immediately.

“Well, actually,” she said after a considered pause. “It’s really the Archon and her guards who keep the place safe and secure for you all. I help where I can, but they’re the ones who really deserve your thanks. Kyra thinks about you when she’s organizing the guard rostas, I know.”

“That’s nice to know,” Elissa tilted her head. “Thank her for us then, Kass. I don’t suppose she’d welcome a delegation of hetaerae turning up at the leader house to express our appreciation in person?” she laughed.

Yeah, this would do it, Phoibe braced herself, but Kassandra frowned thoughtfully.

“You might be surprised,” she said quietly. “I could definitely let her know if you ever do want to meet with her...about anything. Any concerns. She has the interests of all the islanders at heart. I know that.”

“We just might do that,” Elissa nodded. “Eh Phile?”

By now Phile was sharing the chicken with Phoibe.

“Absolutely,” she agreed. “By the way, there’s bound to be drinking and dancing at Mikis’ tonight Kassandra. I know everyone would love to see you, to welcome you back?”

To Phoibe’s astonishment Kassandra didn’t actually give it much consideration. She put an arm about Phoibe’s shoulders and pulled her into a half hug.

“Thanks for the offer,” she shook her head. “But I’m looking forward to a quiet evening in with my
wife...and daughter,” she ruffled Phoibe’s hair.

“Aw,” Phile patted Phoibe’s knee. “Family time. That’s nice. Well we’ll down a cup or two in your honour. And the Archon’s of course.” She held out the last remnants of the chicken to Phoibe.

“You can finish that,” Phoibe shook her head.

“Are you sure?” Phile tilted her head and smiled. “You’re a growing girl,” she reached out with a finger and tapped Phoibe’s cheek gently. And I don’t need to grow any more after all,” she laughed.

“Certain,” Phoibe nodded.

“Then thank you, sweetheart,” Phile leaned over and pressed a kiss to Phoibe’s cheek. “We’ll see you around,” she slipped her arm through Elissa’s and they set off together along the dock.

There was a long silence as Phoibe and Kassandra watched them leave.

“Phile’s a very pretty young woman,” Kassandra said at last, side-eyeing Phoibe’s sudden blush.

“Is she?” she said awkwardly. “Which one is Phile again?”

Kassandra laughed delightedly and jumped down off the wall.

“Oh Phoibe,” she held out her arms and helped her down. “The one who was feeding you morsels of chicken with her fingers, you lucky girl. She gets paid for that sort of thing usually.”

“Ah...yes...Well I suppose so...yes, if you like that sort of thing,” Phoibe struggled to appear casual and failed rather dismally. ”Maybe...but I’ve still not made my mind up,” she shook her head.

“Good,” Kassandra put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against her side. “Plenty of time for that. We should get back. It’s getting late and I need to earmark some more wine for tomorrow, before Aegeus realises I gave away an amphora for nothing today.”
“Have you had that hidden in there all morning?” Phoibe watched curiously, as Kassandra retrieved a largish amphora from the shrubbery.

“Possibly,” she said, evasively, wrapping an arm around it.

“I’m guessing Aegeus doesn’t know we’re taking it then?” Phoibe chuckled. “What he doesn’t know won’t make him go red in the face eh?”

“I don’t know why he takes such a personal interest in the bloody wine cellar anyway,” Kassandra frowned. “Hasn’t he got enough to keep him busy with his dock tax project?”

Phoibe stopped in her tracks and raised her eyebrows. Kassandra had walked on a good way before she realised she was talking to herself for the second time in two days. She looked back, puzzled.

“Since when have you known about Aegeus’ project,” Phoibe caught up with her.

“Since last night,” Kassandra shrugged. “Kyra and I were in bed,” she saw Phoibe begin to roll her eyes but sallied forth regardless. “And I was asking her what she’d been doing during the day. Whether anything unusual or extra-important had come up. Anything I could help with, and she told me that she was giving Aegeus responsibility for the collection of all the dock taxes.”

“And then she asked you, who you were and what you’d done with her wife?” Phoibe laughed.

“Hey,” Kassandra protested. “Look! People tell me I should take more of an interest and then when I do, you make fun of me!”

Phoibe realised she had a good point and looked a little chastened.

“You’re right Kass, I’m sorry, I was being an arsehole, it is good that you’re getting more involved. Hey?” she frowned. “Are you not going to ‘language Phoibe’ me?”

“No,” Kassandra gave her a side glance. “Because you were being an arsehole.”

“Good point, well made,” Phoibe nodded. “Still,” she nudged Kassandra’s arm, heard the wine slosh in the amphora.

“I imagine Kyra thought it was pretty sexy actually, you know,” she saw Kassandra’s dubious expression. “Cymone says there’s nothing sexier than when a man takes a genuine interest in you. I assume it’s the same for women?”

Kassandra walked on a little, saying nothing, then gave Phoibe an arch look.

“It might be.”

“Excellent,” Phoibe punched her arm. “I bet that baby’s in there already you know. I mean,” she
stepped back and looked at Kassandra, gestured broadly. “Look at you!”

“I don’t think it works like that Phoibe,” Kassandra watched curiously as Phoibe stopped and wiped her sandals on the backs of her calves.

“Come here, Kassandra,” she stopped her, eyed her up and down and began to brush the dust from her tunic.

“It’s a bit late for me to be making a good first impression,” Kassandra laughed, swatting her away.

“Maybe,” Phoibe shrugged as they approached the temple steps. “But I don’t want her thinking I don’t know how to look after you.”

“Oh well,” Kassandra smiled. “If it will reflect badly on you,” she crouched down and let Phoibe straighten the shoulder of her tunic, tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear and finally lick her thumb and rub a little smut of dust from her jaw.

“You’ll do,” she said at last. “Let’s go commune with the goddess’ representative.”

The temple was filled with the low murmur of women’s voices at prayer when they entered. Phoibe put a finger to her lips and gave Kassandra a meaningful look.

“I know how to behave in temple!” she hissed.

“Despite rarely attending, that’s good to know,” Amyrita had glided silently up behind them.

“To what do we...ah, of course,” she remembered the previous day’s visit. “Ophelia is in attendance once again,” she sighed wearily and eyed the big clay vessel that Kassandra was nursing. “You know the way, Eagle Bearer.”

“I don’t think Amyrita is entirely happy in her work, you know,” Phoibe hissed as they made their way down the steep steps to the corridors under the temple.

“I didn’t even know all this was here,” she peered around. “It’s a bit gloomy, no? And smoky,” she sniffed, eyeing the guttering oil lamps.

“Atmospheric, I suppose,” she whispered. “As if her being a hundred and two wasn’t enough.”

“Phoibe!” Kassandra hissed back. “Don’t be disrespectful, she’s no more than a hundred and one at most!”

“Who’s a hundred and one?” came a sharp voice from the shadows.

“Fuck! Ophelia!” Kassandra jumped, felt the amphora slip a little and grabbed it to her chest.

“Language Kassandra,” Phoibe said primly, managing to swallow a laugh. “And in temple too!”

“Quite right, you big heathen ox,” Ophelia slapped her in the belly. “I’ll pray for you...again.”

“What in Hades are you doing lurking around in the dark?” Kassandra’s pulse had just about slowed to normal.

“I was answering nature’s summons,” Ophelia frowned. “Not that it’s any of your business, you great oaf.” she shuffled past her towards Phoibe.

“You were...?” Kassandra glanced warily over to the shadows from where Ophelia had emerged.
“What?” she followed her gaze. “No, you idiot! There’s a room for the express purpose just down the way. I wonder about you sometimes.”

She turned her attention to Phoibe who had been pursing her lips and gazing amused at the whole interaction. She assumed a polite, respectful expression.

“Who’s this charming child, misthios,” Ophelia asked over her shoulder. “And why would anyone trust her out with you?”

“Ophelia,” Kassandra sighed and rolled her eyes. “May I present Phoibe of Kephallonia...my daughter,” she placed her free hand on Phoibe’s shoulder and smiled fondly at her. “Phoibe, this is Ophelia, elder priestess of Artemis and general pain in my…”

“I am honoured to meet you at last, Priestess,” Phoibe gave a polite bow.

“High,” said Ophelia cryptically.

“Erm...hi?” Phoibe ventured puzzled.

“What? No,” Ophelia shook her head. “Technically I am the High Priestess, but I don’t stand on ceremony.”

“Well, you never corrected me,” Kassandra shrugged.

“I can recognize a lost cause,” Ophelia took Phoibe’s arm. “I let her get away with a lot of things because she doesn’t know any better,” she confided.

“Her heart’s in the right place though,” Phoibe offered.

“Indeed,” Ophelia patted Phoibe’s arm. “Let’s repair to my inner sanctum, where the light’s a bit better and I can get a proper look at you.”

Kassandra followed them in and watched as Ophelia led Phoibe over to the brightest of the lamps and studied her closely.

“Well you’re a much more convenient size,” she smiled. “I can see that right way,” she took Phoibe’s chin between a gnarled finger and thumb and tilted her head this way and that, eyeing her with interest.

After a few moments she released her hold on Phoibe’s chin and reached down to take her hand in hers.

“Yes, you have something of your mother about you, child,” she smiled kindly.

Phoibe’s face was solemn.

“But High Priestess,” she shook her head. “You didn’t even know my…”

“I know, what I know, child,” Ophelia glanced past her to Kassandra and gave her a meaningful look.

“It’s not polite to question a priestess. Come, take a seat, then you can tell me how I can help.” She waved over to the corner of the room. “Help yourself, little one.”

Kassandra looked over as Phoibe pulled out the...the bloody chair!
“I thought you’d got rid of that!” she gestured, putting down the amphora a little irritably. “You said it took up too much room!”

“Oh Misthios,” Ophelia took her own seat opposite Phoibe. “If I got rid of everything that took up too much space, you wouldn’t be here half as often eh?” she chuckled.

“Don’t fret, your seat’s right under the table,” she kicked it out, with a little more vigour than either of them had anticipated, hitting Kassandra in the shin.

“Ow, dammit Ophelia,” she sighed, rubbing her leg ruefully. “I didn’t know I had to come armoured,” she gazed despondently at the stool.

“I thought she was supposed to have supernatural reflexes, eh?” Ophelia winked at Phoibe.

“Sometimes,” she conceded, watching as Kassandra straddled the stool cautiously.

“Careful now Misthios,” Ophelia produced three cups from under the table, blew the dust out of one.

“You’re old enough for a little watered wine, young Phoibe?” she poured the last of the wine out of the jug on the table.

“Ey, no, I don’t know about that,” Kassandra protested, sitting down a little suddenly and swallowing a grunt.

“Ooh careful Kass,” Phoibe winced sympathetically. “I don’t think you’re supposed to keep putting a crimp in it like that you know. And it’ll be fine, I’ll put plenty of water in it.”

“Well,” Kassandra was trying to discreetly situate herself. “I…just…well, don’t tell Kyra,” she surrendered.

“For the love of the virgin,” Ophelia watered Phoibe’s wine until she nodded. “Just sort yourself out instead of wriggling like a puppy. I take it we all know what’s going on under there?” she looked at Phoibe with raised eyebrows.

“Well maybe not at this precise moment,” Phoibe glanced warily at Kassandra’s embarrassed fumbling, waited until she relaxed as much as was possible with her knees up to her shoulders. “But, in general, yes, absolutely. In fact Priestess, that’s what we’re here about.”

“Is it indeed?” Ophelia pushed a cup over to Kassandra, she took a grateful sip and frowned. “Hey, this is just water!” she waved it towards Ophelia, slopping some clumsily over the rim.

“Less of it now,” Ophelia observed dryly. “Water for you, Misthios. Unless the archon has already been blessed?” she asked, seeming genuinely interested.

“Well, I…no, well we don’t know, yet,” Kassandra conceded. “Why didn’t you think about that when you got me legless on hydromeli the other night?” she asked, grumpily.

“Yes,” Phoibe sipped thoughtfully and tilted her head towards Ophelia. “That was a bit of an oversight actually, if you don’t mind me observing?” she lowered her voice conspiratorially. “Between you and me, I think there was a bit of a row about it.”

“Then I can only apologise, Misthios,” Ophelia placed a knotty hand to her breast. “Far be it from me to come between a woman and her wife. Permit me to swear here and now, that there shall be no danger of your becoming inebriated in my presence ever again. Here. some more water, you spilled
“Thank you,” Kassandra scowled, holding out her cup. “Thank you for your input as well Phoibe,” she said dryly.

“My only excuse is that I was overwhelmed by your magnificent offering,” she refilled her own cup with wine. “It is a genuinely wondrous thing. You saw it young Phoibe?”

“I did indeed,” Phoibe smiled slowly. “And it is a magnificent offering, no? Sort of makes up for Kassandra’s temple attendance being a bit...patchy…”

“If by patchy, you mean non existent,” Ophelia smacked her lips. “I see you here child,” she nodded at Phoibe, “with the Archon, your more...observant mater,” she cast a sidelong glance at Kassandra. “Or Savina and her handsome young fellow sometimes, or the big chap, Praxos, well with everyone except this big, irreverent ox actually.”

“There are many ways to honour the goddess though surely?” Phoibe gave a wily smile. “And she has just brought me to temple two days running if you think about it.”

“Indeed, indeed,” Ophelia nodded, smiling appreciatively at Phoibe. “More water, Misthios?” she waggled the jug.

“No, thank you,” Kassandra shook her head. “I’m making it last.”

“Prudent,” said Ophelia dryly.

“And I suspect,” Phoibe said thoughtfully. “That the goddess is sometimes prepared to...turn a blind eye to…” she topped up Ophelia’s cup and waited till she was sipping from it before continuing.


Ophelia gave Phoibe a hard look over the rim of her cup. They held each other’s gaze for a few moments before Ophelia put down the half empty cup and gave a throaty chuckle.

“Oh, I like this one, Misthios,” she slapped her knees. “You may come anytime you like, young lady. Yes, yes, the goddess and I have an understanding about that. She turns a blind eye to my love of the grape and I refrain from speculating about her fondness for surrounding herself with young maidens,” she winked.

Phoibe’s eyebrows ascended to her hairline and she gave Kassandra a sidelong glance.

“Was that not just speculation, right there?” Kassandra observed, finishing her water and putting the cup on the table.

“I thought it was safe enough, given the present company,” Ophelia grinned toothily. “So, young lady? What is it that you need of me? I see you circling that sphinx feather like a wolf? Do you wish me to return it?”

“Not at all!” Phoibe held up her hands. “Rather the opposite. Kassandra would like to make a formal offering of it, to the goddess.”


“Well!” Phoibe leaned forward on the table and steepled her fingers. “We were hoping that we
“could...scratch each other’s backs a little.”

“Go ahead,” Ophelia leaned back in her chair, cradling her cup to her breast. “I’m listening. Go fill this water jug for us would you please, Kassandra, I get the feeling young Phoibe and I may be talking for a while.”

“You left her with Ophelia?” Kyra raised her eyebrows. “Are you...” she was about to give Kassandra the rough edge of her tongue, but seeing her rather downcast expression as she perched on the corner of the desk, she reined herself in. “Are you sure that’s a wise decision?” she amended.

“Oh I think she’s the match of Ophelia actually,” Kassandra examined the top sheet of the pile of paperwork by her knee.

“Well yes,” Kyra was busy trimming the point of a new reed pen but glanced up at the sound of rustling papyrus.

Kassandra was frowning with concentration as she read.

“They didn’t need your...input?” Kyra asked sympathetically.

Kassandra looked up and sighed.

“No, once I’d filled the water jug and refilled Ophelia’s wine jug, my usefulness was pretty much exhausted,” she waved the papyrus a little. “You’re authorizing the scaffolding already?”

“Mmm,” Kyra put the trimmed pen in the pot on her desk, started to trim a second one.

“I was going to get started on that anyway,” she explained. “It’s the cheapest of the fixes, scaffolding and some elbow grease and Artemis will be clean and shiny pretty soon and it will make a good impression. By the time that’s completed some of the obsidian profits should have started to work their way through,” she yawned suddenly, sat back in her chair and stretched.

Kassandra got up and walked around to the back of her chair and began to massage her shoulders.

“Tense,” she bent and kissed the back of Kyra’s neck, felt her shiver a little. “Mmm,” she breathed in deeply. “What are you wearing?”

“Wearing?” Kyra clipped the nib, put the pen in the pot, settled back, relaxing under Kassandra’s strong hands.

“You smell wonderful,” Kassandra rubbed her nose below Kyra’s ear, kissed her softly.

“Nothing different,” Kyra yawned again. “You’ve spent the afternoon in Ophelia’s musty room is all.”

“Possibly,” Kassandra nodded. “You abandoned the himation I see?” she grinned.

“Oh gods, it was too hot,” Kyra flexed her neck appreciatively.

“And Aegeus,” Kassandra bent to press a kiss to the dark bruise at the crook of her shoulder.

“Quite right, boy,” Kassandra said sympathetically. “She’s bringing your reputation into disrepute.”

“I said we were rough housing and he got over excited,” Kyra laughed getting to her feet. “Which wasn’t entirely untrue,” she smiled archly, “I just altered the protagonist.”

She stepped around her chair and into Kassandra’s waiting arms, rested her head against her powerful shoulder and relaxed into her embrace for a minute or two.

“There’s nothing here that can’t wait until tomorrow now,” she glanced back at her desk. “Let’s go and have something to eat.”

Cymone was just about to put on her cloak and leave for the evening when they entered the kitchen.

“Sit yourselves down,” she postponed leaving for a few minutes.

“I’ve a treat for you Archon,” she uncovered a dish. “Praxos brought octopus from the market this morning. You’ve not had it for a little while. I keep forgetting you like it to be honest. Probably because Kassandra doesn’t and she’s the bigger eater, there you go, enjoy, I did it just how you like it,” she smiled proudly.

Kyra picked up a fork and looked down at the plate and her stomach gave a sudden, unexpected lurch. She was suddenly more tired than hungry and the last thing she wanted was octopus.

She cast a glance over to Kassandra who was tucking into a plate of pickled vegetables, chicken and olives that Cymone had thrown together for her.

“I wonder, if you could fetch some cold water, please?” Kyra looked hopefully at Cymone, “it’s so warm this evening.”

“Really?” she frowned, “I hadn’t noticed. Probably because I’ve been in here all afternoon. It’s always warm in here. Yes, certainly I will,” she took two jugs out into the yard.

Kyra hissed sharply at Kassandra.

“Have this for me, will you?” she began to pick out the chunks of octopus and drop them onto Kassandra’s plate. “I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but I just can’t face it, right now.”

“But I..” Kassandra looked dismally at the plate. “I don’t really…” she saw Kyra’s pleading expression.

“Of course, sure I will,” she forked a couple of chunks into her mouth and chewed determinedly. Gods, she didn’t like octopus.

“There we go,” Cymone came back in, placed the jugs on the table and poured a cup for Kyra.

“Here you…oh goodness you were hungry,” she looked at her plate, then caught Kassandra resolutely chewing on another piece.

“And look at you!” she grinned. “I didn’t even think you liked octopus.”

“Neither did I,” Kassandra mustered an unconvincing smile.

“Well, now that I know, I’ll make it more often,” Cymone smiled. “Here you go, I’m sure the Archon won’t mind if you have some more,” she spooned the remaining chunks on to Kassandra’s plate.
Kyra gave her a sympathetic look and watched as she gave a sigh and ate another chunk under Cymone’s watchful gaze.

“It does my heart good to watch you eat, Kassandra,” she clapped her on the shoulder. “It’s always nice to see your work appreciated...oh and here’s another one who gladdens a cook’s heart,” she grinned as Phoibe came swaggering in.

“Ooh, octopus,” She swung onto the chair next to Kassandra. “I didn’t think you liked octopus actually?” she frowned, eyeing her plate then the empty serving dish. “You once said it was like eating a donkey’s...”

“Well this is delicious,” said Kassandra quickly, suspecting she was storing up trouble for the future. “I’ve clearly never had it properly prepared before,” she smiled at Cymone.

“Oh you and your silver tongue, Misthios,” Cymone laughed happily and pressed a quick kiss to the top of Kassandra’s head as she pulled on her cloak. “Can you serve yourself, young Phoibe? Perhaps your mater will let you have a piece of her octopus if you ask nicely?”

The minute she’d left Kassandra pushed the plate over to Phoibe and looking down to check that Orion had taken up residence under the table, she fished the chunk of octopus out of her mouth and dropped it to him.

“What was all that about?” Phoibe went to get bread and sitting down, set to with a will. “Do you like octopus or not?”

“No...I do not,” Kassandra shook her head. “Kyra didn’t want to hurt Cymone’s feelings.”

“Hmm?” Phoibe shrugged, chewing happily.

“So how did it go with Ophelia?” Kyra went to the pantry and returned with a plate of flatbread and a dish of soft cheese and some olives.

“She’s not a bad old stick really,” Phoibe mumbled round a mouthful of vegetables, watching with resignation as Kassandra reclaimed the chicken from her plate. “She’s open to negotiation. And gods she can drink! She polished off two full jugs, never even slurred and she’s only tiny.”

“And the negotiations?” Kassandra poured herself a cup of wine, swilled and swallowed.

“Sorted,” Phoibe grinned, tearing off a piece of bread.

“As soon as we find out that the...” she glanced around her and listened carefully.

“Everyone’s gone,” Kyra spread some cheese on a piece of bread, leaned back in her chair and eyed Phoibe with interest. “As soon as we...?”

“As soon as we know the deed has been done,” Phoibe, poured a cup of water for herself. “We get word to her and she organizes a big to do about revealing the feather in temple. You need to get some work underway as soon as you can though, Kyra.”

“It’s done,” Kyra nodded. “They’ll start scaffolding Artemis this week.”

“Excellent,” Phoibe continued eating, a little more slowly now the edge was off her hunger. “She wants a couple of things in return obviously.”

“Oh aye?” Kassandra sighed. “How many amphorae?”
She picked some mint leaves out of the bowl of herbs on the table and began to chew.

“No...you know she didn’t suggest that, surprisingly enough,” Phoibe frowned thoughtfully. “Maybe she assumed that went without saying. She’d like you to look a little more Archony when we go to temple, Kyra, that’s your part. The laurels, posh frock.”

“That can be arranged,” Kyra conceded. “Is that all?”

“She’d like you to crack on with the roof as soon as it can be funded,” Phoibe continued. “Apparently it’s leaking in over the novices’ quarters and they’ve all had to shift down to the other end of the room and share beds and she thinks shenanigans might be going on.”

Kassandra snorted so abruptly that she sprayed half chewed mint leaves over the table.

“Eyy!” Phoibe fished a wad off her plate. ”Steady. Gods it’s like living with a shaved bear sometimes,” she frowned. “And it’s not funny,” she waggled her fork in Kassandra’s direction. “We don’t need our temple getting that sort of a reputation, on top of everything else.”

“Are you kidding?” Kassandra wiped her eyes, still chuckling.”You’d have no trouble attracting recruits once word got round. And given what Ophelia said this afternoon, I’m not sure Artemis would mind.”

“From the sound of it,” Kyra sighed, “it would be a good thing, if I didn’t find out what Ophelia said this afternoon. Laurels, new roof? Is that it?”

“From you, yes,” Phoibe chewed and swallowed before swinging her fork around to point at Kassandra.

“You …” she raised her eyebrows. “She just wants you to turn up. Once a month minimum. She said, and I quote…”“I don’t care if the big ox shows up naked, so long as she gets here,” though honestly, I think that might have been a figure of speech. But I suppose you could take her at her word and try it, once you’ve got your original fittings back?”

“She wants me to turn up at temple?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows and chewed more mint.

“Indeed,” Phoibe nodded. ”Don’t look like that. She’s not being unreasonable. After all, you’re the wife of the Archon. You’ll be the mater, pater, whatever you two decide, of the Archon’s baby, you need to start setting a good example. We let a lot of things slide, between us two Kass, because of the way things were. We need to do a better job of it this time, from the beginning.”
Chapter 41

When she followed Kassandra up to bed that evening, Kyra was a little surprised to find her standing on the balcony waiting for her. As she went to join her, Kassandra reached out her hands and smiled hopefully.

“Let’s go look at Orion?” she tilted her head. “The Hunter, not the dog,” she teased.

“Really?” Kyra laughed taking her hands.

“Mmm,” Kassandra nodded. “We should do it while we have the chance. Phoibe says pregnant women shouldn’t clamber about on roofs.”

“Ah well,” Kyra released her hands and watched as Kassandra effortlessly vaulted up onto the balustrade, then the overhanging low portico, before leaning down and extending a hand to her. “If Phoibe says so.”

She looked up at the clear, star-studded sky. “And it is a beautiful night,” she reached out for Kassandra’s broad, calloused hand, felt her powerful arm flex, lifting her effortlessly.

Reaching the roof Kyra looked around and laughed. There was a thick blanket laid out, half a dozen cushions, a jug of wine and two cups, a covered bowl of olives.

“When did you do this?” she looked up at Kassandra with a fond smile.

“This morning, before we left,” she led Kyra over, helped her down, then sat beside her. “Not the wine and olives obviously,” she grinned. “I didn’t want the place full of pigeons.”

“Very wise,” Kyra leaned back on her hands and gazed up.

“There he is,” Kassandra moved in close beside her. Kyra could feel the heat of her body against her arm. She followed the line of Kassandra’s finger. “Right where you first showed him to me years ago.”

Kyra cast her mind back. She remembered perfectly that night beneath the stars, the first time they’d made love, with the sound of the waves as accompaniment, the scent of the sea and the scent of Kassandra filling her senses, and she remembered all the horror that had followed. They both bore the scars of that time, even if Kyra’s couldn’t be seen as readily as Kassandra’s.

“It’s been such a journey,” she leaned back against Kassandra’s solid warmth. “It’s taken us such a long time to get here and we’ve hurt each other so much on the way.”

“Shush,” Kassandra breathed, moving closer, kissing her temple. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” Kyra looked up at the glittering stars of the hunter’s belt. “I’m sorry, Kassandra, I’m the one more inclined to look back down the path. I’m the one who harps on past mistakes. I need to stop. The past is the past, all of it, and all of it served to bring us here, the good and the bad.”

“I thought you were the most beautiful thing I had ever seen that night,” Kassandra rested her head against Kyra’s shoulder. “And I was right, you were. And you still are.”

“Tell me, Misthios,” Kyra breathed softly, leaning against the comforting heat of her. “Did you bring
“The thought did cross my mind,” Kassandra admitted with a soft chuckle. “Our first night together was spent below the Hunter’s gaze, I thought perhaps…”

Kyra turned to look at her, at her tender, hopeful expression.

“I checked our environs,” Kassandra smiled playfully. “We are not overlooked by any but Orion himself.”

Kyra turned into Kassandra’s embrace, reached up and knitted her fingers into the root of her braid, eased her into a soft kiss as she lay back, pulling Kassandra down with her against the pillows.

Later, as Kassandra lay naked above her, thrusting steadily, murmuring her love as she suckled at her breast, Kyra looked up at the blue-black sky, at the glittering stars. Her body tensed and then melted and the stars wheeled and streaked above her at her release as she hugged Kassandra tightly to her, felt the spilling heat of her climax deep within her.

She had thought they might stay there, sleep out under the stars as they had that night years ago when Kassandra had shared the terrible secrets of her youth with Kyra, but instead she insisted on them returning to bed.

“What if the baby is already in there?” She said playfully, lifting Kyra down from the portico roof. “What would Phoibe say if she discovered I’d let a pregnant woman sleep on a roof?” she laughed, crouching and pressing a kiss to Kyra’s belly before sweeping her up and carrying her to the bed.

As she was about to drift off into sleep, already barely conscious, Kyra pulled Kassandra’s arms tight about her.

“I love you,” she mumbled sleepily. “I love you so much, I’ll be glad when you’re back though, I miss the taste of you.”

Kassandra dreamt that night. She dreamt of their child. She dreamt of them walking through the flower meadows, her arm about Kyra, the child on her shoulders, Phoibe walking beside them, reaching up to hold its hand. She could feel its weight, its warmth, the grip of its hand, the sound of its laughter. But she couldn’t see its face.

When she woke Kyra was still asleep in her arms, warm and yielding, murmuring a little as she felt Kassandra stirring, wriggling back into her embrace.

Kassandra buried her face in the hair at her nape, breathed deeply, filling her lungs with the scent of her, the warm, woodsy musk of her sweat. It was familiar and comforting.

The first time they had made love Kyra had smelt like home to Kassandra. Not the complicated, muddled mess of her memories of home, but her real home, a place where she could rest and grow old, safe and content.

Kyra struggled awake, turning lazily in her arms, stretching back awkwardly for Kassandra’s kiss, reaching back, knotting her fingers in her loosened hair, hugging her head tight against her.

Kassandra raised herself, helped Kyra roll onto her back, stroked her tangled hair away from her sleepy face, touched noses, kissed her lightly.

“Good morning wife,” she smiled. “I bet you’re glad I didn’t let you sleep on the roof now eh?” she laughed softly.
“Mmm, I concede,” Kyra rubbed her eyes sleepily, pressed up into Kassandra’s arms, pushed her hips up against her.

“Ah, it’s like this is it, indeed?” Kassandra cocked an eyebrow and bent to kiss the hollow of her throat.

Remembering Kyra’s final words before she fell asleep the previous night Kassandra began to kiss her way down her body. She stopped at her breast, circling Kyra’s nipple with the warm flat of her tongue. She drew back and blew cool air across it, watching in delight as it puckered to tautness, sucked it back into the warmth of her mouth, suckled hard till she heard Kyra begin to whimper with need.

Kassandra kissed her way down, tracing the firm muscles of Kyra’s belly, dipped and circled the divot of her navel with an exploratory tongue, felt her squirm, ticklish. She could smell the warm, familiar musk of her arousal, felt Kyra parting her thighs to her, eased herself down the bed and shifted to lie between her legs.

Kyra’s fingers knotted firmly into Kassandra’s hair, she felt the insistent tugging at her head, urging her down to where Kyra wanted her. Kassandra resisted for a few moments despite her own growing need, parted Kyra’s labia and gazed hungrily at her slick, rose flushed folds before bending to her task.

As she licked the first broad, greedy stripe along the length of Kyra’s sex, she frowned, puzzled. It was all so familiar, so comforting, the musky, woody, amber scented warmth of her, and yet…

There was something different. A hint of something new. Like wine of a different vintage. It was undeniably Kyra, always Kyra, would always be Kyra. Kassandra would recognize the scent and taste of her anywhere, after no matter how long, but…

She stopped mid task, felt Kyra raise her head puzzled, heard her frustrated whine as she tried to pull Kassandra’s head back down.

A great, broad grin of realization spread across Kassandra’s face and she completely forgot what she was doing for a moment, looked up, beamed at Kyra, laughed at her perplexed frustration.

“What?” Kyra raised her shoulders a little, trying to work out what was the matter. “What is it? Oh shit,” she frowned, disappointment evident in her voice as she realised the import of what she was about to say. "Oh no! Am I bleeding? I’m sor..”

Kassandra lurched up her body to stop her with a kiss, she was on the verge of telling her. The words were hammering at the back of her teeth, but she stopped herself at the last instant.

Kyra should realise for herself, she thought.

“Nothing,” she grinned. "I just love you so, so much,” she laughed delightedly.

“Well this isn’t very loving,” Kyra pouted. “Teasing me like this,” she pressed her hips up against Kassandra, ground against her, whining a little.

“No,” Kassandra shook her head, still grinning “It’s not, is it?”

She moved down the bed, bent to her task again, burying her face in Kyra’s sex, breathing deep, drinking in the new scent, the new taste, barely able to stop herself laughing with delight even as she sucked Kyra’s twitching clitoris between her lips, circled it firmly with the flat of her tongue.
She felt Kyra surging up against her, bucking urgently against her face as release approached and slipped her fingers easily into her, thrusting in time with her desperate grinding, laughing against Kyra’s sex as she came, dragging at Kassandra’s hair, pulsing wetly around her fingers, flooding her palm.

When she’d kissed and licked and stroked Kyra through her twitching aftershocks, she moved up, kissed her deeply, curious to know if she would notice the difference in her own taste.

“What on earth is the matter?” Kyra cupped Kassandra’s face in her hands, looked at her curiously. “Why are you…grinning like that?” she smiled, puzzled.

“I’m happy,” Kassandra laughed, flopping on her back beside her, breathing deeply. “I’m in love with my wife, we’ve just made love, can’t I be happy?”

“I love to see you happy,” Kyra laughed, still confused. “Let’s see if I can make you a little happier still eh?” she reached down for her.

“No, it’s okay,” Kassandra caught her hand. “I’m good.”

“Are you sure?” Kyra cocked an eyebrow and looked archly at Kassandra’s very evident erection. “Because you certainly look like you could use a little attention.”

“I honestly could not feel better, happier, more content than I do right now,” Kassandra pressed Kyra’s hand to her lips. “I love you so much…and,” she cocked an ear. ”Unless my ears deceive me, here comes the lovely Savina to awkwardly interrupt your “morning routine”.”

Kyra sat back a little, looked at Kassandra. It was absolutely impossible that she was drunk, she thought. And she wasn’t wrong about Savina, her hearing was as acute as her sense of smell she remembered as she heard the gentle tapping at the door.

Kassandra raised herself on her elbows and watched Kyra get ready for the day, smiling contentedly all the while.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Kyra arched an eyebrow as she came over to the bed and bent to kiss her.

“I certainly am,” Kassandra grinned. “Look,” she nodded to her crotch. ”It went away all by itself!”

“That wasn’t quite what I meant,” Kyra laughed, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “And you may regret pointing that out to me, you’ve set a precedent now,” she smiled.

When she’d left Kassandra flopped back on the bed, arms outspread, grinning till her face ached.

She wanted to run through the house and tell everyone, wanted to climb on the roof and scream it, wanted to scramble to the head of Artemis and roar it to the whole of Mykonos.

Kyra was having her baby!

Deep inside her, even now, something was happening, something was changing, forming, growing and life was never going to be the same again. Part of her wanted to run after Kyra, take her in her arms and tell her, tell her what so far only Kassandra knew.

But another part of her wanted Kyra to find out for herself, wanted her to make the discovery like any other mother to be, wanted her to be able to tell Kassandra, to tell everyone herself.
Part of Kassandra just didn’t want to spoil that moment of surprise for Kyra.

But she couldn’t stay here, couldn’t stay in the house right now. Her whole body, every muscle was singing with energy, vibrating with excitement.

Kassandra got up, dressed quickly. She didn’t trust herself to walk through the house, she couldn’t keep the idiot grin off her face.

As she had the day before, she stepped out onto the balcony, hopped onto the balustrade, vaulted up to the roof. This time though she raced across the villa, leapt lightly down the other side, scaring the life out of one of the gardeners and set off at a run across the meadows.

She ran full tilt, arms pistoning, legs pumping, lungs straining, ran till she burned and trembled, ran till she reached her destination, the rocks by the underground chamber where Kyra had discovered the scroll.

Kassandra flopped, spread-eagled on the grass, chest heaving, muscles shaking, pulse pounding in her ears and laughed with what breath she could spare. It had worked, the whole ridiculous, painful enterprise had worked.

She gazed up with swimming eyes as the shifting clouds scudded across the azure sky and offered a silent prayer of thanks to the sphinx, wherever it was, whatever it was doing. She wished it peace, relief from its boredom, a gentle death even, if that was what it desired.

She lay there until her pulse steadied and her breath became her own again, then sat up. She would bring their child here, she decided. When it was old enough she would bring it out here to where she and Phoibe had begun the whole bizarre journey.

She would tell it of the hunt and the fall and the quest. Of how much its mothers had yearned for it, of the incredible lengths to which they’d gone to bring it into the world. She’d tell it how loved it was. She would tell it how loved it was every day.

Kassandra got to her feet, brushed the dust and grass from her tunic and took a deep breath. Her energy had returned along with her breath. She looked about her, feeling the quivering excitement welling within her again.

There was something she should do, she decided. It was something she’d never felt driven to do before but suddenly it seemed hugely important, not just that she do it, but that she do it now.

She ran back into town more steadily, the sun was high, she felt it beating down on her back, felt rivulets of sweat trickle between her shoulder blades, run down to pool in the small of her back.

Kassandra was sweating hard by the time she reached the temple. She stopped at the steps, made a detour to the stables and washed her face and arms in the horse trough. The sun was hot enough that by the time she returned to the temple she was dry again.

It was cool and dark inside. She’d come at a good time. The place was silent apart from a novice sweeping the floors around the pillars. Kassandra made for the steps down below the temple but stopped part way there.

In front of the altar knelt Ophelia. Kassandra realised she’d never actually seen her at worship. But then, she reminded herself, she was rarely here except to talk to the old priestess about decidedly extra-curricular matters. She was suddenly glad that she’d taken the time to wash.

As quietly as she could Kassandra made her way over to the altar.
Ophelia looked even tinier kneeling down. She shouldn’t be here alone, kneeling on the cold stone floor Kassandra thought, flushed with an unexpected feeling of warmth and affection for the old woman. Someone should be here to help her up, to make sure she could get safely to her room.

Kassandra sank to her knees beside Ophelia, looked up at the stern, lovely face of the virgin huntress, realised to her embarrassment that she didn’t really know how to pray to her.

“Just speak what’s in your heart, you big ox,” Ophelia said quietly, without opening her eyes. “She’ll make allowances for the lost child who’s returned.”

Kassandra bowed her head, closed her eyes and offered thanks.

Then she asked for help. Help for Kyra that she would be well, and strong and healthy and that the goddess would stand beside her as their child grew within her, that she would bless her with a safe, quick delivery when her time came.

She asked for help for herself, for help to learn from her mistakes, for the strength she would need to raise and care for her growing family. She asked for the help to love bravely.

When she opened her eyes Ophelia was sitting silently beside her, leaning back on her heels.

Kassandra got to her feet, bent double and put an arm around the old priestess to help her up. She practically lifted her to her feet. She weighed next to nothing.

“Fair enough, Misthios,” she smiled. “This will count as your first visit to temple. Keep it up. Come, give me your arm,” she reached up. “Help me to my room eh? We can sit and chat for a while, no? That girl of yours? Young Phoibe. She’s a good lass, clever, going to grow into a fine woman. Don’t suppose you’ve had much to do with that eh?” she teased.

“No, not really,” Kassandra agreed, quite sincerely. “I think the other women in her life have had more to do with that.”

Ophelia glanced up at her, a little surprised.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Misthios,” she opened the door to her room. “You’re not a bad sort really. And self pity is one of the least attractive emotions.”

She shuffled over to her table and poured a cup of wine.

“I have prayers written down by the way,” she said, looking up at Kassandra. “If that would help make it easier for you. But you can just talk to her, you know. One huntress to another eh?” she laughed.

“I have a favour to ask,” Kassandra glanced down at her feet, shuffled a little.

“Don’t you always Misthios,” Ophelia kicked the stool over towards her, “and what is it this time?” she topped up her cup. “I’ve already agreed to… massage the truth for you, in temple no less!” she laughed.

“I’d like to make an offering to the goddess,” Kassandra said quietly. “But it’s been a long time, I’ve sort of forgotten what’s appropriate.”

“Well, it depends what it’s in aid of,” Ophelia took a drink. “Sit down would you, you big ox, you make the room seem even smaller looming around there.”

Kassandra eyed the stool wearily, folded herself up carefully and perched with her knees up to her
“What is it you want of her?” Ophelia sat down, eyed her keenly.

“I don’t want anything,” Kassandra looked over at her, felt the smile growing again, despite the familiar, almost painful stretch in her hamstrings. “I want to thank her.”

“Well that’s very nice,” Ophelia nodded. “She’ll like that. Nothing like thanking her to get her to look kindly on your endeavours.”

“She already has,” Kassandra grinned. “That’s why I want to thank her... privately. No one else knows yet,” she said quietly. “Not even Kyra.”

Ophelia looked up, astonishment writ large on her face. She reached out without looking and put down her cup, missing the table. It fell by her foot without breaking, spilling the last dregs on the dusty floor.

“Really?” she said quietly.

Kassandra nodded.

Suddenly, for the first time since she’d realised, she felt her eyes swim with tears. She blinked hard, brushing her cheeks awkwardly, half expecting Ophelia to say something cutting.

Instead the old woman got to her feet and shuffled over to her.

To Kassandra’s surprise she wrapped her thin, bony arms around Kassandra’s massive shoulders and eased her close, drew her head against her narrow chest and let her cry.

“Well done, Kassandra,” she whispered, stroking her hair gently. “Very well done indeed.”
Kassandra struggled to keep the secret. She wasn’t a great liar around people who knew her and she was certain both Phoibe and Kyra knew something was amiss by the end of the day.

She’d spent most of it with Ophelia chatting quite contentedly with the old priestess. To her astonishment she’d even been offered the chair.
“Hardly seems appropriate for a mother to be, crouching on that stool,” Ophelia had laughed.

Kassandra had made to get up, she was already leaning forward, legs tensing when she sat back.

“No, actually,” she smiled. ”I think I’ll stay here if it’s all the same. This is my stool after all...I assume?” she arched an eyebrow.

“Of course,” Ophelia chuckled quietly, blowing the dust out of a second cup and filling it with wine. “It wouldn’t be anything like as entertaining to see anyone else sitting on it. Here,” she pushed the cup towards Kassandra.

She eyed it skeptically.

“I thought you weren’t going to ply me with drink again?” she picked it up.

“Phh, ply you!” Ophelia snorted. “As if I could ply you with anything. I’m not trying to get you drunk, Misthios, we’re just going to be the first to toast the new arrival eh? And you can drink what you like now, I imagine. You’ve done your duty,” she winked. “Though you do realise you’ll have to vacate that stool when you bring the little one to visit...it’s about the right size eh?”

By the time she returned home the staff had left for the night and Kyra and Phoibe were sitting in the kitchen at supper.

“Where in Hades have you been all day?” Phoibe looked up, “I was looking for you. I wanted to see if you wanted to come swimming. But then I wondered if you can go swimming with your...whatsit,” she nodded at Kassandra’s crotch. “But you were nowhere to be seen. Not a word, not a note, nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Kassandra kissed her to shut her up and grabbed a handful of nuts from a bowl on the table. “I was with Ophelia,” she walked around the table, grinning uncontrollably as she approached Kyra.

“Should I be jealous?” she teased as Kassandra bent, cradled her chin gently and kissed her, softly at first before gently insinuating her tongue between Kyra’s willing lips, sliding her hand round the back of her head, holding her close.

Phoibe cleared her throat.

Kassandra laughed and broke the kiss, pressed her nose softly against Kyra’s.


“Ah hem!” Phoibe cleared her throat again, with an air of theatricality. “Kyra said we could all go swimming tomorrow afternoon, you’ll just have to tie your perizoma nice and tight. And she says that when you get in the cold water it’ll take care of itself, you’ll be fine.”

“Well, you make it sound very tempting,” Kassandra laughed, sitting down, tossing nuts in the air and catching them in her mouth. “Swimming it is then...maybe fish a little eh?” she grinned at Phoibe.

“Yes!” she beamed happily. “Really? The three of us?”

“Four of us,” Kyra corrected.

Kassandra flinched, missed an almond and winced as it hit her in the eye. She blinked a little
painfully and looked over, startled and open mouthed.

“We should take Orion,” Kyra smiled. “He loves the sea. What is it?” she looked at Kassandra...looking back at her.

Kassandra tried to read Kyra’s expression and failed utterly.

If she knew, this would be the perfect time to tell them, just the three of them sitting quietly together. She sat and waited, almost quivering with expectancy, only to see Kyra turn back to the table, break a piece of bread from the heel of a loaf and spread it with a little cheese.

“You know,” Kassandra slapped her knees crisply. “Hippolytus asked me to arrange to get that olive tree trimmed back, the one that’s encroaching on the trellis work? He’s worried that it blocks the line of sight from the upper portico and he’s quite right. I forgot to mention it to the gardener earlier so…”

She got to her feet and made for the door.

“The gardeners aren’t here now,” Phoibe rolled her eyes. “They left hours ago, while you were socialising at the temple.”

“I went to pray actually,” Kassandra said without thinking and saw them both turn to gape at her.

“I...er...I thought I’d make a start...on temple attendance,” she swallowed. “And now I’m going to lop a few branches off that tree. Nothing that needs a gardener, just a strong pair of arms.”

There were a couple of minutes silence as Kyra and Phoibe sat looking at each other, eyebrows raised.

“Ophelia swore she wasn’t going to get her drunk again,” Phoibe shook her head. “And she is a priestess when all is said and done,” she shrugged. “And she’s going to kill that tree, you realise?”

Kassandra busied herself chopping down the offending branches, and then further occupied herself with the entirely unnecessary task of reducing them to firewood and stacking the resulting cordwood onto the already quite substantial pile by the kitchen.

By the time she had finished she was weary and sweaty and her shoulders were aching. She stripped to her underwear and washed at the pump, dried herself roughly on her sweaty tunic and made her way upstairs.

Kyra was already in bed, curled up asleep, breathing steadily. Kassandra stripped off her underwear, placed it in the basket to be laundered and stood for a moment or two watching her, the soft waves of hair over her ears, the thick fringe of her lashes flickering slightly as her eyes moved.

Did she know, she wondered? Was she teasing Kassandra? Or just waiting to be sure? Or was Kassandra reading too much into it?

She dreamt of their child again that night. She held the solid, warm little bundle in her arms, felt it moving strongly against her chest, felt its warm hand at her cheek. Kassandra glanced down, hoping to see its face, but it was suddenly hidden in shadow. She looked up.

The sphinx sat there, vast and impassive, close enough that she could smell the rank, raw meat stink of its breath, see herself and her child reflected in its beautiful, inscrutable gaze. As she watched, breath trapped in her lungs, it bent its massive head right down to the baby in her arms.

Its face was close now, closer than it had ever been, closer than when it had thrown her to the ground
and glowered over her in its fury. She could almost touch the poreless perfection of its skin, felt the soft brush of a golden curl against her cheek.

As she watched, a slow, soft smile spread across its face and the very tip of its pink tongue, rough like a cat’s, dipped out and brushed across the top of her baby’s head, smoothing down the black fuzz. She heard the baby giggle, a delighted laugh, somehow reminiscent of Kyra.

“Another bold little creature,” the sphinx purred. “How you continue to amuse me, little Misthios.”

Kassandra! Kassandra,” she opened her eyes and looked up to see Kyra leaning over her, fully dressed, hair braided, already wearing her laurels.

Kassandra raised herself on her elbows, still bleary from sleep.

“I didn’t really want to wake you,” Kyra bent to kiss her. “You were laughing, it must have been a lovely dream?”

“It...sort of was...yes...I think,” she ran her hands through her messy hair.

“I have to go sweetheart,” Kyra kissed her again, more lingeringly. “I’m visiting the orphanage and then I have to go and be stern and severe with Nomiki.”

“Lucky Nomiki,” Kassandra laughed amiably.

“Yes, he’ll think so when I’ve finished with him, the shifty little weasel,” Kyra muttered. “But I’ll be back in good time for swimming, don’t worry.”

To Kassandra’s breathless astonishment Kyra pulled back the sheet and bent to kiss first between her breasts, then down to her navel, before pressing a tender kiss to the soft, sleeping flesh of her sex. Kassandra felt herself twitch in automatic response and Kyra laughed softly.

“Dress appropriately,” she smiled. “See you later.”

Kyra chose to lead them out to a secluded area of beach where she was certain they wouldn’t be overlooked and where Phoibe would stand a good chance of catching flatfish for the evening meal.

She was so convinced of their privacy that by the time Kassandra had tethered the horses, and unpacked the water and the bundle of snacks that Cymone had provided, Kyra had stripped naked and was splashing in the water with a delighted Phoibe and a wildly over excited Orion.

Kassandra sat on the beach for a while watching them, smiling happily. It had been too long since she’d seen Kyra like this, fully relaxed, free of the weight of responsibility, laughing and having fun.

She watched her hoist Phoibe onto her shoulders, not without difficulty. She was too big now for anyone but Kassandra to do that easily. She flailed there laughing for a couple of minutes before Kyra’s knees gave out and they collapsed into the shallow waves, Orion barking and splashing around them.

When she emerged spluttering a moment later, raising her arms to comb her wet hair back from her face Kassandra was suddenly transported to that day years ago when they had first made love on a beach not far from here. When a teasing young Kyra had run laughing into the waves and pulled Kassandra after her by her heart and her cunt.
She’d held her thus ever since, she thought. However far apart they’d been, however bitter the words between them at times, it had all been leading to this, to sitting here in the warm sun, watching her family playing in the sea.

“Don’t just sit there,” Phoibe laughed, standing a little way from Kyra, spluttering as Orion messily doggy paddled over to her. “There’s no one around Kass, come on in.”

Kassandra moved to get up and realised that in all decency she couldn’t right now.

“In a few minutes Phoibe,” she called. “Just let me get...accustomed...to...er..”

Kyra seemed to work out what the problem was. Laughing and shaking her head she strode out of the breakers and across the beach to flop on the sand beside Kassandra.

“Having a little problem there, Misthios?” she breathed, glancing down. “Actually not so little eh?” she grinned.

“I’m sorry,” Kassandra smiled sheepishly. “You...you just looked...exactly like you did...the first time. Our first time. You bewitched me then Kyra. You still do it now...with just a word, just a look…” she glanced down at the sand between her feet, unable to look at Kyra’s beauty for a moment, overwhelmed.

“I’m touched Kassandra,” Kyra leaned over, kissed her shoulder gently and whispered in her ear, ”flattered that I still have the same effect on you... now that I’m pregnant.”

The rest of Kassandra’s body stiffened instantly. She sat frozen for a moment before turning to meet Kyra’s smiling eyes.

“How long have you known, Kassandra?” Kyra laughed. “How long have you known, and why didn’t you tell me?”

Kassandra shifted round to face her.

“I wanted you to...I wanted you to have the surprise,” she glanced down bashfully. “I think I began to...sense something a few days ago,” she said thoughtfully, as it suddenly occurred to her. The number of occasions recently when something indefinable had caught her senses. “But I didn’t realise properly until…”

“Yesterday morning?” Kyra tilted her head. “You were making love to me and you stopped… you were laughing…”

Kassandra smiled, felt tears filling her eyes, nodded mutely.

“I think that was the moment I suspected,” Kyra said thoughtfully. “I just...wanted to wait a little...be a little more sure…”

“And now you are?” Kassandra felt a tear roll free, didn’t care.

“Now I am, yes, because you are,” Kyra caressed her face. “I can see it in your eyes. You know. You absolutely know.”

She frowned a little. “Gods...Kassandra...did you...did you smell it somehow? Taste it? What?” she breathed.

“A little of both,” Kassandra admitted. “It’s still you, love. Still totally you, but with something else,
it’s beautiful. You’re beautiful,” she leaned forward caught Kyra’s mouth with hers kissed her tenderly, caressing her neck with trembling fingers.

“Gods, Kassandra,” Kyra shivered a little, wrapped her arms about her shoulders, held her close. “It’s really happening. Right now. We’re...we’re having this baby.”

Kassandra grinned delightedly, pulled Kyra in tight, kissed her hard as they tumbled together into the warm sand, heedless of anything but each other, kissing greedily now, devouring each other, laughing into each others mouths as they did so.

“Oy, oy, oy!” it was Phoibe. She was somehow managing to convey an eyeroll with just her voice. “I know I said there was no one around...but me and the dog are here. Don’t get me wrong, I know it’s natural and beautiful when two people are in love, but all the same. Orion’s not old enough to see this for one thing.”

“Should we tell her?” Kassandra grinned excitedly.

“I think so,” Kyra laughed. ”You’re terrible at keeping secrets.”

“Oh my gods!” Phoibe clasped her hands to her mouth. “Really? You’re not...no, of course you’re not joking,” she flung her arms around Kyra’s neck and hugged her tightly. “Oh gods, it worked. It actually worked! I can’t believe it.”

“No, neither can I really,” Kassandra laughed, rubbing the back of her neck.

“So, you’re excited?” Kyra stroked Phoibe’s cheek softly. “About being a big sister?”

“Oh gods yes!” Phoibe beamed. “I never, ever, ever, thought it could happen. I mean I could see the lie of the land with Kassandra,” she cocked her thumb at her. “It was never happening there. I just...I just never thought…” she braced herself back on her hands and grinned up at the sky. “And now I’m going to get a little sister!”

“Or brother,” Kassandra reminded her.

“Don’t tell me you had a vision?” Kassandra grinned.

“Phhh, don’t be ridiculous of course I didn’t,” Phoibe snorted. “It just stands to reason, no? Two women, together? Of course it’s going to be a girl. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I’m amused by your logic, Phoibe,” Kyra laughed. “Considering that we are two women together. And that there was a sphinx and a magical pool involved.”

“And a shimmery, mother of pearl cock,” Phoibe nodded at Kassandra’s crotch and raised a hand to cut off her reproof. “I get that. But all the same...I bet you a hundred drachmae!” she looked over
“Do you have a hundred drachmae?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows. “That’s a lot of rabbits.”

“I’ve caught a lot of rabbits,” Phoibe shrugged. “Are we on, or are you chicken? If you’re right you’ve got a fifty fifty chance anyway.”

“Fair enough,” Kassandra laughed, too happy to worry about anything right now.

“I’m not sure I approve of you two gambling over the future of this child whilst it’s right here,” Kyra was leaning back on her arms, smiling fondly at them.

They both turned and looked at her, reclining there, smiling contentedly, her hair clinging wetly to her shoulders and her smooth brown skin frosted with light sand.

“Sorry,” Phoibe laughed. “We’re sorry,” she reached out a tentative hand, glanced to Kyra for a confirmatory nod, and placed it gently, low on her belly. “We’re sorry little one. Whoever wins will buy you something nice with the wager...and it’s going to be me,” she grinned.

Kassandra gave her a playful clip round the ear and looked up as Orion came with a mouthful of dripping seaweed as an offering for Kyra.

“We need to go tell Ophelia on the way back,” she decided. “She has some not entirely untrue words of wisdom to compose.”

Three days later the temple was heaving with islanders ready to hear Ophelia’s dubious pronouncements.

Kyra was dressed in her robes, wearing her laurels, hair neatly arranged. Phoibe had on a new chiton and Savina had braided her hair to match Kyra’s. Kassandra was wearing her official body guard armour, buffed and polished to within an inch of its life.

She had wondered for a moment or two if it might bring with it unpleasant recollections of the night of Arsenios’ visit.

But as Phoibe had helped her fasten the chest pieces and found the broach to fasten the chlamys she found that she could think of nothing but the present, nothing but the beautiful woman standing just feet away with Kassandra’s child quickening in her belly.

“Yes, yes, they’ve come from all over,” Ophelia patted Kassandra’s arm as they stood in the entrance to the temple looking at the murmuring throng. “We laid on biscuits and wine.” She saw Kyra’s eyebrows shoot up.

“No, no, not from your cellar, Archon, don’t worry,” Ophelia chuckled. “Savina arranged it all through Mikis. She’s a remarkable girl your Savina,” she said, thoughtfully. “You are paying for it of course.”

Kyra rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Never fear,” Ophelia took her hand. “She somehow managed to get something both cheap and reasonably potable. Remarkable girl, as I said. So, they’re all well disposed to take on board whatever I want to tell them by now,” she laughed. “Go in. Take your seats, everyone is waiting on you.”
All eyes were upon them as Amyrita ushered them along to a cushioned bench by the side of the altar, they stayed on them for the duration of the ceremony.

Kyra and Phoibe sat, intent and attentive, either side of Kassandra, apparently immune to the gaze of the entire congregation but Kassandra could feel herself fidgeting, feel their eyes pricking her skin.

She shifted a little awkwardly, tried to concentrate on what was unfolding, watched Amyrita return to the dimly lit hall flanked by beautifully robed novices, bearing in her hands a slender cloth wrapped bundle. The feather no doubt, Kassandra reasoned.

She could half hear Ophelia pronouncing the praises of the wise and beautiful Archon who had made it her mission to renovate the temple of the goddess. Heard her exclaim over how the virgin huntress would bless her for her devoutness.

There was an ornate wooden stand on the altar, Kassandra noticed. She’d not seen that the other day. Presumably it was intended to display the feather.

They wouldn’t leave it there all the time, surely, she considered? Some shifty bastard would be sure to try and steal it.

In fact, under a different set of circumstances and not so very long ago as all that, she might have been that shifty bastard.

“Psst,” Phoibe kicked her ankle, quite hard actually, Kassandra thought a little resentfully.

She looked over at her. She was frowning and nodding urgently in the direction of Ophelia.

...but ANOTHER mighty huntress,” Ophelia barked, with the air of one repeating herself, and not for the first time. “Our Archon’s beloved mate, Kassandra Of Sparta. Who else could have brought to Mykonos such a glorious offering?” she flung out a bony hand.

If all eyes hadn’t been on them before, they certainly were now.

Amyrita unwrapped the feather with a flourish of unsuspected theatricality and placed it on the stand. A low murmur of wonder rippled through the gathered throng.

It did look magnificent Kassandra reflected. Ophelia had clearly had a number of the lamps extinguished in advance to dim the ambient light and the feather glowed with an unearthly intensity.

“And surely the Goddess will smile on the wandering lamb, returned to the fold with such a trophy,” Ophelia beamed. “Even if the sheep in question looks a little more like a wolf. Indeed, she may well prefer that. We know what the Goddess is like after all.”

Kassandra raised her eyebrows and gazed sidelong at Phoibe, who was pursing her lips, thoughtfully.

“Truly she shall look kindly on their innermost desire,” Ophelia held up her arms. “Beam down kindly on their union, however unorthodox some of you may consider it to be. Who are you, who are we, who are any of us to query the wisdom of the Goddess? Her mercy will rain down on those who honour her, and look at how the Archon and her mate honour the Huntress. Giving her a temple worthy of her, ridding her of the filth of those disrespectful pigeons, dirty little buggers that they are.”

Kassandra glanced sidelong at Kyra, she was immobile and gloriously impassive.
“Her blessing shall fall upon the Archon, I tell you this,” Ophelia declaimed. “This very night, the secret yearnings of her heart shall be made known and answered. And who better to be the vessel of the glorious Huntress’ gift than our own glorious Misthios? Who else would be worthy of delivering the Goddess’ blessing, I ask you? For surely they have pleased her...in every way, I imagine. I mean I’m sure we’ve all speculated in idle moments. Our blessed protectoress is fond of a communal bath after an arduous hunt after all, I can’t imagine, when it comes right down to it that she would be at all adverse to...”

Amyrita cleared her throat loudly and dramatically. Even Kyra was shifting a little on the seat, Kassandra observed, trying to keep her eyebrows under control.

“Yes, well, that’s as may be,” Ophelia shook her head, rerouted her train of thought. “This very night, I tell you, and who knows, possibly on a few subsequent nights also, I suppose it depends on how effective the Goddess’ blessing is...quite effective though, I imagine,” she caught Amyrita frowning and tilting her head in the direction of the congregation. “Our glorious Eagle Bearer shall feel the hand of the Goddess herself, feel her bestowing her radiant mercy, her divine hand shall work its way deep into her very loins!”

“Your very loins!?” Phoibe hissed, glancing sidelong at Kassandra.

She hadn’t anticipated her loins becoming a topic of conversation in temple and shuffled in her seat a little, heard Kyra whisper to keep still.

“Do you feel it Misthios?!” Ophelia spun round to her with hitherto unsuspected alacrity.

“Feel...it?” Kassandra ventured when it became apparent that an answer was expected.

“The hand of the goddess!” Ophelia raised her own hands heavenwards.

“I...um...” Kassandra wasn’t sure there was a correct answer to that particular question, given the rather florid nature of the build up. “I’m not...sure?”


“I well,” Kassandra wiggled a little awkwardly, felt all eyes on her.

“Just say “yes”,” Phoibe hissed. “Yes, yes, I do.”

“Erm...yes?” Kassandra nodded tentatively.

“There you have it!!” Ophelia shouted triumphantly. “Wonder!” she swung a hand in the direction of the glowing feather. “Blessed by...WONDER!!” she bellowed, flinging both hands in Kassandra’s direction. “Praise to blessed Artemis, virgin huntress, lover of maidens, after her fashion, guardian of the pregnant woman. Truly we are all blessed,” she clapped her hands.

A puzzled, but undeniably impressed murmur rippled through the crowd.

“And you know what else the Goddess likes, besides offerings and hunting, and maidens of course?” Ophelia held out her arms.

“She’s going to get struck down,” Phoibe hissed anxiously.

“A sing song!” Ophelia declaimed to everyone’s surprise.
This was the first Kassandra had heard of the rather austere Artemis’ predilection for a bit of a knees up, but nevertheless there were a group of young novices sitting by the pillars, haltingly tuning a selection of lyres and lutes.

“Let’s have the one about hunting the young doe,” Ophelia decided. “The one that’s ripe with innuendo on a second glance, she likes that one. Come on girls strike up, close enough is good enough at this stage, the Archon and her wife have business to conduct.”

“I’m going to kill her,” Kyra whispered. “Or have her killed.”

Kassandra on the other hand was listening to the song with increasing interest. It turned out temple was a good deal less stuffy then she’d been led to believe, she thought.

Whatever Phoibe and Kyra may have thought of Ophelia’s pronouncements, they had clearly gone down well with the slightly tipsy temple goers. They left the building quickly enough, but didn’t go much further, gathering in small gossiping groups at the foot of the stairs to see the stars of the show exit.

That song?” Kassandra frowned quizzically as Ophelia accompanied them out. “That wasn’t really about hunting a doe was it?” she raised an eyebrow.


“Well there you go,” she looked down the steps to the chattering crowd.

“Half of them have no idea what all that was about, but they know something surprising is going to happen soon, and the other half are already imagining what the pair of you are going to be doing when you get home,” she waved a hand expansively.

“Well, yes, thank you, Ophelia,” Kyra sighed. “It wasn’t... quite what I was expecting, but it seems to have done the job.”

“You’re very welcome Archon,” Ophelia smiled and patted her hand. “And Artemis will watch over you, you know. I’ll have a word.”

“They have an understanding,” Phoibe nodded, receiving a friendly nudge from Ophelia. “Though I’m not sure Artemis won’t want to renegotiate after today.”

“Well, honestly Ophelia,” Kassandra laughed. “It sort of was what I was expecting, insofar as I was expecting anything. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome Misthios,” Ophelia patted her ass. Kassandra was a little startled but reasoned it was one of the few places within reach for her. “See you at temple?”

“Absolutely,” Kassandra grinned, not lying this time. “Do you often sing that song?”

“Oh, Misthios!” Ophelia chuckled. “Artemis has a whole song-book full of dubious innuendo, you’ll love it.”

As they made to descend the stairs Kassandra straightened her breast plate, adjusted her belt to sit a little more securely about her hips and took up her official position two short strides behind and to the shoulder of Kyra, close enough to step in instantly should her aid be required.

Kyra didn’t move though. She looked down at the gathered groups. Most of them were looking up at
Kyra and Kassandra with expressions a cocktail of curiosity, puzzlement and respect, seasoned here and there with more than a little lasciviousness.

It would do, she thought.

She turned to Kassandra, she was standing at her full height behind her, shoulders back, chin up, face professionally impassive, hand on the pommel of her sword.

Kyra looked back down at the curious crowd.

“Sweetheart?” she extended her hand.

“Hmm?” Kassandra looked down, confused.

“Let’s stop this ridiculous pretense shall we?” Kyra smiled. “They all know what we’re going to be doing tonight, or think they do,” she laughed.

“Well, in fairness, they’re probably not wrong are they?” Phoibe chuckled.

“Not exactly,” Kyra smiled. “Though, admittedly, I don’t know precisely what they’re imagining, so…” she shrugged, amused.

“May I have your arm...wife?” she looked at Kassandra, face full of hope.

Kassandra looked at her extended hand for a long moment and a broad smile spread across her face.

“Of course, my love, whenever you wish,” she took Kyra’s hand and tucked it under her arm.

“Daughter?” Kyra reached out to Phoibe and shared a smile as she took her hand

Together they descended the steps returning respectful greetings, nodding politely at the odd bow here and there.

A few paces in, a woman’s hand extended from a small group of onlookers. Kassandra immediately stiffened and spun, dropping Kyra’s arm, standing between her and whoever had the audacity to attempt to touch her. Her sword was already partly drawn when she saw the startled, apologetic face of Savina, holding up her empty hands.

“Gods, Savina,” she laughed in relief. “You took your life in your hands.”

“I’m sorry,” Savina was looking a little pale, but mustered a smile. “I didn’t think. I’m relieved to see the swiftness of your reflexes however, of course.”

“Shout, next time,” Kassandra held her shoulder for a moment. “Were you at temple, just now?”

“Yes, I was trying to catch you up,” she fell into step beside them.”I swear I didn’t see Ophelia’s...speech...beforehand,” she shook her head, took hold of Phoibe’s proffered free hand.

“I’m amused that you think she’d written down any of that. She was totally winging it,” Phoibe chuckled as they made their way through the last groups of onlookers and saw Praxos sitting on a wall opposite, swinging his feet and eating a pastry, feeding odd bits to Orion who sat drooling below him.

“You are going to make my dog fat, Praxos,” Kyra called, seeing him jump guiltily.

Orion turned delightedly at the sound of his mistress’ voice and came lolling over as Praxos
jumped heavily down from the wall and began to brush crumbs from his beard.

“He...missed you,” he nodded at the dog who was waggling his whole body in delight as Kyra and Phoibe petted him.

“And I wanted to hear what the ceremony was about,” he frowned, dubiously. “I’m not sure...well I’m not sure that I totally got the drift of it.” he blushed hotly. “Well I mean, I thought I did, but...I don’t think I can have done...not in temple...” he tailed off awkwardly.

“Judging by your blush,” Phoibe teased, “you totally got the gist of it, Praxos.”

“Really?” he glanced cautiously at Kyra who was giving Orion a final tickle behind the ears and standing up.

“Well...I understand your being doubtful...brother,” she ventured and watched his eyes widen, saw him swallow hard. “But Phoibe is quite right. Though admittedly Ophelia’s phraseology is sometimes a little....”

“Unconventional,” Phoibe suggested. “It would be good to be an uncle though Praxos, don’t you think?” she grinned.

He didn’t seem able to speak for a moment and his eyes seemed suspiciously bright. He turned for a moment and looked up to the villa, blinking hard before turning back and grinning down at Phoibe.

“I thought I already was?” he ruffled her hair a little, cautious of her new braids.

“Yeah, of course,” she took hold of his huge, rough hand.” But to be an uncle from the beginning sort of? And now I come to think of it...you know what uncles do?”

“Many things I fancy,” Praxos laughed. “What in particular were you thinking of?”

“‘They give their weary nieces shoulder rides up tiring hills?’ Phoibe cocked a hopeful eyebrow.

Moments later she was squealing like a little girl again as he effortlessly swung her up to sit on his massive shoulders. Orion bounced and barked excitedly, wagging his tail in a frenzy of delight as he circled Praxos’ feet.

“I think we should get home,” Kyra smiled fondly. ”Before we give the chattering masses more to gossip about.”

“Are you sure?” Kassandra had stepped back close, her arm pressed against Kyra’s shoulder. “Not even one more, tiny little thing to fuel their excited speculation?” she bent low, spoke softly, her eyes laughing.


Kyra looked from Savina’s playful emerald glance to Kassandra’s sultry amber gaze.

“Very well, Misthios,” she breathed. “Just this once,” she inclined her head as Kassandra raised her chin with a single finger and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to her lips.

An excited ripple washed through the crowd.

“And now,” Kyra blushed a little as Kassandra put a powerful arm about her shoulders and eased her close. “We should definitely go home,” she reached out a hand for Savina and the five of them set off
back to the villa, Orion repeatedly racing ahead and coming back to check progress, leaving a swelling wave of curious speculation in their wake.

Chapter End Notes

I’m calling it now. Ophelia writes Artemis femslash in her down time.
Nine months later - give or take.

Kyra had clearly made a valiant effort to not wake Kassandra, and had in fact managed to get out of bed clandestinely, but getting back in had defeated her. The mattress dipped dramatically and Kassandra found herself tipped onto her side a little, watching Kyra clamber aboard.

“Oh, shit,” Kyra sighed. “I’m sorry love. I tried not to wake you, I swear.”

“Why ever not?” Kassandra rubbed her bleary eyes and half sat up. “I don’t mind you waking me. Are you all right?” she asked, suddenly anxious.

“What? Oh yes,” Kyra sat sideways on the bed, dangling her legs over the side. “I’m fine, It’s not time yet,” she laughed. “I just needed to pee...again,” she sighed. “I’m sure more fluid comes out than goes in over the course of a day.”

She sat quietly in the moonlight and Kassandra watched as she dipped her head and rubbed a hand rhythmically over the swell of her belly.

“Won’t the little one let you sleep?” she asked softly, sitting up fully and reaching out to rub Kyra’s shoulder.

“It’s nothing,” Kyra shook her head. “My back aches a little...well everything aches a little,” she gave a humourless laugh. “And it feels like this baby is never coming out. Like it’s just going to stay in here forever. I don’t want to keep moaning about it though. You must be sick of it by now,” she glanced over her shoulder.

“Oh not for another good six months yet,” Kassandra teased, receiving a slap to the arm for her trouble. ”And I don’t blame them to be honest,” she grinned. “I’d want to stay in there too.”

“Very funny,” Kyra smiled, stretching her shoulders.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Kassandra leaned over and kissed the back of her neck gently. “Something warm to drink? Something to eat? A cool bath perhaps, it’s a warm night no?” she rubbed Kyra’s back soothingly.

She shuffled back awkwardly into Kassandra’s embrace, leaning into her side.

“Well,” she smiled, taking hold of her hand and placing it to her breast, urging her to caress it. “There is something we could do that would make me feel better,” she smiled archly.

Kassandra laughed delightedly and lowered her hand down to Kyra’s belly, rubbed slow easy circles there, feeling the vague shape of limbs beneath the taut skin and muscle.
“We’re not even alone, Kyra!” she said, playfully scandalized. “Your mater is a shameless woman, little one,” she said more loudly.

“You weren’t so bashful about putting them in here,” Kyra laughed. “Rhea said it’s fine. It’s good for us! And it will take my mind off my back, and my pelvis...and my indigestion. And it’s not kind to deny a pregnant woman.”

“Come here,” Kassandra sat up, leaning back against the head of the bed and parted her knees. “Sit back here,” she laughed and shook her head as Kyra struggled, rather gracelessly to clamber between her legs and lean back against her chest.

Kyra gave a grateful sigh and relaxed into Kassandra’s arms, tilting her head a little to allow her to kiss the side of her neck.

“You’re sure?” Kassandra breathed quietly, slipping her arms around her and caressing her breasts softly.

“Mmm,” Kyra wriggled back, smiling. “You should make the most of it you know, I’m pretty sure I won’t be so obliging for a while afterwards.”

“I’ll manage, I’m sure,” Kassandra shook her head as she teased Kyra’s nipple gently. She felt it leak a few thick drops onto her fingers. It had startled her the first time, but a slightly embarrassing conversation with Rhea had reassured her.

She raised her hand to allow Kyra to lick the milk from her finger, bent to kiss her ear. “I love you,” she whispered. “And you too, little one,” she added a touch more loudly.

“And we love you,” Kyra caught her hand, eased it down over the hard swell of her belly, down to her sex. “But, stop talking now, eh?”

Later, Kassandra sat back with Kyra still leaning back in her arms, comfortably asleep now, breathing slow and soft against her neck. It wasn’t an especially comfortable position for Kassandra but she knew it worked for Kyra, so she put up with it.

A definite advantage to it was that, because it was harder for Kassandra to sleep, she got to sit quietly and feel the baby move.

She’d learned that it regularly shifted around a little after Kyra had been disturbed in the night. Resting her hand on the drum taut skin of Kyra’s belly she could feel it moving, see it even, the subtle shifting of limbs below the skin.

So Kassandra sat and talked quietly with her child as it flexed and stretched and settled.

She told it about its family. About Kyra and Phoibe and Barnabas, about Alexios and Myrrine, about Nike and Selene and Clio, about Savina and Praxos. About all the people who already loved it and were waiting to meet it.

She spoke to it of her own adventures, carefully edited to make suitable bedtime tales and when she’d run out of things to tell it, she sang quietly until it stilled and slept.

These had become her favourite moments of the day, alone with her child, quiet, safe, relaxed, waiting for the blessing of sleep, and she kept them close to herself, not even telling Kyra.

When she woke in the morning, it was with a dead leg. Kyra had slid down and rolled over in the night and was lying over Kassandra’s left leg. She was sound asleep with the covers pulled up to her
chin, snoring softly.

With some difficulty Kassandra managed to drag her leg out of Kyra’s clutches without fully waking her. She replaced her leg with a pillow and Kyra snuggled down happily into it, murmuring something unintelligible.

Kassandra tried to ignore the painful tingling of returning circulation and tucked the covers neatly around Kyra, got dressed and made her way down to the kitchen.

Cymone was already hard at work. She looked over hopefully as Kassandra entered.

“No baby yet, then?” she shrugged.

“No, not yet,” Kassandra smiled. “I thought I’d take her up something to eat please? She had a disturbed night.”

“Ah, you’re a good girl, Misthios,” Cymone laughed. “Make sure you keep this up when the little one arrives, you know.”

“I swear!” Kassandra placed a hand to her chest. “Besides there are so many people here who would kick me into the middle of next week if I didn’t, it’s not worth the risk.”

“Quite right,” said Cymone, only half joking, as she set to preparing a breakfast tray.

For the past couple of weeks Kyra had agreed to take her work into one of the private rooms where she could sit with her feet up, take a nap if necessary and excuse herself more easily for one of her increasingly frequent pee breaks.

Aegeus had been a little sniffy at the suggestion of a lack of professionalism but Savina had begun to display an unexpectedly steely core in dealing with him when Kyra’s well-being was at stake.

Currently Kyra was pacing though. She was pacing and becoming increasingly irritated with Aegeus’ rambling complaints about chicken thieves.

“Chicken thieves for gods’ sakes, Aegeus,” she rubbed her aching back. “Why are we wasting time talking about bloody chicken thieves, can the guards not deal with this without our intervention? We need to sort out the supplies for the artisans working on the temple,” she stretched her back and groaned a little.

“I assume they aren’t stealing the chickens?” she frowned at him. “Because we haven’t provided them with sufficient to eat?” she resumed pacing.

Aegeus assumed a defensive tone.

“With all due respect Archon,“ he wheedled. “It’s not really my fault that they have specific dietary requirements.”

“No!” Kyra retorted. “But it is your fault that we didn’t know about it until….” she stopped and hissed, bent over a little and rubbed her belly firmly.

Kassandra was beside her in an instant, rubbing comforting circles in the small of her back.

“All right, my love?” she bent to see her expression.

Kyra was frowning and had her eyes closed. She was breathing slowly, in through her nose and out through her mouth as Rhea had advised. After a few moments she opened her eyes and smiled at
Kassandra, whose expression was the perfect mix of anxiety and hopefulness.

“Not yet, sweetheart,” Kyra laughed and patted her cheek. “Just a practise contraction.”

“How can you be so sure?” Aegeus was dithering. “How on earth do you know that it’s not happening? It could be happening right now? We should summon the midwife.”

“Sit down Aegeus,” Kyra sighed. “I’ll know when it’s coming.” She resumed her pacing. “We need to transfer some supplies from the guards for the time being and then arrange for regular supplies from Delos, Savina could you..”

“But with all due respect Archon,” Aegeus was fidgeting on the couch beside Savina. “You’ve never had a child before, how would you…”

“Oh do shut up, Aegeus,” said Savina to everyone’s surprise. “Even if it were time, your fussing is helping no-one. And the Archon will know because she is the one experiencing the contractions. She will know if they feel any different.”

“Well!” Aegeus was a picture of wounded dignity, a hand to his chest. “I’m sure I meant no offense Mistress Savina, I can assure you that I only have…”

“No, I’m sorry Aegeus,” Savina sighed. “I think we’re all a little…”

“Can you both stop now?” Kyra said quietly, taking hold of Kassandra’s arm as another contraction arrived. She bent a little, leaning on Kassandra, breathing slowly and a little shakily.

“Kyra?” Kassandra whispered, crouching to look at her. “Sweetheart?” she stroked her cheek.

When it had passed, Kyra looked up, a little less confident this time, Kassandra thought.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” she smiled looking over to the couch where Savina and Aegeus sat open mouthed.

“That was quite a strong one,” she laughed weakly. “Right, Savina,” she raised her chin. “Supplies for the artisans, no goat as we have learned,” she said dryly. “And ale. I’m not sure where we will be able to get sufficient quantities quickly enough,” she sighed.

“Leave that with me, Archon,” Savina made a note. “I’m quite sure that Mikis will be able to help us there, he imports quite widely,” she looked up as Kyra hissed again.

“All right,” Kassandra looped her arm about her and half carried her over to the vacant couch. “I think perhaps you should sit down for a little while?”

Kyra stopped her half way there, holding her belly with both hands and breathing hard. It didn’t seem quite as effective this time and she reached out and clutched at Kassandra’s arm, tightly enough to whiten her knuckles.

“Breathe my love,” Kassandra soothed, suddenly anxious. She put her free arm around Kyra and pulled her in as close as she was able to these days. “That’s it, try to relax, remember what Rhea told us, slowly in…..”

Kyra looked up at her, giving a good approximation of a reassuring smile and it was unlikely that anyone other than Kassandra would have recognised the hint of fear hidden in her eyes.

“I think that perhaps Aegeus was right,” she smiled. “If you would be good enough to summon
“Rhea?” she glanced over at his chalk white face.

“Phoibe will be quicker,” Kassandra decided. “Aegeus, go find Phoibe please and ask her to come and see us as quickly as possible. She’ll still be with Dion.”

“Phoibe?” he swallowed. “Of course, yes. Dion...indeed.”

“Well come on Aegeus,” Savina hauled him to his feet. “Don’t waste time man. You aren’t going to want to be in here after all,” she pointed out.

“I...oh..yes..” he looked over to Kyra, she was facing Kassandra, resting her head against her shoulder, breathing deeply. “No...no...indeed, I don’t,” he realised quickly. “Mistress Phoibe, of course,” he hurried out.

“Arch..Kyra,” Savina went over to them, touched Kyra’s back gently. “Perhaps we should think about getting you upstairs to your bedroom once we’ve seen Phoibe?”

“Yes,” Kyra nodded against Kassandra’s shoulder and swallowed hard.

“I will go and put these notes in your office,” Savina stroked her back gently. “Please don’t worry about the supplies, I will make sure that everything is arranged. And certainly don’t worry about the chicken thieves, I will ask Hippolytus to send a couple of guards to investigate. I’ll come right back to help you to your room?”

“Thank you Savina,” Kassandra smiled gratefully as Kyra rested her head against her shoulder again.

“I won’t be long,” Savina gathered up the tablet and papyri and made her way to the door, nearly colliding with Phoibe who came skidding in at full tilt.

“Sorry Savina,” she said, slowing down and going over to Kyra. “Are you all right?” she touched her arm. “The baby is definitely coming?”

“I am reasonably confident that you will be a big sister by the end of the day, Phoibe,” Kyra reached out an arm and pulled Phoibe into a shared hug. “The family is going to be a little bit bigger soon,” she kissed her head softly.

“Oh...oh gods,” Phoibe breathed. “It’s finally happening. Right, right. Praxos is saddling a horse for me, that will be quicker and Rhea can ride back...she can ride I suppose? She can ride with me if not, we’ll be back before you know it.”

“Phoibe, Phoibe,” Kyra caught her arm. “Calm yourself sweetheart. It takes a little while. You’ll have time to walk there and back and stop for a snack on the way, my love,” she laughed.

“Yes, well,” Phoibe considered. “I’m sure you’re right, but I’m not going to do that. I’m going to be quick instead.”

“Good girl,” Kassandra mustered a nervous smile and ruffled Phoibe’s hair. “Excited?” she arched an eyebrow.

“I’ll be excited when the baby is here and Kyra is all right,” Phoibe decided. “Right, I’ll be back before you know it,” she took a step towards the door, stopped and spun back to throw her arms around Kyra’s waist. “I love you,” she hugged her. “And I really hope it’s quick and doesn’t hurt too much.”

“I love you too Phoibe,” Kyra smiled fondly. “And so do I. By the way, do we get to hear the names
now? I mean it’s nearly here,” she grinned.

“Nope,” Phoibe smiled stopping at the door. “Not till it’s here...till she’s here!” she grinned before racing off.

“Do you think she’s going to be disappointed if it’s a brother?” Kyra relaxed into Kassandra’s embrace.

“Not in the least,” she chuckled. “I’ll still give her the hundred drachmae.”

They stood together, arms about each other, enjoying the last few moments of peace.

“Kassandra,” Kyra whispered quietly.

“Hmm?” she bent to hear.

“I’m a bit scared,” Kyra glanced up.

“I don’t blame you,” Kassandra kissed her softly. “I bet I’m more scared though,” she smiled. “You are going to be fine. You are the strongest, bravest woman I know. You’ve got this under control.”

By the time Rhea arrived Kyra was sitting in a chair in the bedroom. She had undressed and put on a soft, faded old tunic and Kassandra was stripping the bed.

“Well, aren’t you organised?” Rhea laughed. “You barely need me. Should I go?” she teased.

“Don’t you dare!” Kyra reached out for her hand, gripped it tightly.

“Now little one,” Rhea crouched down and reached out to stroke Kyra’s cheek gently. “I’m so sorry your mater can’t be here to see this Kyra,” she said softly. “But I’ll do my best to stand in for her,” she leaned forward and kissed Kyra’s forehead tenderly. It was already covered in a light film of sweat.

“Hello, little sister,” Nike stopped by the door and looked in. “I hope you don’t mind? Mater wanted an extra pair of hands and I wanted to be here when my niece or nephew arrived. Is that all right?”

Kyra looked up, smiling a little tearfully and got to her feet, she met Nike halfway and opened her arms for a hug.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she rested her head against Nike’s chest. “I’m a bit nervous, to be honest.”

“I bet you are,” Nike kissed the top of her head. “But it’s all going to be all right. Mater is very good. You are strong and healthy. And your big, handsome wife would kick the arse of Zeus himself to protect you. All will be well.”

Rhea was instructing Kassandra and Savina over by the bed. They’d unfolded a large waxed linen cover and over the top had laid a soft, well washed sheet.

“Now then!” Rhea clapped her hands. “Who’s staying and who’s going?” she looked around.

Phoibe was standing by the door, hugging the frame and looking nervous.

“Do you want to stay, sweetheart?” Kyra tilted her head. ”You can if you wish?”

“I...I think I’ll wait outside,” Phoibe swallowed. “It’s going to hurt isn’t it?”
“Well...yes,” Kyra considered.

“A lot...?” Phoibe glanced over at Rhea.

“Little one,” she came over and crouched in front of Phoibe, took hold of her shoulders gently. “Yes, it will. It will seem to you that it hurts very much. And I don’t know how long it will go on for. And your mater will curse and swear and probably damn Kassandra to Hades at some point. There will be blood and mess and it will all be worth it in the end when you get to meet your new little sister or brother. And everyone understands if you don’t want to see your mater go through that. You’ve plenty of time ahead of you to see the miracle of birth,” she laughed and patted her cheek.

“Then I’d rather not see it, I think,” Phoibe decided. “You’ll look after her, right?”

“Like my own child,” Rhea said solemnly. “I swear to you Phoibe. We all will. Go give your mater a hug now, perhaps Savina will keep you company while you wait?”

“Of course,” Savina smiled. She met Kyra’s grateful gaze. “I’ll stay as long as it takes,” she nodded. “I’ve asked Aegeus to go and tell Kittos what’s happening, don’t worry about anything.”

Phoibe hugged Kyra tight, resting her cheek against the taut swell of her belly, pressing a kiss there.

“I’ll pray to Artemis,” she promised. “See you soon, little one,” she breathed.

Out in the hallway Praxos was approaching with a couch from one of the guest rooms in his arms. He put it down opposite the door and stretched his back.

“You don’t know how long you’re going to be here after all,” he smiled. “Thought people might need something comfortable to sit on. I’ll be downstairs if you need me. As long as it takes,” he looked down at Phoibe, ruffled her hair fondly. “Excited, little one?”

“A bit,” she smiled nervously. “I’ll be excited when it’s here.”

“Aye, me too,” Praxos looked over his shoulder to the door. “Shout if you need me Savina.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Phoibe asked as they sat down.

“Oh...no idea,” Savina laughed. “It could be an hour...it could be a day.”

“A day?!” Phoibe exclaimed, horrified. “Are you? You’re not joking are you?”

“Let’s hope it’s nearer the hour then shall we?” Savina suggested.

Two hours later Savina went downstairs to borrow a set of knuckle bones from Praxos to pass the time.

An hour later Nike opened the door, she looked a little flushed and disheveled and had a long apron over her chiton, a thick strand of hair had come loose from its clip and hung in her eyes.

“Is it here?” Phoibe looked up hopefully.

“Not yet little one,” she smiled sympathetically. “We wondered if you could go and bring some cold water, for drinking? For everyone. And see if there is something sweet that Kyra could have to eat. She could do with a little energy. It’s hard work, birthing a baby,” she grinned.

“Sure, sure,” Phoibe got to her feet. “I suppose that’s why it's called labour, no?” she said thoughtfully.
“Quite right little one,” Nike laughed. There was a groan and a string of ripe curses from the room behind her.

Phoibe glanced up at Savina’s embarrassed expression.

“Don’t worry, Savina,” she patted her hand. “I’m just going to pretend I don’t hear anything today. I don’t really blame her after all.”

They found Cymone still sitting in the kitchen, despite the sun having set, she had her feet up on a stool and was looking out of the open door, sipping a cup of watered wine. She looked up as they entered, her expression hopeful.

“Not yet,” Savina sighed. “We came for some fresh water.”

“And is there something sweet for Kyra?” Phoibe asked, face anxious.

“How about some honeyed figs?” Cymone got to her feet, and gave Phoibe a hug. “Don’t worry little one,” she sounded reassuring. “Your mater the Archon is strong and brave. And I have no idea how Artemis arranged this but I do know that your mater Kassandra is too strong and brave to have given her anything less than a little warrior. All will be well, come help me get some food for them all, no?”

Savina filled two water jugs at the pump and then went to get lemons from a tree in the grounds.

“These are fine fruit,” Cymone observed as she rolled and sliced them.

“Mmm,” Savina nodded. “I had to climb the trellis to get them.”

Phoibe and Cymone gave her equally disbelieving looks.

“I wish I’d gone with you,” Phoibe smiled. “I would have liked to see that.”

“And then you would, no doubt, have climbed the trellis in my stead,” Savina laughed, picking up the tray that Cymone had assembled. There was a bowl of honeyed figs, another of yogurt, a small jar of honey, a plate of flat breads filled with cold meat, a saucer of salted biscuits and a dish of fruit.

“I imagine everyone will be hungry by now,” Cymone shrugged at her quizzical expression.

Nike’s expression was equally surprised when she opened the door to Phoibe’s tapping foot.

“Supplies!” she called over her shoulder. “Are you coming in to check on progress?” she took the water jugs from Phoibe. “It’s all right, little one, everything is going well, come say a few words of encouragement to your mater,” she smiled.

Phoibe stepped in a little nervously. Rhea was sitting on a chair at the foot of the bed. She smiled and waved her in.

Kyra looked more exhausted and bedraggled than Phoibe had ever seen her. She had become frustrated with the constricting tunic and removed it long ago. Now she sat naked on the very edge of the bed, Kassandra was crouched before her, between her knees, her hands at Kyra’s hips, stroking gently as she murmured encouragement.

Hearing Phoibe approaching Kyra looked up and gave her a weary smile.

“Phoibe,” she held out a hand to her. “I’m sorry it’s taking so long, my sweet,” she squeezed her hand gently.
“That’s okay,” Phoibe patted her back cautiously and found it slick with sweat. Her hair was stuck wetly to her brow and Phoibe noticed the wash bowl on the dressing table. She went and dampened a cloth and came back to wipe Kyra’s face. “I guess it takes as long as it takes, no?”

“Indeed,” Kyra grimaced, closed her eyes, breathed steadily.

Phoibe looked over at Kassandra, she looked almost as exhausted and bedraggled as Kyra but she mustered a smile for Phoibe.

“She’s doing so well,” she assured her. “She’s so brave and strong,” she cast an adoring glance at Kyra, stroked her flanks softly.

Kyra grimaced and moaned again and Rhea got to her feet, popping the last bit of a fig in her mouth.

“Another one already, sweetheart?” she smiled. “I think it’s time to check again,” she stepped up.

“We should go and wait outside,” Savina placed a gentle hand on Phoibe’s shoulder and led her to the door as Kassandra followed Rhea’s instructions and lifted Kyra’s feet up onto the bed.

“Checking what?” Phoibe asked as they sat back on the couch.

“To see if she can push yet,” Savina handed her a plate of food that she’d assembled from the tray. Phoibe normally ate like a horse and she hadn’t touched anything since this started.

“I...what...you mean she’s not been pushing already?” Phoibe shook her head. ”I’m not really hungry, thank you.”

“You can’t push until the time is right,” Savina brushed a stray lock of hair back from Phoibe’s brow. “Things will go more quickly once she can begin to push”

“Dion doesn’t know anything about having babies,” Phoibe observed gloomily. ”I should have asked Rhea more questions.”

“It might have been a better idea, yes,” Savina agreed. “Here, at least have a little fruit, you don’t want to faint holding the baby,” she warned.

Phoibe saw the wisdom and began to eat, but with less enthusiasm than Savina had ever seen. She was clearly more exhausted than hungry though because a few minutes later she had dozed off against Savina with a mostly eaten fig still in her hand.

Savina removed the fruit, finished it herself and shifted along the couch so that Phoibe could lie down with her head in her lap.

She was fast asleep like this when Savina heard Orion skittering upstairs.

“No, no,” she hissed as he lumbered over to sniff at the sleeping girl. “Leave her be, there’s a good boy,” Savina waved him away.

He swung his massive head and sniffed the air before padding over to the bedroom door, huffing noisily at the gap below it. Taking in a lungful of his mistress’ scent he whimpered softly and began to scratch at the bottom of the door.

“Damn, there he is,” Praxos came thundering up the stairs. “Sorry Savina, he got away from me.”

“No sign yet then?” Praxos grabbed his collar and clicked his tongue. “Come on son, let’s go back downstairs. This is no place for us boys,” he smiled at Savina. “So...you and Kittos?” he nodded towards the bedroom door as he dragged Orion grumbling towards the stairs.

“You know, Praxos,” Savina tilted her head. “Suddenly it seems like a less attractive proposition than it did a few days ago.”

Savina herself had dozed off for a while when an anguished groan woke her with a start. It took her a moment to remember where she was and what was happening. Praxos had presumably returned upstairs at some point because she and Phoibe were covered with a blanket and the lamps had been lit.

There was another groan followed by what definitely sounded like Kyra swearing heartily. That was good, surely, Savina thought, rubbing her stiff neck. Those were definite pushing sounds.

The next groan was accompanied by Nike and Rhea’s enthusiastic encouragement and Kassandra’s deeper, softer reassurances.

The following cry was loud and pained enough to wake Phoibe with a start. She struggled up, the blanket slipping off as she looked around, orientating herself as another cry rang out. Kassandra’s voice was louder, more encouraging now, eager and excited.

Phoibe looked up at Savina, raised her eyebrows hopefully.

“It sounds like it,” Savina helped her sit up. They were both fully awake now, leaning forward ears straining for the next sound.

Part of it was definitely Kyra telling Kassandra how much she fucking hated her right now and Kassandra wholeheartedly sympathizing with her.

“It’s okay,” Phoibe glanced sidelong at Savina. “I didn’t hear that.”

“Neither did I,” Savina agreed, shaking her head.

They’d expected the next pained groan, to be once again, followed by another round of encouragement and praise, when they were startled to hear the sharp high cry of a baby.

Phoibe grabbed Savina’s hand so hard that she felt her knuckles scrape together but she gritted her teeth and put her free arm around Phoibe’s shoulders, pulled her in close and kissed her temple.

“It’s here,” Phoibe breathed.

She’d clearly been expecting the door to open within the next couple of minutes and was a little disappointed when Savina explained that they’d want to deal with the afterbirth first.

“Rhea will want to check it,” Savina poured Phoibe a cup of water from the jug that Praxos had presumably left while they slept. “Drink now,” she insisted. “Drink and eat a little while we wait. It won’t be long now.”

Phoibe complied, without much enthusiasm, but she’d finished a cup of water, some grapes and a couple of biscuits by the time the door did open.

Kassandra stood there.

She looked sweaty and exhausted. Her tunic was smeared with blood, sweat and who knew what
else. Her braid was coming loose and stray strands were slicked to her sweaty brow. Her eyes were
reddened and her face wet with tears and seeing the absolutely beatific expression on her face,
Phoibe didn’t think she’d ever looked more beautiful.

“You’ve both been so patient,” she gave them a tearful smile. “Would you like to come and say
hello?”

Phoibe glanced at Savina, who smiled and nodded encouragingly.

“Go, Phoibe,” she reassured her. “I’ll greet them in a little while.”

Kassandra laughed softly and shook her head.

“Oh no, Savina, Kyra will never forgive me if I go back in without you. Come, please?” she took
Phoibe’s hand and waved Savina over to the door. “She wants to see you both.”

They walked in together. The room was quiet now. The lamps burned brightly and the doors to the
balcony stood half open to allow in a little of the cooler evening air.

The bed linens had been changed, Nike was neatly bundling the soiled sheets and towels over in the
far corner, as Rhea covered the wash bowl.

Kyra was sitting bare chested, clean sheets tucked about her waist. Her hair had been brushed back
and her face washed. She looked totally exhausted and absolutely, blissfully happy.

Cradled to her breast, suckling hungrily was a still slightly blood-smeared baby.

She looked up as they entered, and smiled, weary but happy. Savina pressed a hand to her mouth but
couldn’t disguise the sob that broke forth as she walked over to the bed. Kyra reached out a hand to
her, pressed Savina’s fingers to her lips and kissed them fondly.

“Thank you so much, Savina,” she breathed. “For everything, my dear friend. For everything you’ve
done and for everything that I know you’re going to continue to do. But especially for everything
you’ve done tonight. There’s nothing I can say that’s in any way enough.”

Savina shook her head, tears streaming down her face and reached out to caress Kyra’s cheek.

“There is nothing you have to say, Kyra, you know that,” she whispered, bending to kiss her softly.
”“There is nothing that I wouldn’t do for you and for your family,” she pressed a gentle kiss to the
baby’s fluffy head. “Gods smile on you little one.”

She stood up and stepped back before turning to Phoibe. She was standing by the foot of the bed,
still holding Kassandra’s hand, wide eyed and a little pale. Savina came over and placed a
comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Go see your mater eh?” she smiled gently.

“Phoibe,” Kyra looked over, smiling reassuringly and patted the bed next to her. “Come,
sweetheart.”

Phoibe approached, breathless and reverent, stopped by the side of the bed. Tears suddenly sprang to
her eyes and her throat felt thick and a little sore.

“Are you all right mater?” she managed.

“Never better, love, come,” Kyra encouraged and Phoibe found herself being lifted onto the bed, felt
the mattress dip as Kassandra put her down and sat behind her.

She gazed wide eyed and astonished at the determined, hungry little creature in Kyra’s arms.

“Say hello to your little sister, Phoibe,” Kyra hugged her close. “She eats just like her mater,” she smiled over Phoibe’s head at Kassandra.

Phoibe felt her chest ache with the intensity of the sudden love she felt for this little stranger. She reached out tentatively to brush the fluffy strands of black hair that fuzzed her head, stroked the plump, tan cheek with the back of her finger, accidentally brushing against the curve of Kyra’s breast and not caring.

The baby was nursing with a single minded concentration that did indeed remind Phoibe of Kassandra. She laughed breathlessly, watching the little brows crease with determination, and the sound clearly attracted the baby’s attention.

She raised her eyelids and gazed, intent and curious, at Phoibe with startling bright amber eyes.

Phoibe gasped and glanced over her shoulder at Kassandra, at the only other eyes like that she’d ever seen in her life.

“Do you like her?” Kassandra smiled, leaning forward to kiss Phoibe’s cheek.

“She’s...she’s gorgeous,” Phoibe breathed. She reached out and took hold of the tiny, clutching fingers with their delicate pearly nails. "She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

The baby suddenly stopped nursing, released Kyra’s nipple and peered hard at Phoibe, a sight dribble of milk running from the corner of her mouth. Phoibe felt the tiny hand clasp around her finger and smiled delightedly.

“Hello Zoe,” she breathed.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Here at last.

Thank you so much to everyone who has read, left kudos and especially to those who left comments. We appreciated every single one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue

Kyra was sitting on the terrace nursing Zoe and enjoying the warm evening sun when Kassandra strode out. She looked tired but happy. The strain and tension of the last few days had faded and she looked more relaxed than Kyra had seen her since Myrrine’s visit was arranged.

She stood in the doorway, gazing fondly at Kyra and Zoe, making no immediate move towards them, watching as they sat together, burnished by the warm light of the slowly setting sun.

“Come,” Kyra reached out a hand towards her and waved her over.

“How is your mater?” she asked cautiously as Kassandra came and sat beside them, bending to kiss first Kyra and then to press her lips to the fluffy black fuzz of Zoe’s head.

“She’s reflecting I think,” Kassandra sat back, closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sun on her face.

“On past misdeeds?” Kyra suggested, shifting Zoe to a slightly more comfortable position and turning a little to look at Kassandra.

“In a way,” she laughed softly. “She’s struggling with an influx of new emotions that aren’t associated with disapproval of my life choices.”

“Ooh, grand-mater will be a while then,” Kyra whispered to Zoe who continued to suckle greedily, reaching up a tiny hand to grasp for Kyra’s breast with plump fingers.

“Well she’s learning to be a warm human being,” Kassandra reached out a gentle finger and stroked the back of her daughter’s tiny hand.

Kyra laughed delightedly at the ridiculous size difference and shook her head.

“In fairness my love,” she teased. “It did take you a while to learn, so let’s show a little understanding, no?”

“Your mater makes a fair but cutting point,” Kassandra laughed as Zoe, eyes still closed as she fed determinedly, clasped her finger. “You will learn that it is one of her many, many talents. Anyway I left Myrrine attempting conversation with Phoibe. It was painful...but oddly touching in its way. She’s going to take breakfast with her tomorrow and ask her about her studies.”
“Goodness,” Kyra settled after a thoughtful pause. “What a treat for both of them. I don’t think I’ll attend, but I may sit outside the room and eavesdrop.”

“That was my plan too,” Kassandra laughed.

Zoe suddenly fuzzed a little and turned her face away from Kyra’s breast to gaze at Kassandra, attracted by the sound of her laughter.

Kyra gave her a second chance, offered her nipple again but Zoe was fixed on Kassandra now.

“Well, your daughter finds you far more interesting than my breast right now. Take her, would you?” Kyra handed over the solid little bundle.

“Really now, little one?” Kassandra raised her eyebrows playfully, bent and rubbed her nose gently against her daughter’s. “Perhaps you don’t take after your mother after all?” she teased.

“Rather depends on which mother we’re talking about,” Kyra winked as she re-adjusted her clothing, making sure she was comfortable as well as covered. “And maybe she’s going to be an ass woman...like her grandmother,” she grinned archly.

Kassandra sucked her teeth and grimaced.

“Gods, woman,” she laughed ruefully. “You are never going to let that go, are you?”

“Not this side of the Styx, no,” Kyra chuckled, turning as the sound of raucous laughter rang out from the meadow on the other side of the low wall at the edge of the grounds.
Kassandra got to her feet and carried Zoe over to the wall.

Kyra watched, feeling a warm swell of emotion at the sight.

Zoe seemed so very tiny cradled in Kassandra’s powerful arms, her fuzzy little head nestled against her mother’s hard bicep.

Kassandra pulled the swaddling up over the baby’s head to protect her from the sun and turned so Zoe could follow her gaze over the wall. But she was fixed on Kassandra now, gazing intently at her mother’s face, meeting Kassandra’s warm amber gaze with her own.

“Your uncles are being silly,” Kassandra bent her face to Zoe’s and whispered softly.

Kyra walked over to join them. Out in the long grass she saw Phoibe riding on Alexios’ shoulders, laughing and yelling excitedly as Orion bounced along after them giddy with delight.

They were running full tilt after...Praxos? He was lumbering ahead with a scrap of red fabric tied to his belt like a flag.

They stood watching in amusement as the chase unfolded. Even with Phoibe on his shoulders Alexios was much faster than the bigger Praxos and they were gaining ground fast.

“Uncles!” Kyra laughed fondly, standing beside Kassandra, resting her head against her shoulder.
“Being boys again.”

There were a few moments silence and then she heard Kassandra say quietly.

“One of them is being a boy for the first time.”

Kyra turned her head, watched the muscles work in Kassandra’s jaw as she tried to control her emotions.

“It’s all right love,” she stroked her back gently. “It’s just us here.”

Kassandra was quiet for a while, Kyra heard her work to steady her breath.

“Why don’t you ask Alexi if he’d like to stay for a little while?” Kyra said gently. “He’s fascinated by Zoe. Let them get to know each other better? I don’t want her to just see him once or twice a year. She’ll be good for him, I think, no?”

Kassandra glanced down at Kyra, smiled and nodded weakly.

“I think he’d like that,” she looked back over the meadow.

Praxos had been hunted down and Alexios was lying spread-eagled in the long grass laughing delightedly, Phoibe flopped backwards across his chest waving the red flag in triumph.

For his part, Praxos stood above them, hands on hips, looking down and shaking his head. Even from here they could see his chest heaving as he caught his breath.

While he was busy looking at the victors Orion came galloping up behind him, jumped up and caught him right at the back of his knees, sending him toppling with a thud that Kyra swore she could feel even at this distance.

“Your mama is right,” she laughed delightedly. “Your uncles are silly, Zoe,” she slipped her arm about Kassandra’s hips and leaned against her.

“You know,” she ventured, feeling suddenly magnanimous. “Why don’t you ask Myrrine if she’d like to stay for a while too?”

Kassandra glanced down at her, startled. Kyra saw her raised eyebrows and laughed wryly.

“Maybe it’s the lovely weather,” she shrugged. “Maybe it was that delicious almond cake Cymone made, maybe it’s because I’ve just nursed our beautiful daughter, maybe it’s the sight of you here...with her in your arms like this...I just.. I think Zoe will be good for her too.”

“Well, she did take the sphinx story on board better than I expected,” Kassandra rocked Zoe gently.

“The feather is very convincing,” Kyra laughed. “Good of Ophelia to lend it to you.”

“She’s not such a bad old stick really,” Kassandra laughed quietly. “Definitely open to negotiation. And she loves you, doesn’t she, little one?” she chuckled, kissing her daughter’s forehead softly. “And actually, it was Zoe’s eyes that convinced Myrrine, moreso than the feather even.”

“Well she does have very beautiful eyes,” Kyra breathed. “Just like her mama.”

They were interrupted by the sound of running and looked up to see Alexios sprinting up to the wall. He was grinning delightedly and covered in sweat, loose strands of hair sticking to his forehead. Phoibe and Praxos were bringing up the rear, a little more sedately.
“Is she awake?” he asked eagerly, clambering over the wall with a little less grace than his sister usually mustered. “Can I hold her?” he reached out, caught sight of his hands. “Oh, no,” he drew back. “I’m sweaty. I need to wash. When I’ve washed, can I hold her then?”

“Of course you can brother,” Kassandra smiled watching as he gazed besotted at his niece.

“Were you watching, little Zoe?” he grinned. “Did you see Uncle Alexi and Phoibe running? We were fast, no? But your Uncle Praxos is fast too,” he conceded as the others joined him. “He’s big but he’s fast. Hey, Phoibe, when Zoe is big enough she can ride on my shoulders and you can ride on Praxos and…”

“I’m not getting any younger you know Alexi,” Praxos laughed, hoisting Phoibe over the wall and then struggling over himself.

Alexios grabbed hold of the back of his tunic, took a grip of his belt and hauled him over the last bit.

“Zoe was watching us,” he grinned. “I’m thirsty,” he realised suddenly. “I need something to drink. And hungry. I’m hungry too. Are you hungry Phoibe?”

“Always,” Phoibe took his sweaty hand in hers.

“We’re hungry Kyra,” he looked hopefully over at her. “Can we have more cake? Is there more of the cake? Can we have more if there is?”

“I’m pretty sure Cymone made more than one,” Kyra laughed. “We warned her that you eat like your sister.”

“Phoibe,” he grinned happily. “There’s cake. We can have more cake. But we have to wash our hands first. Then we can hold Zoe. She can’t have cake though…can she?…no, babies can’t eat cake…can they?…not yet, no?”

“No, not yet,” Phoibe kept hold of his hand and led him towards the door. “And it’s just as well to be honest Uncle Alexi, cos Zoe already eats like her mama.”

“Like Kassandra?” he looked down at her quizzically. “Because she eats a lot or because of the breast thing, because…”

“Oh-kay!!” Phoibe hauled him off. “Let’s go get that cake shall we?”

To everyone’s startled astonishment Myrrine appeared at the door. Phoibe dropped Alexios’ hand and stepped aside a little. The smile on his face faded, replaced with a look of hopeful caution.

“Did I hear someone mention cake?” she said awkwardly, giving a tentative smile.

“Yes,” Alexios seemed encouraged. “Phoibe said cake. We were going to have some. Because we’re hungry. But we have to wash first. Because we’re sweaty. And then we can hold Zoe. But she can’t eat cake though. Not yet. But… you could?”

There was a tense silence as Myrrine took all that in.

Phoibe cleared her throat quietly and took a deep breath, raised her chin.

“We were playing,” she said carefully. “We got hungry, so we are going to wash up and have something to drink and eat. Would you like to join us for some cake?”

Myrrine looked over to Kassandra, she was standing with Zoe cradled close in her arms, the baby
was fussing a little, sensing the sudden tension in her mother’s body.

“That’s very kind of you Phoibe,” Myrrine decided. “I should like that very much. Will your...will your *maters* be joining us?” she glanced up quickly.

Kassandra was momentarily speechless. She stood, blinking slowly, gazing at her mother.

“We would love to,” Kyra recovered first. “Why don’t you all go on ahead and we’ll follow you in just a moment.”

“Very well,” Myrrine nodded. She turned to walk to the door, stopped suddenly and looked at Phoibe then glanced up to Kassandra.

“Will you...will you be bringing my granddaughter to join us?” she asked with poorly concealed hope. “My... *younger* granddaughter?” she tentatively extended a hand towards Phoibe as though she was reaching out to a strange dog.

Kassandra watched intently, jaw clenched, as Phoibe stood, wrong-footed for a few moments, before reaching out, just as tentatively and taking Myrrine’s fingers in hers.

“Yes. Yes mater,” Kassandra managed huskily. “We’ll join you in a moment.”

She and Kyra stood silently watching as the others left.

“Well,” Kyra breathed at last. “Zoe my love...” she shook her head and looked over at her daughter, cradled safely in Kassandra’s powerful arms.

“I think our daughter has turned out to be good for a lot of people,” Kassandra said quietly, gazing down devotedly at Zoe.

Full of warm milk, feeling her mother’s tension ease, she had fallen asleep, her head nestled against the solid muscle of her arm.

Kassandra knew that hot tears were running down her face but she didn’t care.

The sun was warm, her family was gathered, her wife had a comforting arm about her and her beautiful daughter slept safely in her arms.

She reached out a gentle finger and traced the plump, brown curve of Zoe’s cheek before bending to kiss her forehead and whispering softly.
“S’agapo, mikro mou.”

“Come my love,” Kyra reached up, turned Kassandra’s face to her and stretched up to kiss her wet cheek. “Let’s go join the others. I can find out if you eat like your mother as well!”

Chapter End Notes

As this story went on it became more and more collaboratory. I may have been “womaning” the keyboard, but none of this would exist without my co-creator fishbone76.

Embarrassingly, I don’t have words to thank her sufficiently for her input, help and support. But if you’ve enjoyed this at all, then I hope you’ll find them for me and go tell her what a great job she did.

You could do it here, or still on site in the comments section of Until We Meet Again, which you should definitely be reading, if you aren’t already. I like to think that this is the fluffy, fairy tale “happy ever after” that her characters deserved. And of course you
could go track her down on her other social media sites.

I really hope that some readers will go and tell her how incredible her art work has been in this. In particular the absolutely breathtaking “baby photo”. It’s been worth sitting up nights tapping this out, if for no other reason than to see that.

There’s not a fussy sentence or contrived plot point that I’ve constructed in this whole story that comes anywhere close to demonstrating the skill, or conveying the emotion that fishbone76 has managed here and I don’t have the eloquence to do her justice.

So I’m just going to say,

It’s been an honour, a privilege and never less than a total pleasure.

Thank you my friend.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!