

BABE IN ARMS

Patricia Daniel



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Cover photo

*Female volunteers march at a camp in Baghdad
as Iraq prepares for a possible military invasion*

Taha Al-Rubayyh / Getty Images

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to: Nora Astorga, who lives on as an inspiration to many; to friends and colleagues like Sandra, Siân, Mary, who have always been prepared to raise their voice and go the extra mile for the rights of other women; to my mother Mickey and my daughter Dora who, in their different ways, have taught me about the reproductive rôle of women; to all the female rôle models in the book, especially war correspondents like Marie Colvin and Irene Slegt; to Ajit Mookerjee for the inimitable descriptions of Kali; to the scriptwriters of Star Trek for inventing strong female rôle models and writing those wonderful lines for male characters which men should, but never actually, say; and to all readers who enjoy the story: Go girl!

'This Antithesis you have found in some Author betwixt a warrior and a lover, and you stretch it to shew the difference betwixt a man and a woman.'

Constancia Munda from the pamphlet The Worming of a Mad Dogge Or A Soppe for Cerberus the Jaylor of Hell, London, 1617, in attack of J. Swetnam's pamphlet, London, 1615, The araignment of lewde, idle, froward and unconstant women (in Shepherd 1981: 206)

Since women are patently superior in most respects, it was inconceivable to me that we had conceded power over the earth to men, overcome simply by their brute force and ignorance. There had to be another, more sinister, explanation...

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The Amazon women, who lived by the stormy banks of the shores of the Black Sea, were said to be descended from Ares, a race of warriors who despised peace and lived only for war

Part Two Morgan

The bastard daughter of Yverne, half-sister to King Arthur, Morgan was seen as a child of passion and fire, a treacherous witch, a slayer of knights and the enemy of orphans

Part Three Sandra

The last three journalists left in the United Nations compound in Dili, East Timor before the evacuation in 1999, were women: Irene Slegt, Minka Nijhuis and Marie Colvin, who all had distinguished records of bravery

Part Four Kali

Kali is a manifestation of the Hindu goddess Devi, especially in her most fearful aspects, often depicted as a wild skinny naked black woman riding on the back of a fierce tiger and devouring male antagonists

Part Five Lileth / Eve

Lileth was the Hebrew goddess of night, who settled in the ruins of Edom, holding sway over the land from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Akaba. Rabbis held she was Adam's first wife before her transformation into a demon; she was considered dangerous - especially to children

Part Six The Ambassador

"She ambushed so many Yankee politicians with her intelligence, disarmed manoeuvres with her bravery and audaciously mounted operations in alleyways and corridors, she persuaded ambassadors and nations, weaving third world alliances against dispossession, illegality and injustice, conspiring with whoever she could against the war"

(Sofia Montenegro on Nora Astorga, Nicaraguan Ambassador to the UN 1986-8)

PROLOGUE

I have the most incredible story to tell you and I think you are the only person I can tell it to, because you're my daughter. You could say it was a dream but I know it wasn't, I know I lived it, although it meant living a thousand lives...

It started like this...

I was in the cosmic womb, surrounded by darkness.

But as memories of my past lives were washed away, streams of light and colour fell about me. I saw splashes of the blue mountains, the red desert and the humming rain forest. I saw you there - the bright face of my daughter. Now and then I glimpsed the shimmer of the starship and the cold sheen of war.

I knew I was to be reborn. Abandoned in space, without heritage, a poor orphan child destined to wander the galaxy seeking a place where I could truly belong. I would be pure, unprejudiced, lacking allegiance.

All that I brought with me out of the void into my new life was this: the mission the goddess had entrusted to me. I carried in my genes the puzzle to be solved - I mean, of course, the fundamental question of the cosmic conspiracy - and my purpose was to pursue the answer.

There! I was ready. I slipped easily through the temporal fissure and the umbilical cord detached itself. I could fly free again.

Far beneath me spun the blue-green planet where my search began....

PART ONE

THE AMAZONS

I first found myself in a forest clearing. The dark trees towered above me on all sides. The sky was blue overhead and the grass soft and springy beneath my bare feet. I felt small, bewildered and afraid, ready for flight yet not knowing where to run. As I hesitated, three young women appeared from between the tree trunks.

“Look, who’s that?” they asked each other, pointing at me.

They seemed terrifying, carrying weapons over their shoulder, tall with strong, bronzed limbs and each of them had one breast missing. Filled with awe, I stayed, rooted to the spot.

“Where’ve *you* come from, child?” one asked, as she moved quietly forward and squatted down so that her eyes were on a level with mine. She raised her hand to gently touch my cheek and I stopped quivering for I knew instinctively that there was no need to fear her.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully, looking into her brown face. She smiled and warmed my heart. I immediately imprinted on her and she became for me over the years mother, sister, lover and minor goddess all rolled into one.

“My name is lola,” she said, making me feel at home. “And yours?”

I shook my head. Tears started to my eyes and I flushed with embarrassment because I did not know who I was.

She stood up and took my hand. “Then I’ll call you Selena, for the Moon goddess, since I found you in her sacred grove and,” she grinned, “ you’re bound to go through many changes! You’d better come with us,” she added and led me into the trees where the other two waited.

“It’s a little lost warrior,” she told her friends. “We’ll take her back with us – what else can we do? But first,” she said excitedly, glimpsing a quick movement in the undergrowth, “ let’s catch that gazelle! There she goes again! Look! That way! Come on!”

lola pulled me along behind as she flew through the forest, her friends outstripping us and unhooking their bows as they ran past. Stumbling, blind and winded, it was a miracle I kept up with them.

“There! Yolanda! Oh goddess! She missed!” cursed lola. We changed direction and ran on.

“She’s turning back! Here! Chloe! You can do it!” called lola, cursing again under her breath because she herself couldn’t shoot. Coming to a sudden halt, Chloe stretched, took aim and shot in one smooth sequence. There was a crash and the gazelle lay before us, twitching once and then still.

“It’s a clean kill,” muttered lola in satisfaction.

Chloe whooped in delight and threw her arms around Yolanda, then leaped away and began taunting her: “Yolanda, Yolanda, couldn’t hit a verandah!”

Yolanda took up the challenge, adopting a wresting stance and neatly tripping her friend who landed on her back. Chloe rolled over, still laughing.

I was shocked that they could play like that, with the beautiful gazelle dead at our feet.

“Don’t be sorry,” said lola, seeing my face. “She died in an instant. And we only kill for food. We hunt the way the Moon goddess taught us.” She squeezed my hand. “You brought us good luck.”

I tried to give her a brave smile.

Chloe found a straight branch and lola helped to lift the gazelle over it so that Yolanda and Chloe could carry the catch between them. Everything they did seemed to be easy and graceful.

“Let’s go home, little one,” said lola and strode out purposefully.

As I began to stumble with tiredness, lola swung me up into her arms, wrapping my legs around her waist. She carried me like this until we emerged from the dark path and arrived at the village.

Here the evening sun lit up a scene of tranquility. The river widened to form a large deep pool, then narrowed suddenly between two big rocks and cascaded down a series of waterfalls until becoming calm again at the bottom. Several women and children were swimming naked - they clambered out laughing and took turns diving off the rocks.

The homes were made of wood and thatch, arranged in a semi-circle, with the forest behind as a natural defence. A woman came out of one building and ran lightly to meet us.

“Oh, well done, girls,” she said, not even panting.

With a grunt, Yolanda and Chloe set down the game they had caught.

“We’ve found a child, too, Hippolyte,” said lola, swinging me down onto the ground and holding me gently against her so that I could see the beautiful woman.

Hippolyte was wearing a dress of soft kidskin, dyed red. Her long hair was plaited with a gold thread and she wore gold sandals on her feet. I saw that she too had one side of her chest flat and naked, while the other was soft and full and covered by the tunic.

“Where’s she from?” asked Hippolyte in curiosity, her voice like honey.

“She can’t tell us anything,” answered lola

“Well, we’ll take care of her until we can learn more,” decided Hippolyte. “Will you leave her with me?”

lola squatted down to my level again. “Will you go with Hippolyte?” she asked me.

“No,” I said fervently, alarmed and clutching at the strap of her tunic for security. “I want to stay with you.”

Hippolyte shrugged and laughed. “So be it,” she said smiling.

And so lola led me off to a small cottage where we removed our clothes and then went running hand in hand down to the river to swim. The sun began to set and stars appeared in the darkening blue of the sky.

Clean and dry and refreshed, we ate honey cakes and fruit. We sat outside and I snuggled beside lola while she sang to the accompaniment of a small guitar and Yolanda played the flute. And finally I climbed into lola’s bed and was comforted by the warmth of her until I fell asleep.

In the morning I awoke early to the crow of the cockerel and, feeling more courageous, slipped out and went exploring. I saw some of the inhabitants already at work, weaving fine linen cloth, spinning wool, making pots with wet clay, milking goats, one was mending her weapons. The heady smell of wood fire filled my nostrils.

There was a large hut somewhat on the outskirts of the settlement itself. The building was similar to the rest, but the door was shut and barred and a woman stood guarding it with a spear.

“Don’t come near here, little one,” called out the woman with a friendly warning, “You’re too young.”

“But what kind of animal do you keep in there?” I wanted to know.

She laughed. “Come on, then, just take a peek.”

She lifted me up so that I could see through the open window at what I recognised must be a different member of the same species. It was a similar size, with more hair over the body, a little paler because of being kept in captivity, but still muscular as though it had not so long ago been running free. It was naked. Though there were no mammary glands on the chest, it had an additional body part hanging between the legs, which looked very strange...

It paced up and down the simple room, beating its fist on the wall. Then, uttering a harsh laugh, it slumped down into a wooden armchair, put its feet up on the table and closed its eyes.

“What do you think of that then?” my new friend asked as she put me back on the ground.

“I’m not sure,” I said slowly. What was it for? Suddenly I didn’t want to know anymore and I ran away, calling out “Thank you” as I went.

“It’s my turn to groom the horses,” lola told me after breakfast. “Do you know how to ride?”

I shook my head, understanding nothing.

lola took me by the hand and we walked down past the river to a large corral where a number of noble four-legged animals danced and played in the sunshine. With one hand on the top of the fence to balance her, lola leapt over, then motioned me to follow. The horses pranced up to us, shaking their heads and blowing their soft breath over me. Though they were so tall and their hooves flashed, I didn’t feel afraid, even when one pushed its head at me and nibbled with its velvety nose.

“You’re a natural,” laughed lola as she showed me how to rub them down with a stiff brush.

2

As we walked back into the village, I heard a crashing noise from the forest. A rider emerged with a rush and only slowed her fiery horse as she approached the first dwellings.

“Hi, Rhea, whoah, what’s the hurry?” called lola.

“Where is Hippolyte?” cried the newcomer, jumping down from her mount, which was flecked with sweat.

"She's usually at the hall at this time," said lola. "I'll come with you. Selena," she continued, turning to me, "take the horse to the corral and rub him down with fresh grass."

I hesitated as lola held out the reins to me. But since she persisted in expecting me to be able to carry out the task, I led the horse away without question - and in fact I had no trouble looking after him.

When I returned, I found a hum of excitement in the village. People were gathered in twos and threes outside the meeting hall.

"There's an invasion force," I heard someone say.

"The Athenians are coming to rescue Herakles."

"Rhea saw the army beyond the mountains..."

"A few days' march, then."

Hippolyte herself came out at that point and held up her hand for silence. Her cheeks were flushed and I saw that her nipple was erect.

"We'd better get ready to meet the Athenian army - again," she said, her voice hardening beneath the honey. "We'll set off at dawn tomorrow. I'll need two groups to ride out with me - lola, it's your turn to be group leader and you, lanthe. The other two groups stay here to protect the village, as usual.

"In the meantime," she smiled a little ironically, tossing her long hair free, "I have some unfinished business to attend to."

A knowing laughter met this statement, as the women dispersed, chattering like magpies. Things were moving too fast, it was all a blur to me and, to my mortification, I burst out crying.

lola ran to me. I clutched in panic at her tunic and buried my head in her lap.

"Selena," she said, lifting my chin gently and pushing back my hair so she could see the whole of my upturned face, "I've got to go away to battle and you can't come with me."

"I don't want you to go!" I wailed.

"You'll be safe here with Yolanda," she tried to reassure me, "And I'll be home soon. Come on, you've got to be brave."

She gave me a big bear hug and I held her tight, sniffing and snuffling in an attempt to fight back the tears.

"lola, can you bring down the rest of the horses," called Hippolyte as she passed us.

"And Selena," she went on briskly, ignoring my distress, "run to the guardhouse and ask Clarissa to prepare the prisoner. Tell her I'll be over when the afternoon shadow begins to fall."

She pointed towards the house I had visited earlier. I turned reluctantly to do as she asked. Lola waved me away with a sweet smile and so I went.

“This afternoon? All right!” For some reason Clarissa laughed at my message. “Well, little one, you’ll have to help me after all, since everyone else is getting ready for war. Are you afraid?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “What’s to be afraid of?”

“You’ll learn soon enough!” She grinned as I scowled at the ambiguous reply.

Clarissa opened a side door, which gave access to an outer room.

“You’ll need to go down to the river to fetch fresh bathwater,” she murmured, “Can you manage?”

As I struggled to fetch and carry water, Clarissa took her time laying out some fine things: a jar of sweet-smelling myrrh, a clean white linen robe, a golden belt and worked leather sandals... and a knife.

“That doesn’t look a very difficult job,” I muttered under my breath as I stood back to wipe the sweat off my face.

Clarissa shot me a sharp amused glance.

“OK, everything ready?” she asked. Then she unbarred the inner door and stood with her spear across the opening. The inmate growled at her resentfully.

“My lord Herakles,” she said, trying to make her voice respectful, “Queen Hippolyte is coming to visit. So – it’s bath-time. This child is here to attend you - I have to stand guard. But I’ll help you shave.”

The prisoner’s wild demeanour had lightened. He watched with growing interest as I brought in the water and clothes, ducking under Clarissa’s spear each time I passed through and averting my gaze from his naked body as much as I could.

Yet at first he refused to comply.

“Ha! That she-cat can’t expect me to make an effort!” he blustered. “If she wants me, she’ll just have to take me as I am!”

Clarissa stood her ground.

Finally, as if we all knew he would, he began to bathe.

“Selena, can you call for another guard to watch the door so that I can shave him?” said Clarissa after a while.

I watched with great interest and a certain amount of repugnance as this operation was carried out. Clarissa wielded the knife with skill and flourish – the prisoner tried hard not to flinch.

I held out the garments for Herakles to dress - and, when our job was done, the man himself looked almost beautiful.

Hippolyte arrived, also beautifully dressed, and accompanied by two warriors carrying dishes of food.

"Is Herakles' armour ready for tomorrow?" asked the queen, before entering the inner room. "He'll ride out with me."

"I'll leave it in the outer room, Hippolyte," replied Clarissa quickly, though in some surprise.

After the food was placed on the table, Hippolyte was left alone with the prisoner and the door was barred again.

I helped Clarissa to unwrap a shield, a sword and a breastplate, wrist and ankle bands, all worked in bronze and leather but somewhat tarnished with lack of use.

"They'll need cleaning and polishing," grumbled Clarissa, obviously put out with the job she'd been given. "Fetch me some oil, Selena."

While Clarissa busied herself with the armour, I slipped into the shadows behind the house and found a little window that I could peep through if I stood on tiptoe.

"Good news for you, Herakles," Hippolyte was saying. "Theseus is coming to rescue you with the whole of the Athenian army. We'll ride to meet them and you'll be set free. There's no need for a pitched battle."

"Don't think you can get away with this," he blustered. "Theseus won't let this go without a fight."

"Don't forget," replied Hippolyte, keeping her voice calm while her eyes flashed with anger, "your people captured my sister and she's lost to us forever. She's been so tainted by the Athenian way of life that she'll never return. But that wasn't enough. Theseus sent you here on some daring enterprise or other. Maybe to steal away another warrior – or to steal something else?"

"What would you have that'd be worth stealing?" he sneered nastily, but flushing slightly at the same time. "You had no right to hold me prisoner. I did nothing wrong."

"Why else would you be skulking along the shore in disguise, if you weren't up to some new mischief?" she snapped. "For all of this," she continued more evenly, "we could have taken our revenge on you. But that's not our way."

"Then why keep me here for - how long has it been?" he demanded.

"Two moons of gentle punishment," she replied, amused. "I'd hoped it would be longer... But before you go, there is one thing that you can do for me. You know that we have no men within our territory - but it's high time for me to mate and bear a child..."

"Don't go thinking you can use me as part of your vile reproduction plan!" he snorted indignantly, standing stock still in the middle of the room. "Anyway don't you usually travel towards the Hindu Kush to meet up with the filthy nomadic tribes on the caravan trail?" he asked with another sneer.

"The Bedouin chieftains have better manners!" she replied, losing her temper. "But in this case, I'll have to make do with a mere half-god!"

"I suppose you and your mutilated warriors hold your victims down at spearpoint?" he continued to rant.

Hippolyte laughed shortly. "We've never found that necessary!" she replied ominously as she moved towards him, until they stood together, barely touching. "Is that how you really see me? Cruel and deformed?"

He was slightly taller: as he looked down, I saw that he, despite himself, inhaled the smell of her and was intoxicated. He placed a hand gently on her naked shoulder. She shuddered and I did not think it was with distaste, since she raised her face for a kiss.

"What are you doing?" hissed Clarissa half angrily, as she caught me from behind and pulled me away from my watching place. "Don't let anyone catch you doing that again!"

"Why, what's wrong?" I asked innocently, though I felt flushed and my mouth was dry.

She took me to the front of the house, still holding me tight.

"It's a private thing. Besides, you're too young to know what it means to loose your girdle."

"What happened to Hippolyte's sister?" I asked in an attempt to deflect her attention.

"Ah, Antiope," Clarissa sighed and her face grew stern. "It was two summers ago when she was visiting friends by the shore of the great lake. The Athenian pirates came one night and took her away by stealth. When Hippolyte heard, she gathered a large army and led them across the Hellespont to Athens – to rescue Antiope – but Theseus and the Athenians defeated her. She came home in tears, feeling she had abandoned Antiope to a fate worse than death."

"What's that?" I asked, fascinated. "Is it something to do with..."

Clarissa cut me short. "Time for bed," she said.

I looked up at the night sky. Somehow the day had passed and I had forgotten my own problems.

Clarissa sent me home with a playful slap on the rump.

"You can stay with me tomorrow," she called. "I'll take care of you until lola returns."

"All right," I called back. "Where shall I find you?"

"I'll find you," she promised, "when the dust settles."

3

It was an intoxicating sight that I witnessed the following morning - the horses turning this way and that as the riders formed into two groups and awaited the signal to depart. The sun flashed on spears and swords, the sacred axe with the crescent blade, the helmets lined with bronze. In one hand lola carried a shield like a half moon, over one shoulder a short bow reinforced with horn and brass, and she had leather protection strapped on her arms and legs. My heart swelled with pride mingled with painful longing; as she cantered away out of sight at the head of her group, I tried hard not to feel completely abandoned.

I saw Hippolyte with Herakles by her side in his bronze armour. As she rode out, she turned to him, a smile playing about her lips; their gaze locked for a short moment and he, with a grin, followed her docilely into the forest.

There followed a time of quietness mixed with tension. Those who remained went about their usual work but with a watchfulness, waiting, with frequent glances towards the mountain road. Every morning I would wake, my heart in my mouth, imagination running ahead of me through the day, hoping that I would see lola before the sun set.

Soon enough a messenger brought us news that a battle had been fought and won. My heart leaped with joy when I realised it was lola riding back into the village. I was safe again! I ran to meet her but, after a quick kiss, had to make do with a disappointingly casual arm round my shoulder, since everyone wanted to speak to her at the same time.

“What happened?”

“How many were lost?”

“What did Herakles do?”

“How’s Hippolyte?”

It seemed as if the entire population of the village had crowded into our little house to hear the full story. lola was known as a great story-teller and I, now warm and comfortable in her arms, was as near to the story as I could be.

“We rode hard towards the west in the attempt to head off the invaders before they got too far into Amazon territory. As we rode up from the plateau, we saw the other queens leading their groups at the same time, as if a hundred ribbons were unfurling up the mountain-side. At last we reached the top and then our great army spread out neatly like a shimmering string of beads across the mountain range.

“Below us we could see the Athenian army choking the valley.

“Hippolyte turned to Herakles and spoke softly to him - I didn’t hear what she said. They kissed (It was a slow sweet kiss, with affection). Then she called lanthe to ride down with Herakles – so that the Athenians could see he came accompanied, out of respect, by one of our warriors, to rejoin his people. There they went, becoming tinier and tinier, two glimmering dots into the valley bottom. We saw a small party of Athenians form and ride out to meet them. It was like watching stitches on a tapestry perform. We held our breath. Herakles was reintegrated into his group and lanthe turned to make the ascent.

“But such is the treachery of men that, instead of accepting the peaceful settlement, they turned back suddenly. And lanthe was struck down with a spear...”

There was a collective gasp from the audience.

“... like a pinprick in the tapestry.”

“What happened?” demanded Clarissa.

“Hippolyte made the signal to attack. What else could she do? She hadn’t had intention of fighting before that. Besides, the Athenians were trapped in the valley, they were bound to be defeated. But she had to avenge the death of her warrior. We streamed down the mountain like a bolt of silk unwinding,” continued Lola.

“As Hippolyte approached the Athenian army, she saw Theseus himself at its head.

“Now I know who’s behind this scheme, the pirate,’ the queen muttered as we closed. But there was a much greater shock for us all: Antiope rode up from behind, to fight side by side with Theseus.”

Another gasp, this time of disbelief.

“It’s true, she was there as his companion, his lover - there couldn’t be any doubt. She was there of her own free will and she fought to protect him from her Amazon sisters - knowing our methods of fighting and our weaknesses.”

“What happened?”

“I lost sight of them. It was a fierce and desperate battle - time seemed to stand still as we joined swords, I was absorbed into the fighting so that I experienced everything in slow motion. I can still recall the colours of my opponent’s belt, the pattern of his leather thongs, I can see every detail clearly in my mind’s eye... In fact it was soon over.”

“Did you make a kill?” asked Yolanda.

“Yes!” she rejoined with pride, “I killed a squadron leader! He fought like a lion – I had to struggle hard against him. The throng was tremendous, there was no space to manoeuvre - I began to feel drugged by the sweat and the dust, the sound and smell of death, the sun’s reflection off the shields blinded us... He fought bravely, but I overpowered him. He fell beneath my horse’s hooves and I finished him off with my spear.”

“It was your first battle?” prompted Clarissa.

“Yes,” smiled lola. “And that was the first man I’ve killed! I almost forgot to collect his head... I had to return when the battle was over. I recognised his insignia, though I had to pull another body off him in order to find it. I had to brace myself - I hated having to sever the neck and the blood went everywhere because I didn’t make a clean cut. I delivered it to Hippolyte - it was distasteful to her, I could tell, she had to look away for a moment. Then she smiled and congratulated me.”

“Now you’re a true warrior.”

“You’ve passed the initiation...”

“I returned it to the body,” continued lola, sombrely, “as is our custom. Yes, now I’m allowed to mate. But the battle gave me a distaste for the idea... I can’t see how I can feel comfortable to be close to a man, to be intimate with him. Men had brought this senseless violence to us, we didn’t ask for it or want it... Yet even though it was their choice to fight, they put themselves in a losing position and so showed themselves to be weak and arrogant and unprepared... In the end, I was not uplifted by the battle or the victory, it was repugnant to me - and it still is,” she ended softly.

“Were there many losses?”

“We lost lanthe,” lola reminded us. “No-one else from our village, although Maya was wounded in the shoulder. Overall not many of the Amazon warriors were killed, thank the goddess.”

“And the Athenians?”

“Those that tried to escape were caught up on the swamp land, before they reached the Hellespont, by the great lake,” explained lola. “The terrain is difficult, uneven, and they were unprepared for that... As far as we know, Theseus and Antiope - and Herakles - escaped. Hippolyte was very quiet after the battle. She kept to herself as we rode homewards, avoiding unnecessary conversation. Yes, yes, she praised me, but it was with a deep sadness...”

“Because of Antiope?”

“Her sister, yes. All that we stand for - Antiope had denied it and betrayed us. For the pirate Theseus, who has, one hears, many other women companions. He pledges to no one. And yet this is what happens when women stay too long in the proximity of men. They become corrupted. Even Amazons lose their chastity. Those warriors that Hippolyte lost in the battle outside Athens, that was for Antiope’s sake ... and yet, the part she played in this latest scheme to belittle us, it’s difficult to understand. But there was something else too. I didn’t see, but Zoe did, how Herakles

was, in the early stages, surrounded by excited companions. He pulled out from his tunic Hippolyte's golden girdle and began to boast how he had seduced her."

Another gasp and many questions.

"The Athenians laughed and cheered. Then Hippolyte rode up fiercely with her mace swinging - and Herakles shamefacedly hid the girdle again. Not able to meet her gaze, he turned and quickly urged his horse off into the thick of the fray. Poor Hippolyte - after all, he had pleased her, but he wasn't worthy of her.

"We travelled back through the valleys. The peace and beauty of the countryside helped to heal us," lola smiled gently. "We began to laugh again. We went up into the hills and stopped at the farms to barter for fresh food - we got goat cheese and halva for the village. Hippolyte sent me ahead to bring the news. So here we are," she concluded wearily, "and our borders are still secure."

The cottage gradually emptied and we got ready for bed. I brought lola milk and honey cakes as she lay down.

"I'm so glad you're safe," I whispered shyly as I snuggled up against her, feeling safe but small and insignificant by the side of my hero.

"Mm, so nice to be back with my little sister to look after me," she replied drowsily before her eyes closed.

But she slept fitfully, reliving the battle. And I was restless, too, as her story had left me with so many questions to reflect on, about the nature of man and woman.

4

There followed a few short years of peace and harmony, during which I learned the skills of weaving, farming, hunting and armed combat. I became particularly known for equestrian skills and often remembered that initial thought of fear at a new task that was so soon dispelled by lola's supportive expectation of me. At intervals we were visited by travelling warriors who helped us to continue learning about the outside world - while at the same time we were protected from it, since no man was allowed to enter Amazon territory.

There was an early, important, event after the battle of the ... Hippolyte's belly began to grow larger. lola explained to me about the mating practice - and that the queen was carrying Herakles' child. It all gave me a funny feeling inside, I didn't fancy any of it. We talked again when the village began to make preparations for a ceremony to Artemis.

"The goddess takes care of fertility and childbirth," Lola said, adopting her instructor's mode. "We ask her to intercede, to make sure the baby grows healthy in the womb and for the birth to go smoothly."

"But why do we have to mate at all?" I demanded.

"We want to have children," she shrugged. "We have a yearning to bear children - they say the bond is closer than anything else you can experience. And, anyway, we must have children to populate and protect the Amazon territory."

"Will you have children, too, to bond with you?" I asked jealously. "Then what will I do?"

Lola hugged me close. "We have a special bond, you and I, because I found you and you chose to live with me. You'll want children as well, probably, when you're older."

"I don't think so!" I said indignantly.

Night fell over the great sea as the ceremony commenced. A faint breeze from across the water barely moved the leaves in the almond trees. Within this stillness, the dancing of the chosen warriors became frenzied, the music wild.

Then a gasp from one of us and the whole crowd fell silent. The goddess herself had appeared, carrying two goatkids over her shoulder. These she dropped down by the fire, motioning one of the warriors to prepare them for roasting.

"Continue the dancing," she said smiling and went to sit next to Hippolyte. She accepted a goblet of wine and delicately picked on olives and grapes from the golden dishes.

Later she rose and went indoors with Hippolyte. Clarissa, who was our physician, accompanied them. They returned soon afterwards to the celebrations, sat and chatted easily. I noticed that Hippolyte looked tired but happy. Food was served on polished wooden dishes and the wine was passed round again.

When the dancing ended, Artemis asked for our attention

"The mating between Hippolyte and Herakles is blessed," she told us. "Hippolyte is carrying twins, a boy and a girl. They will be born after the next two moons."

The party broke up joyfully at this news, some going home to sleep off the wine. A group of us made our way down to the shore, still excited and not wanting to sleep yet.

"Let's go swimming in the moonlight," suggested someone.

The next instant, we were naked, splashing into the lake - which was still warm from the day's sun and bright as a mirror from the full moon's reflection.

Hippolyte gave birth at night and it wasn't easy to miss the event. I woke to hear the sounds of activity in the village - people running past and calling to each other. I got up to see what was happening and as I came outside I could hear Hippolyte's groans and screams as she laboured.

"It sounds as if she's fighting," I said to lola.

"They say it's like no other pain," observed lola, as we walked towards Hippolyte's house. "The greatest pain a warrior has to bear. But we're able to withstand it because it's creative, not destructive."

With one last almighty roar, followed by a few short cries, the noise stopped. All those waiting began to smile and look at each other in anticipation. There was not much longer to wait. First Clarissa came out of the house to let us know that the birth had gone well.

Then as dawn was breaking, Hippolyte emerged to show off her new babies. She looked tired after the birth, with dark rings under her eyes as if she had not slept for days. She sat and moved stiffly - but she was glowing with happiness and couldn't stop smiling. I noticed how closely she held her babies. She kept looking at them, stroking them, kissing them, folding back their shawls tidily, murmuring to them. Her being with them was a constant caress. She made herself comfortable in a hammock on the verandah so that she could receive well-wishers.

Later I saw how she fell into a light doze, a voluptuous smile on her rather haggard face, while she was breast feeding her daughter.

The whole village was thrilled at the arrival of the twins and there was no shortage of volunteers to hold and comfort them, play with them, wash and change them. Help was needed especially when the one baby cried as she or he awaited their turn at the breast.

"Hippolyte looks as if she's been knocked about," I said to lola, noting the bruised eyes.

"It's not surprising," said Clarissa, overhearing. "Two babies – more than twice as much work."

The twins were about six months old when I was asked to prepare horses for Chloe and Yolanda, my hunting companions.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"We're returning the baby boy to Athens," Yolanda explained. "We only keep the girls.

Haven't you noticed there are no boys here?"

"But how does it work?" I asked in astonishment.

"It's a fair bargain," said Chloe. "We maintain our female population. The fathers receive boy children with Amazon blood - brave and nurturing at the same time. Amazon blood is a positive force for other races. Since we usually mate with the nomadic tribes – and they carry the blood of diverse peoples, from Syria, Africa, India - we also maintain a healthy bloodline."

"And how will they escape from the Athenians? Won't they be captured? Or just killed like lanthe before the battle?" I asked lola, after fetching the horses.

"They'll bring the baby to the edge of our territory and find a traveller to complete the task," she told me.

"Will he arrive safely? How do you know the traveller can be trusted?"

“My dear,” she smiled, “this is the son of Herakles, who is the close friend of the king of Athens. Whoever delivers him to his father will be richly rewarded!” She paused and went on. “Usually we return the boy babies ourselves. We have a different relationship with the tribesmen. They’re not obsessed by territory like other men, they live for the wind and the shifting sand. So they don’t feel threatened by us or our Amazon lands. Our coming and going is acceptable to them... and so we cooperate, trading horses and children.”

I shook my head, not knowing what to believe.

“It’s the way we live!” said lola, irritably.

Chloe and Yolanda brought out their saddle bags. Hippolyte gave them a girdle worked curiously in gold.

“This belonged to Herakles –he gave it to me as a memento,” she explained, wryly. “Well, it’s a little heirloom for his son!”

Chloe took it from her. “Mm, I’ll make sure to wrap it round the baby before we pass him on – I’d like it to be the first thing his father sees!”

Yolanda took the goat’s milk stored for the baby in leather containers.

“We’ll get more as we cross by the hill farms,” she promised as she mounted.

Hippolyte stood, cradling the boy twin in her arms for the last time. Eventually she held him out. While Yolanda gathered him up in front of her, wrapped in a soft dark woollen shawl, the queen waited silently for them to depart.

“Take good care,” was all she said, as the two warriors rode out of the village.

Was Hippolyte sad to see her baby boy go? I felt sure she must be, because of the bond I had seen between them. After all, he had been created and grown in her belly, she had suckled and cosseted him. But she only had the one breast for feeding and this, I reasoned, had to be for her daughter.

5

I now began to develop physically myself, going through all those changes that lola had warned me about - menstrual blood flowing, breasts budding, hair sprouting. All this was not too big a shock for me, since I had been used to seeing girls in different stages of development down at the river where we swam regularly, and I was familiar with the grown woman’s shape, since I still slept curled up with lola. But I was not so prepared for the strange feelings and desires that accompanied the physical changes, feelings I couldn’t express, that made me shy and awkward.

lola turned to me in bed one morning, propping herself up against the pillows with one elbow and idly stroking my hair with the other hand.

"We should plait your hair," she said, "it's so pretty now it's grown." She paused for a moment and drew back. "You're no longer a child, Selena," she observed. "I've been thinking for a while that maybe you should sleep on your own."

"No!" I gasped, reaching out to give her naked thigh a clumsy caress. "That's not what I want!"

"What is it you want, then?" she asked with a little smile, as she leaned forward to kiss me full on the lips.

I melted beneath her touch.

As the days went by, she showed me all the ways a body can receive pleasure without shame - and later, when I became more confident, she showed me how to give pleasure to another in the same way.

"You've had other lovers?" I demanded, thinking back to nights when she had slipped into bed very late beside me after partying.

"Of course," she said gently. "But not for some time."

"Why not?" I asked, hoping for the answer I got.

"I've been waiting for you," she said simply. I felt blessed.

Soon after this, lola approached Hippolyte on my behalf.

"Selena's now a woman," she said. "Isn't it time for her to go through the initiation rites?"

"Do you want to become a warrior?" asked Hippolyte, looking down at me and then at lola. "How's she getting on with her training?"

"She's accurate with a bow and arrow and an enthusiastic swordswoman," lola replied.

"Do you want to become a warrior, young woman?" Hippolyte asked me again.

I squirmed at the question, for I knew what this entailed – it meant burning off the right breast.

"Does it hurt?" I asked, thinking of the operation.

"If you intend to be a warrior, you'll be able to bear the pain," she reassured me.

"Is it necessary?" I asked.

"As you can see in the village," replied Hippolyte, "we allow some women to avoid the operation. They live with us and we love them. But they're not true Amazons like the rest of us - we who are both warriors and lovers."

My heart swelled with the possibility of becoming complete, at one with my own nature and at one with the tribe. I saw myself going off to war, armour gleaming beneath the sun. Story-tellers would sit with children by the fire and thrill them with my exploits. How could I turn down a chance like that?

lola stood by, looking at me proudly. She loved me. How could I let her down?

Shyly, I nodded my head. "If you think I'm ready..." I murmured.

"Let's plan the ceremony," said Hippolyte, smiling, "for the night of the crescent moon."

Of course I had known something about the ritual, without relating it to my own future, since no pressure had been placed on me to prepare for it. Now lola became my mentor for this, as she had been for almost everything else that I had learned.

It was a quiet preparation, carried out in private. I practised the deep breathing that helped control my fear and would later help me to control the pain. lola sat with me, cross-legged on the floor, and explained the stages of the operation so that the path was clear in my mind and I knew exactly where I was going.

We also talked about the reasons for the operation. These were of course partly practical - to enable me to draw a bow and wield a sword without impediment. But they also went deeper than that.

"It's a permanent symbol for us of our double nature," explained lola, becoming animated in her instructor rôle. "In appearance we become androgynous. And so we are capable of any human endeavour. It's also a sign to all outsiders - a reminder that we, as women, bear great pain and demonstrate great courage. It's the power of this sign which makes us invincible."

"And irresistible," I added naughtily, touching her smooth right chest.

"Pay attention!" she laughed, slapping my hand away.

On the designated morning, only three warriors attended me. lola was my guide and comforter, Clarissa was the surgeon and Hippolyte sanctified the proceedings. The large flat ritual knife was heated in the brazier until it was red hot.

Clarissa as always was quick and competent with her hands. At the same time there was gentleness and concern in her voice as she talked through what she was doing.

Even with the poppy draft I had been given as anaesthetic, the pain was like fire itself inside my chest. But the operation was quickly over and the pain was so intense that I became numbed to it. More poppy juice and I began to float...

lola crossed to the door to inform those waiting outside that the ritual was completed successfully. Clarissa helped me to lie more comfortably on the couch. Throughout the rest of the day, women came to visit and congratulate me, bringing me small gifts.

"Here's a little posy of your favourite violets."

"I've made some fresh apricot cake for you."

"A pot of basil."

"A woven belt."

Through the poppy haze I felt divine.

Then came the day I had secretly been dreading. It was time for lola to visit the nomadic tribes. She was reluctant and her face was sober as she got ready to leave.

“You don’t *have* to go?” I said, not wanting to lose her, jealous and repulsed at what she was going to do.

“ Hippolyte feels it’s right,” she replied quietly, packing her saddle-bag. “I’ve put it off long enough.”

“ But it’s your choice in the end! You want to go!” I shouted, trying to pick a quarrel with her.

“It’s what we do,” she said. “You know that’s how we live.”

“It isn’t fair,” I raged. “It’ll never be the same between us if you go. It’ll ruin everything.”

“Don’t do this to me,” she begged, holding out her arms. “You know that I love you.”

We embraced passionately and then she swung herself lightly up into the saddle and was riding off with the others. Suddenly she was out of sight. I was distraught and burst into tears. She was gone and I had been like an angry spoilt child, she would carry that with her. I hadn’t told her how much I loved her.

For days I moped about the village. Clarissa tried hard to cheer me up, to reason with me.

“Listen, how much harder do you think it was for lola to go? You didn’t think of that, did you? Just thought of yourself! Anyway, why should it be different when she comes back? You still love her, don’t you?”

But I couldn’t rationalise my feelings.

At the next full moon, they came riding back. lola burst into our little cottage, full of life and light like the goddess she was. And I tried to remember what Clarissa had said, but it was too difficult, for I was eaten up with jealousy and couldn’t welcome her home properly.

After they had all bathed and dressed and eaten, the younger girls clamoured for lola to tell the story as only she could. She murmured to me, her eyes pleading,

“You don’t have to hear this. We can meet later.” But against my better judgement, I stayed, sulking at the back of the room. For, like everyone else, I needed to hear what it was like.

“We crossed the river,” began lola, “and rode until we came upon the camp in the late afternoon. It was magical. There is so much life out there in the wilderness, you couldn’t imagine it. You see the dark green shadows of the date palms by the emerald water and there’s fresh yellow grass where the black and white goats graze. The camels are extraordinary beasts, with their red leather saddles, snorting and spitting – and roaring! they really like giving you a fright when you’re not looking! Then the crimson and blue stripes of the huge tents billow in the breeze. And beyond all that is the gold of the sand dunes, forever changing.

“Yolanda was the leader of our group. She spoke with their chief. Well, we’ve all studied their language, but Yolanda’s more competent than the rest of us. I liked the look of the chief. He was an older man who had a remarkable face. It was weathered and scarred like the earth, the face of someone who could tell you many strange and enthralling stories...

“After a little while he came out and welcomed us. We were all invited in to the large tent and seated on silk cushions. Chief Kizir gave orders in *bedu* to the women who sat at the edge and they disappeared - we assumed to prepare food, which they brought in on golden dishes. In fact, although the nomads scorn the concept of territory and permanent homemaking, they live in a certain style of luxury, which even the Athenians wouldn’t despise. The bedouin have few possessions but what they have are of the finest - dishes and jugs, clothes. The women wear solid gold ornaments - earrings which dangle onto their shoulders, rings in their nose and hundreds of bangles. They walk tall and proud, unlike the women you see in the Greek cities.

“As we ate, young men entered one after the other, until they numbered the same as us.

‘These are the mates that have been chosen,’ explained Yolanda. ‘Well, in fact, they’re self-selected. Some of them are married and they’ve agreed with their wives to bring up any boy babies when they’re returned.’

“Why do they agree to it?” asked one of the girls listening.

“Different reasons,” replied lola. “One important motivation is to have a son. Or their wife hasn’t been able to carry a baby to term - or doesn’t want to carry another baby through nine months of pregnancy. Some are still unmarried. Their parents want to have another son but the mother’s beyond child-bearing age.”

“So what was it like, meeting the men?” someone else asked.

“It’s difficult to describe how I felt,” lola said slowly, not looking at me. “My feelings were constantly changing and my reactions in that situation often surprised me! On riding out I had steeled myself, as if I were going into battle and at first I was still very much on my guard. Yet... our surroundings were safe and comfortable. The men were handsome and, though strong and vigorous, they behaved in a peaceful and courteous manner towards us. We drank intoxicating liquor and I became relaxed, receptive... Yes,” she continued hastily, “ I know we’re warned not to drink too much, I tried to control myself... We communicated as well as we could, Amazons and Bedouin sharing food and language, exchanging looks and caresses, trying to establish some kind of bond.”

“How did you choose *your* mate?” I couldn’t help asking out loud, and the question came out as a sneer.

lola laughed a little in embarrassment. I wasn’t making things easier for her, although I’d promised to myself that I would. But she avoided my eyes and answered to the crowd – she had her duty as story-teller and was determined to fulfill it.

“Well, in fact,” she confessed, “ it was the chief himself I fancied, although he wasn’t one of the chosen men. But, half-silly with drink, I asked Yolanda if she could negotiate for me. I watched as she went up and spoke to him. He laughed and then looked over at me. As I caught his eye he stopped laughing. He spoke again to Yolanda and she smiled at me in confirmation. My heart leapt.”

I ground my teeth but no-one seemed to notice. lola continued and the others hung on her every word.

“As we gradually paired off, we were led away to where several smaller tents had been erected. Yes, those were our mating quarters and we spent a lot of time there - although we also had the run of the camp and could wander wherever we liked.”

“How was it when you were alone?” came the next question.

“I was so nervous, I found myself trembling - uncontrollably. I couldn’t fold my cloak or unbuckle my tunic. I felt like a child. But Kizir noticed I was having a problem and he – he was kind, he helped me.”

“How did it feel when he undressed you?”

I sucked my teeth, but the story went relentlessly on.

“I had never believed,” replied lola, “that I could really enjoy the touch of a man on me. But he was gentle and sweet, just like a woman is. He undressed me slowly, kissing me softly as he did so, on my hair and my cheek and my neck, yes, and my breast and my stomach and my thighs too!”

There was a general gasp. “Wasn’t it strange?” someone asked.

“No!” said lola firmly. “I stopped trembling and began to shudder - from the sheer pleasure of it! He held me with respect - as we were two equals who had chosen to be together for this time and purpose. Then we lay down on the couch and – so on,” she finished lamely.

“Didn’t it hurt?” someone demanded.

"No!" lola responded. "He slid into me easily enough – that was another part I'd always been afraid of but there was only a slight pain and, actually, it did seem natural to be doing it like that - although it was an idea I'd always abhorred! In fact, it was a delicious sensation," she faltered and came to a halt again.

I thought I was going to be sick, but I stayed there, fascinated.

"And afterwards he went away?"

lola smiled. "No! We kissed and slept a little and then we turned to each other sleepily - and did it again!"

"So he stayed with you?"

"It was a long night and so were the ones that followed," said lola, dreamily. How I hated her. "But don't forget," she shook herself and added primly, "we were there for a higher purpose!"

"And so it went on like that?"

"It began to feel normal, to return to him night after night. During the daytime we would separate, spend time with friends, visit the women of the tribe or negotiate over new horses. And it was the nomads' time for celebrations - they hold friendly contests for the men - horse racing, wrestling. And so we took part - to everyone's delight!"

"Did you win?"

"It was just a game," lola shrugged. "As a matter of fact I didn't apply myself like I normally do. I seemed to be less aggressive, less competitive than usual. I felt languid like when you've had a large meal, drunk with love, I suppose, sated with sex!"

At this point I made a hurried, noisy exit. I breathed in the fresh night air and tried to calm myself. But I didn't move far enough away from the cottage. The questions and answers went on and on.

"There was a bond between us," lola was saying as I entered the room again. "I would look for him in a group of men, I would feel his gaze on me when I was speaking to someone else...The strangest sensation of all is to feel you are, and want to be, wholly of and with just one other person, losing yourself, your individual identity – and not wanting him to be with anyone else."

"Wasn't it frightening?"

"Well, we knew it was for a limited time, an interlude, a duty - and so I enjoyed it, I revelled in all those new feelings. And yet," lola's voice dropped, "as the moon waned, I found it harder to enjoy - soon I would be gone, it would all be over."

"And the chieftain?"

"I believe it was hard for him, he came to love me too..." lola shook her head. "At first the journey home was like a dream, the kind you have with the poppy juice. Then gradually everything came

back into perspective. I began to feel like my own person, I was free again. Yes, of course I still remember him," she said painfully. "But I'm back now, where I belong."

She smiled, looked up and straight into my eyes.

As the others dispersed I came to her, holding out my arms. And for a short time at least I managed to screw up my courage, putting aside my own feelings in order to comfort her like a mother and to welcome her home.

Like the rest of the mating party, lola fell pregnant, but it was a state we both avoided discussing most of the time. Like her, I tried to accept it is as part of the way we lived. As she grew bigger, I would massage her back and ignore the brooding look that came into her eyes from time to time. She grew more beautiful in pregnancy, with a glow that I knew had nothing to do with me. I hated myself for it but I couldn't help thinking:

"Goddess, I hope the baby is a boy!"

Nine months later we had a number of new babies to play with in the village. There was celebration for the arrival of the girls, but those warriors, like lola, who bore a boy child, had only a sadness in the afterglow of childbirth. I ached for her and was jubilant for myself at the same time.

After the weaning period, Hippolyte chose a small group to return the boy children. They would stay with the tribes for the mating period.

"Aren't you going with them?" I asked lola jealously.

"No, it's better this way," said lola. "I don't want to see the chief again. What for? To feel that yearning, the thrill of meeting and the pain of parting again? And I don't want to see his wife take hold of my baby and know that he also is hers now. That's too much heroism to expect..."

"Isn't this wrong?" I demanded, feeling her hurt.

"It's the way we've devised to maintain our population and still live free of men," said lola quietly.

"We all benefit from the children who stay. And those we have to return, well, that's the sacrifice all of us are ready to make."

"But some of us don't have to make it!" I exclaimed.

Still, although I shared her pain, I was secretly glad that I did not have to share her with anyone else just yet.

There came a time when, as a trained warrior, I was sent to serve Thalestris, another Amazon queen, and gain wider experience. Yolanda and Clarissa were among the group – and Hippolyte also chose my beloved lola to go with us. What an adventure!

We arrived as they were preparing for the celebration of the goddess Artemis. She came to visit, with her silver bow over one shoulder and the ten ferocious hunting dogs that Pan, the woodland god, had sent her. Artemis rode out with Thalestris. They returned, flushed from the hunt, to preside at the feast in the wooded grove and enjoy the music and singing.

Once or twice when I was younger the goddess had attended the rituals of the Moon with us, but, as a child then, I had never been presented to her. This time when she looked across at me I saw, to my surprise, her eyes open wide in recognition. Her look then became furtive, almost fearful.

“How long has this warrior been with you, Thalestris?” demanded Artemis. “She’s not originally of our people, is she?”

“No, but what matter?” responded Thalestris easily. “Hippolyte found her as a child and she has grown up with us, a warrior for any queen to be proud of.”

I felt sure that Thalestris was aware of Artemis’ discomfort, but she spoke gently, with the intention of protecting me, wiping all curiosity from her voice.

“She’s learnt all the rituals, I take it? She’s been initiated?”

“She’s not yet killed in battle,” replied Thalestris. “But, like all of us, she’s learned the moral courage to stand between male lust and male actions.”

Artemis grunted and looked away into the distance, frowning.

“It’s becoming more difficult to do so,” she spoke quietly, as if to herself. “Once it was easy - to stand and shoot the giant hunter Orion when he tried to rape Opis. And to turn Actaeon into a stag when he spied on me bathing naked. I could outshoot any man. But I myself was born as a result of rape - after my father Zeus pursued Leto and, turning himself and her into quails, mated with her. And now my twin brother’s power is on the increase.

“We had our separate worlds but that wasn’t enough for him ... He desecrated the sacred cave of Mother Earth, lied to our stepmother Hera and stole the power of prophecy. He controls the oracle who now, when she’s inspired by the divine vapour, reveals her secrets only to men...

“We were supposed to devote ourselves to different spheres of activity, but, no, my influence was still considered to be too strong... It had to be diminished... and all my supporters had to be punished.

“I won the concession to have a group of warriors here to continue the old ways, the rituals, so that these ideas - of how women can be complete - would live on in the new world... But the tribe has

dwindled in size, such is the hostility it faces - and the temptations that cannot be resisted forever...”

I paid close attention, for, although I was unaware of my purpose, it seemed that some of this information that Artemis unwittingly let slip in her unexplained discomposure at my presence would be important to me later.

“You must make an alliance with Alexander,” she told Thalestris before leaving.

We had heard that the renowned Alexander of Macedonia was travelling back from the East towards Babylon. Stories of his exploits were legion.

He had crossed through Asia Minor several years previously with his troops. He had defeated Darius, the king of Persia, in the great battle of Issus. Then he had gone on to subdue all the other tribes between the Hellespont and the Hindu Kush and successfully integrate them into his army. He built his Greek cities along the caravan route (any number of Alexandrias) to control trade and to patrol the surrounding country. In Bactria he announced his plan for world conquest. His vision was to bring his own concept of culture and law, based on city life (that is, civilisation) to the barbarians (as he called all other peoples apart from his own) and to foster a fusion of the races. He himself took a Bactrian to wife, as well as the Persian’s daughter Roxane, and he encouraged his soldiers to intermarry likewise. Ten thousand soldiers had brought Asian wives back with them. A huge wedding ceremony was organised at Alexandria (the one in Carmania) to celebrate this great cultural melting pot.

All these changes had affected our relationship with the nomadic tribes, who were driven from the old caravan routes, losing their traditional livelihood, their freedom slipping away as the checkpoints were established.

Now Alexander was returning, having spread his empire beyond the Hindu Kush, and the Amazons were afraid that our way of life was also threatened. In his outward journey through Asia Minor, our lands had not been affected. But with Alexander’s influence so widely spread, the political alliances he had cemented through numerous marriages, it seemed only a matter of time before we too were assimilated - or one of our neighbours decided to seek the emperor’s support to invade us.

“He seems all-powerful,” said Yolanda.

“The troops declared him a god at Persepolis,” Clarissa reminded us.

“Rumour has it that he is extremely abstemious. He says that sleep and sexual intercourse remind him of his mortality,” added Iola.

“Perhaps we can negotiate with him,” said Thalestris, considering this. “His reputation is so mixed. On the one hand we hear he maniacally pursues his goal of conquest through whatever bloodthirsty means are available. He rules his men with an iron glove. On the other hand, it seems

that he is courteous and refined, spends much time alone, is not given to the usual carousing of the soldier...”

“... and that he has great respect for women,” added Clarissa.

“They say he prefers the company of young men...” said Yolanda in an aside to lola.

“... as is the Greek way...”

“And of course, he is a courageous warrior,” continued Thalestris, ignoring this. “Maybe we can reach an understanding.”

As Alexander came closer, we made preparations. Thalestris chose me to accompany her as one of her armed guard. She dressed herself and her horse with the greatest of care. lola and Yolanda were sent ahead to announce her arrival and to arrange an audience with Alexander.

With the queen we rode out to meet him on the Nesean plains, south of Echbatana, where the wild mares lived. Alexander’s tent had been set up in the shade of the mountains. From here he was to direct the campaign against the Cosseans. Thalestris was invited inside - and we too, as her guard of honour. lola and Yolanda were waiting for us, already seated at a table spread with fine food, fruit, almonds and wine.

Thalestris sat down with Alexander and began to talk to him about the Amazon culture, the territory we held by right, our religion to the goddess, our skills and achievements.

“We’ve never been conquered,” she told him proudly, “We want to retain our way of life, according to our own laws and customs. But we understand that you have other plans for the world and we’re anxious. For we know that you’ve never been defeated.”

“It’s not my custom to force women to do what they don’t want to do,” replied Alexander, smiling, “and I make it quite plain to my soldiers that they abide by the same practice.”

lola whispered to the rest of us on hearing this. “What about the ten thousand wives? They were, after all, the spoils of war, whether they came willingly or not.”

“On my way across to Bactria, the king of the Chorasmians came to me with a plan to defeat the Amazons,” revealed Alexander. “Since your territory borders on his and you are invincible, he offered to help me invade it, hoping to claim some advantage from me.”

“Yes, he’s a cowardly greedy tyrant,” said Thalestris hotly.

“I refused him, of course,” Alexander said simply. He took an apricot and bit into it thoughtfully.

“However, you’re right to be afraid,” he continued with compassion. “It will be difficult to withstand the changes that are taking place around you... And this would be a pity as the exploits of the

Amazons are legendary and have inspired admiration from all those who come into contact with you... How can I help you?"

"You know that it's our custom to mate for a limited time in order to have children?" Thalestris began again.

"So I understand, replied Alexander with a little gleam of interest in his eye as he looked at her. "And, er, does this practice also apply to the Queen of the Amazons?"

"Yes, in the spring it's my time to mate again," she replied. "If you visit us at that time, you yourself could father my child," she added boldly. " We invite you to bring your favourite warriors with you. Together we could begin to breed a superior race. An alliance with Alexander will surely help to protect our people. And you in return will receive any boy children that we bear as a result of our union over the years."

"I would be honoured," he responded promptly. If he felt surprise he covered it. Maybe the proposal suited his own purposes well. Yet something in him was also moved by her beauty and courage. He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

"Wait for me then to come, after the snow melts," he emphasised. "I shall not fail you."

"Until the cherry blossom is finished," she promised, then went on softly, "But please don't make me wait any longer."

"I'll bring a small group with me. A good holiday for us after the Cosseans are defeated," he said with satisfaction.

"The mating period's normally one month," she explained cautiously "That's all."

"We'll adhere to your customs, of course" he replied gallantly, kissing her hand again.

As soon as we started our journey back, the group began to argue.

"It's always been our policy not to allow men into our territory," objected lola. "Now we're inviting them in..."

"It's safer for us, the situation will be under our control," Thalestris tried to explain. "Alexander's a noble warrior. I trust his word. Just think how it would be if we rode out in a group to mate with the Hellenes in one of their cities, how vulnerable we would be - to capture or to entrapment or to abuse. And how is it possible to arrange a mating period in the middle of a military encampment?"

"They'll sow discord," prophesied lola angrily.

"They'll desecrate our rituals. How can we worship the goddess with men present?" demanded Yolanda.

"We'll begin to change," warned lola. "It's always the same in the company of men. I saw that when I was among Alexander's retinue. The women there are not equal. There's a tendency to be submissive, to be pleasing..."

(Of course, I thought, she has firsthand experience of this!)

“We’ve managed with the tribesmen to retain our independence,” protested Thalestris.

“Our allegiance to each other will begin to weaken if the men come into our community,” said Yolanda flatly, supporting lola.

“The attraction of them, the proximity, the possibility of sex with them will affect our concentration and our judgement,” continued lola. (She had not forgotten!)

The atmosphere in the group was tense and aggressive. I could see that, just talking and thinking about men, the harmony we once enjoyed was being lost.

“It’s my last hope for our survival,” Thalestris finally shouted them down.

It was the first time I had ever heard a queen raise her voice except to call us into battle. Now she was under attack from all sides.

“It was my responsibility to take the decision. If anyone wishes to take over my rôle, they’re more than welcome. It’s become a thankless one.”

“It’s too late now, anyway,” Clarissa grumbled. “The damage is done. No-one is going to stop Alexander bringing his warriors into our camp and stabbing us right in the heart.”

8

But by the time the cherry blossom was falling, we heard that Alexander was dead.

The empire that he had controlled began to unravel and in our weakened state we would be at the mercy of more ruthless enemies.

And it was time for me to go. I awoke one dawn, from a dream so vivid I could not believe it was not my reality and my waking life a dream. The goddess was explaining something to me. What was it? The meaning dissipated with the morning light.

But I reached out and clung to lola with the desperate knowledge that I would lose her.

That day we went out hunting leopard. I died an Amazon’s death. The beautiful animal leapt down at me from the sand-coloured rock. The goddess appeared between us. I barely felt the ripping of the claws before my spirit left my body and I was carried away into the ether again.

PART TWO

MORGAN

But I didn't die. At least, I was reborn. At the time I didn't realise it, but looking back I can see now that, somehow, I was set along the next stage of my journey. All I can remember is landing roughly against cold hard stone. I rolled over twice and sat up slightly dazed. Then slowly started picking straw out of my hair.

"Are you a fairy or a demon?" I was asked by a bold voice that came from the shadows. Beyond a well-lit brazier, I deciphered a woman's form. As she approached I saw she was startled but unafraid.

"I'm not sure," I answered shakily. "Where am I?"

"Not a demon, then" she said comfortably, holding out an arm to help me up.

"Oh why?" I asked surprised. "Do demons always know where they are?"

"No, but they always pretend they do!"

The room was not as large as I had first thought, the flickering shadows made it seem larger. The walls were bare stone except for floor length curtains hanging here and there, embroidered in gold with the crescent moon. I shivered with cold as soon as I moved away from the brazier. The occupant was a tiny woman, not young but with a youthful face, and a bright intelligent gaze. She wore a simple long black dress covered by a voluminous apron.

"You're not so much a fairy child as a grown woman," she said, looking me up and down. "Who are you?"

"I don't know," I repeated. "Who are you?"

"I am Morgana," she replied proudly, drawing herself up to her full height. "I'm the half-sister of King Arthur and a famous sorceress."

"Oh" I said, blankly.

"You must surely be from another world if you've never heard the name," she said, shrinking again. She gave me a keen glance, her head on one side, like a little bird. "Have you been sent to help me?" she murmured, turning away.

She threw some fine dust into the brazier and the flames burned up high, creating pictures. Morgana stared into them.

"I cannot see that far," she muttered with regret, "I cannot see that clearly... But I do see that you have traveled through time and space to be with me." She turned back briskly. "You can stay here. I've got room for an apprentice."

There was an alcove in the wall covered by a curtain, which she drew back to reveal a narrow bed beneath a long thin window. An eery moon shone through.

"I'll sleep nearer the fire, if it's all the same to you, Morgana," I stuttered, as politely as I could.

"Let me heat you up some mulled wine," Morgana offered, seeing me shiver. She balanced a pot over the fire and went to fetch me a long brown cloak.

She sat down, then, and looked at me intently.

"You have to have a name," she said. "What will it be?"

She seemed to pluck it out of the air around me. "Arianwen, no, Branwen!" she decided.

"Why? What does it mean?" I asked.

"Your sleek black hair's like the crow – *bran* - and your skin's shining white – *wen*. At first I thought of shining silver – *Arianwen* – but no, you have a dual nature, you're no longer pure."

"A fairy *and* a demon, then," I muttered, smiling to myself.

"Branwen's also the goddess of war," Morgana added huffily. "Doesn't the name feel right?"

I tried it out and was only half-surprised to find it did fit me, after all. Of course, now all this makes sense - but then I had no memory of my previous experience, only those glimpses of light that come and go among the shadows of your understanding, making you think you've found the truth - and lost it again.

Morgana poured out wine for us both into wooden goblets. I held mine tight, warming my hands with it, burying my face in the steam.

"These are cruel times," began my mentor (for I recognised her as that). "The land is ruled by violence. You can't trust any man. Keep well away from the lord and his knights; they live for war - and in times of peace, they continue to kill and rape to keep in practice!"

Morgana considered me again. "But I've a feeling you'll be safe. Since you're not of this time, no-one can harm you. But just in case," she added, obviously not quite satisfied with her own explanation, "take this charm here to protect you."

She removed a gold chain from her own neck and fastened it round mine. A small gold crescent moon hung from it.

I almost laughed in her face. She caught sight of my quizzical expression and snapped: "There are things I can't explain. But I know they work."

I bowed to her knowledge. The mulled wine warmed me and presently I settled down to sleep by the fire on my little truckle bed. Morgana wrapped the cloak more tightly round me.

“What is it that you’ve come to learn? to do?” mused Morgan as we ate bread and cheese for breakfast the following morning.

I shrugged my shoulders, for indeed I knew nothing. I felt restless in the chamber.

“Why are we confined here?” I asked. “Can’t we go outside?”

“I told you last night, it’s a dangerous place, “ she replied. “It’s safe here, for the time being at least,” she muttered, then smiled. “Later I’ll show you around.”

“I feel as if I’m in prison here,” I told her, with some distant knowledge of the freedom I once enjoyed.

“Let’s start with your lessons,” she said encouragingly and began teaching me about the secret properties of herbs.

Soon Morgana lost her caution. She decided it would be useful for me to fetch ingredients for her spells and experiments. First we visited the kitchen - “a little like hell,” as Morgan said. There was a huge fire blazing and several young women in coarse clothes were sweating away over their work, basting the roast pig.

Nadine was the serving maid who brought Morgana’s food to our little cell. The same age and height as myself, with laughing eyes and a high-pitched giggle, she somehow managed to rise above the indignity of her lot.

“I love the springtime,” she told me, as she took me to the herb garden and pointed out those Morgan wanted, showing me how to pick the leaves without damaging the plant. “Everything’s so fresh and clear outside.”

She was right. It was wonderful to step out of the dark castle for even a short while.

“I slip out at night sometimes,” Nadine confided in me, “ when the moon is full – and the cook isn’t watching! She rules us with a rod of iron. You’re lucky to be with the Lady Morgana, she’s a true princess. I don’t care what they say about her.”

“Why? What *do* they say?” I asked, intrigued.

She shrugged. “Terrible things, I won’t repeat them,” she said stoutly. “You’ll hear soon enough.”

As I crossed the great hall with Morgana, on our way back to her room, I saw Lord Lot for the first time. A great bear of a man, his face covered in beard, and his leather doublet decorated with sharp silver fleur-de-lys that reminded me of claws. He was roaring at a handful of knights who clustered untidily in front of him.

“I need more money! I must have money to go and fight in the lowlands! I have to defeat Urien!”

“We could raise taxes again, my lord,” suggested one of the knights.

“It’ll take too much time!”

“We could loot the monasteries,” offered another.

"It's been done! There's nothing left!"

"What about the nunnery at Shrewsbury?" volunteered another cautiously.

"Yes!" yelled the knights in delight. "The Convent!! Let's loot the Convent!!!"

Lord Lot roared in approbation and then rapped out orders.

"Come here, you scabby squire. No! Go! go and get my armour ready. You!" he turned on another underling. "You tell the rest. We leave at noon. Go!"

Then each of the knights began to shout for their own squire, as if trying to outdo the rest in volume and profanity, at the same time making suggestive swoops with their short swords and thumping each other on the shoulder, every now and then breaking out into raucous inane laughter.

Eventually they turned to leave the hall and get dressed for the battle. Suddenly seeing these barbarians bearing down towards us alarmed me and I moved out of their passage, thus betraying our presence.

"What are you doing there, you old witch?" growled Lord Lot, catching sight of Morgana (and thankfully ignoring me). "Plotting your evil ways again?" he continued nastily. "Poisoning men's minds, I know. You just be careful. I'm watching you. When I catch you out in your crimes, I'll burn you at the stake for punishment, God help me."

I was taken aback at his venom, the cruelty in his voice. Morgana's face drained itself of colour but she said nothing and we moved quickly on.

"Urien's my husband, his mortal enemy," she muttered to me. "It's a complicated situation," she continued, seeing my look of surprise. "Lot's married to my sister Anna. That's why I'm here, while Urien is away at war against the King."

"But Arthur's your half-brother, isn't he?" I asked in amazement.

"Yes! And Lot's one of his strongest supporters. It suits Arthur to have me here, so Lot can keep his eye on both of us."

"Both of you?" I echoed.

"Anna and myself," she answered.

"Where *is* the Lady Anna?" I demanded. "I haven't clapped eyes on her yet!"

"You'll have to bide your time," she replied with asperity. "She's kept in the Lady Tower – you'll have seen it by the herb garden. It's not easy to visit."

"But you're allowed to come and go," I protested, "Why..."

"Well," she cut in grimly, "Arthur obviously doesn't think I can have that much influence so far from court."

I opened my mouth but she stopped me again.

"You ask too many questions," Morgana said, as we entered her little chamber. "I'm not ready."

Later I leant over the battlements and watched those same brave knights come clanking out in their armour, towering tin men, barely able to walk upright, then being cranked up by a system of pulleys so they could sit on their horse and hold their broadsword in both hands.

We heard they came back with a good haul of gold plate and coin - and a half dozen bloody nuns' heads, which they used to decorate the battlements and scare off the evil eye.

Despite my talisman, it took me time to feel unthreatened in the Castle. If sent on an errand, I would scurry as quick as I could through the dark damp passageways and the draughty chambers. I would trip on the uneven floor or bump into some statuary or suit of armour lurking in the shadows - whirling around as a breath of air lifted my scarf or my own skirts rustled - terrified that I was to be attacked and devoured by a man-monster.

The whole construction of the building seemed designed to breed fear and suspicion.

And the entire castle was uncomfortable, except for one or two pockets of luxury enjoyed by the lord and his lady.

The men lived separately from the women, as if they were two different species.

They had their separate tasks - sleeping, drinking, eating, raping and killing - and making a lot of disgusting noise through all of these activities. They also had to discipline their male servants, whose role was to help their masters to carry out their important tasks. The women servants had the worst of the deal. Forced into sharing the same space, as workhorses do, their function only to service the men both day and night, they existed largely in response to coarse command.

That night there was a great celebration for the knights. I peeped into the great hall to watch the carousing. The noise was tremendous, thanks to the lofty ceiling. The knights ate like animals, snatching the prize cuts and growling at each other. Then they threw the remains on the floor for the dogs to fight over.

I saw Nadine carry a heavy jug of mead over to replenish the quickly emptied goblets. Lot grabbed at her drunkenly and she spilled some of the mead, struggling to free herself.

"Stupid whore!" yelled Lot, pushing her away. She would have fallen if his neighbour had not taken the opportunity to catch her across his lap and stick his hand up her skirts. There went the rest of the mead, the jug broke against his head and Nadine managed to escape back to the kitchen.

The men instantly forgot her.

"Clumsy wench," snapped the cook, hitting her round the head for her pains. "Can't you keep your distance?"

Later Nadine dragged herself to our room. It was past midnight and the noise of the revels had died down.

“Those two bastards caught sight of me as I was slipping away from the kitchen... I’m not sure they recognised me - they don’t usually take any real notice - but anyway, I was female and they had a score to settle... Everyone else had gone. I tried to scream but they took turns in holding me down...”

Morgana soothed her wounds with some ointment of arnica. I boiled up shepherd’s purse in water and brought some to her in a wooden cup.

“This should stop you conceiving,” I explained to her, having learned my lessons well.

Nadine gave me a sad lop-sided grin.

“We can make you up a bed here by the fire,” I offered.

“No, let me go,” she whispered. “I’ll catch it from the cook again if she doesn’t find me in my place.” I accompanied her back to the kitchen. I waited to see her throw herself on the fairly clean straw and draw a thin blanket round her, seeking warmth from the other kitchen maids.

“What kind of a place is this?” I demanded of Morgan, on my return, “where people sleep in conditions less dignified than their horses, where women can be abused without redress and kept like chattels whether they are of high or low birth?”

“The realm is in a state of moral decline,” agreed Morgan wearily, turning over in her bed to peer at me in the candlelight. “I’m glad you can feel angry about it, it’s a good sign! ... So many people just accept their condition... But I’m tired now, we’ll talk more tomorrow.” She turned away again.

I sighed and blew out the candle. But my anger kept me awake for a long time. There were too many questions I needed answering.

2.

When Lord Lot and his knights set off to war the following day, we were all heartily glad to see them go. In fact, the atmosphere in the whole castle seemed to lighten and Morgan herself appeared less on edge, less secretive. She began to let me into her confidence.

“Is it true that you Arthur doesn’t trust you?” I asked her.

“Yes! And with good reason!” she replied. “He knows that I oppose his policies. He has this mad dream of ‘unification’ as he calls it, of bringing all the smaller kingdoms under his control. But you can’t bring real peace through conquest. And this constant warring is ruining us – people live in poverty and disease, farms are neglected, the countryside itself is laid waste...”

“But what can you do about it?” I asked in bewilderment.

“My task is to bring it to an end,” she said simply. “I have no army to help me, only my wisdom... Yet that is never clear enough,” she muttered, “never quite as clear as I need it to be... as if someone was keeping it from me, trying to stop me seeing...”

"Is it true what they say," I asked boldly, "that you're a witch? That you put spells on people?"

She laughed without humour.

"I have certain powers," she replied haughtily, "but I've only ever used them to protect and heal – or to fight against evil and falsehood. It's true many people call that witchcraft."

"Tell me what you can do," I said eagerly. "Teach me."

"That's enough for now," she decided briskly, getting to her feet. "Let's go and visit the Lady Anna. I'm sure she'll be pleased to meet you."

We slipped past the main guard - Lot had left someone to keep an eye on our movements - and crossed through the herb garden.

"Take care," warned Morgana.

Two soldiers stood directly at the entrance to the Lady Tower wearing richly decorated livery. But even they seemed not to notice us as we passed.

"Did you put a spell on them?" I whispered.

"What! Do you think I'm a witch?" she retorted with a sniff, sticking her nose in the air. "We've just borrowed the cloak of invisibility."

The tower itself was furnished handsomely - I stopped to admire the hangings woven with silver thread as we walked up the spiral staircase. In the main chamber a fire burned merrily in the huge hearth, above which hung a magnificent tapestry. This depicted a romantic scene with minstrel, unicorn and lady in a garden. The seats in the room were cushioned and made gay with embroidered throws. There was a chess table with a set of onyx and topaz players already laid out for a game. A highly polished pewter vase on another table held a bunch of flowers - harebells, wild orchids, dog-roses and tall grass.

My Lady Anna came towards us smiling.

"How good to have visitors. I haven't seen anyone since Gawain stopped by," she said, indicating where we should sit.

"How *is* my favourite nephew?" asked Morgana, arranging her skirts. "I didn't have time to speak to him before he left."

A look of sorrow flitted across Anna's face. "I wish he didn't have to go to war," was all she said.

She motioned to her lady-in waiting who went to fetch a jug of wine from the window ledge and silver goblets from the chest in the corner. She placed these on a small table by the fire.

It was like a holiday. I felt gay and free.

"May I look through the windows, my lady?" I asked impetuously. She nodded and smiled as I jumped up.

"This is Branwen, " explained Morgana. "She's the stranger I told you about, who's come to help me."

From the top of the tower, I saw the countryside spread out neat and bright below me. This was the highest point in the castle with a view that stretched for miles, I could see hamlets and farms, woods and streams. I laughed in delight.

“What lovely rooms you have, my lady,” I said, sitting down again and taking my wine.

“Yes,” she replied softly. “I have everything I need, except permission to leave it.”

“What! Do you *never* go out?” I demanded.

She smiled wryly. “Oh yes! From time to time I’m summonsed to meet important guests in the great hall. And on Sundays, I’m allowed to attend mass in the chapel.”

I fell silent, discomfited.

“Branwen has been pestering me to explain the situation with Arthur,” said Morgan, changing the topic.

Anna smiled again. “Mm, well, you have to understand,” she began, “that Arthur has always had an unnatural passion for Morgana. I think it all stems from that.”

I looked at them both. “But he’s your half-brother,” I objected.

“Exactly,” returned Morgan. “We were very close as children, but as we grew up I realised it wasn’t right...”

“So she left court and went to Avalon, to the fairy world, to learn the healing arts. And Arthur married Guinevere.”

“I was safe in the Celtic Isles until Arthur was transported there after a battle, mortally wounded. And it was my job to heal him. He got close to me again and he persuaded me to return to Caerleon with him. It was a mistake.”

“She came back to the world of men,” continued Anna. “But still Arthur couldn’t have her. And so he tried to prevent her from falling in love with anyone else. Of course, Morgan could have had her pick of all the knights at that time, they all adored her. But Arthur was so jealous he wouldn’t give his permission for Morgan to marry any of them! There was young Guiamor, Arthur’s nephew...”

“Well, to be fair, it was Guinevere who frightened him off,” said Morgan, “because she fancied him herself!”

“Then there was Accalon of Gaul,” breathed Anna.

Morgan’s face became stern. “Yes, Accalon was my one true love. But Arthur challenged him to a tourney – and Arthur used the magic sword, Excalibur, because he was afraid of losing.”

Anna nodded at me. “Arthur killed Accalon. But not only that, he spread a false story that it was Morgan who had tried to use Accalon to kill Arthur!”

“It’s a recurring story,” said Morgan. “He turns his own evil deeds into accusations against me!”

"Still, it didn't make any difference, Morgan was still very popular. And, of course, then she was pursued by the great Merlin himself!" continued Anna.

Morgan groaned. "Pursued? Persecuted, more like! God, that man just wouldn't leave me alone! He was so arrogant, he couldn't believe someone wouldn't be interested in him! He used to demonstrate all his spells to impress me!"

The three of us laughed.

"And there was the famous time," said Anna, "when Morgan used one of Merlin's spells against him..."

"Well, I had to," reasoned Morgan, "he was trying to rape me!"

"And then the story was that Morgan had seduced Merlin and stolen his spells!"

"But isn't Merlin counsellor to the King?" I asked.

"Yes, and has always had too much influence over him," retorted Morgan quickly. "When I first returned to Camelot, I hoped I could help Arthur rule the kingdom wisely. But it didn't happen like that..."

"In the end, Arthur's love and desire for her twisted into hate..." observed Anna.

"So, it's Arthur's fault that people call you a witch?" I intuited, turning to Morgan. "When really..."

"When really," continued Anna, "she's a good fairy - and the best sister a woman could wish for!"

"But it's so unfair!" I protested...

"Well, I do make mischief from time to time," said Morgan, smiling at Anna.

"Ah," her sister laughed, "the magic tests!"

Morgan turned to me. "Guinevere 'forgot' to invite me to a feast once, so I sent her an ivory drinking horn harnessed in gold. No woman who had been unfaithful, and no man whose wife had been unfaithful, could drink from it without wine spilling on their chest. Guinevere, of course, spilled wine and Arthur was shamed as it happened in front of the whole court. But when the men tried drinking from it, not one could avoid spilling wine, except the Welsh knight Caradoc! Then there was the golden goblet - only he who tells the truth can drink out of it without spilling. And the magic mantle - it will fit only she who is faithful to her husband. Since nobody at court can pass the tests except Caradoc and his wife, Arthur has to laugh off the whole thing - but he hates it nevertheless!"

"But you did get married," I persisted. "How did that happen?"

Morgan shrugged. "Arthur was preoccupied at the time with the affair between Guinevere and Lancelot. I managed to escape his attention for a while. I met Urien of Gore and he took me away. I thought I would be safe, then, but, of course, I couldn't escape for good - Arthur began his war against Urien."

"And where's your husband now?" I persisted.

Morgan spoke wearily. "Well, that's enough history for today. We'd better get back before the guard starts looking for us. Next time we'll let Anna tell her story."

"Oh no!" gasped Anna. "As you see, I have nothing to tell!"

I stood up and looked out of the window again.

“Don’t you ever go out riding, my lady?” I asked idly.

“Unfortunately I’m not able to do so,” she replied a little bitterly.

“Why not?”

“Because of my chastity belt,” she replied shortly.

“A belt, my lady?” I asked confused.

She drew up her skirts for me to see what she meant. How the hard cold heavy cruel ugly metal constrained her every movement, denying all comfort or pleasure.

I looked wildly at Morgan for an explanation.

“Lord Lot carries the key with him while he’s away at war,” she told me.

“Even at a distance he controls you...” I stuttered, staring at Anna in horror.

The two older women exchanged a glance and kept their silence.

3

I continued to expostulate about the situation to Morgan when we got back to our apartment.

“Of course, it’s untenable,” she responded, shaking her head. “But we women will always find a way around untenable situations.”

“How do you mean?” I demanded.

“There is another key,” she said simply, patting the pocket her black dress, where she kept her secret charms.

I was aghast. “Then why don’t you set her free?”

“Anna’s surrounded by guards and servants, spies of Lord Lot. She has to appear complacent and obedient. If she went out riding, everyone would know she was free of the belt – and that knowledge would very quickly reach Lord Lot, you can believe me.”

I nodded slowly. “But then,” I asked, “why have another key at all?”

Her bright eyes twinkled at me. “Because there are times when it’s worth the risk to experience freedom – even if it’s only for a few short hours.”

And so it came to pass that, very soon, a young knight rode up to the castle with a message from King Arthur. Since Lord Lot was away, he went to pay his respects to the Lady Anna. I was sent to accompany him, since I had quickly become a favourite of hers and could come and go as I pleased. (And to tell the truth, I was charmed by the gracious life she led, her gentle conversation and the poetry she taught me, such a contrast to the incisive, enquiring and cynical mind that Morgan turned on me in our discussions)

“Go then,” said Morgan huffily when I asked for leave.

Anna was seated at the window, bent over the tapestry work which kept her busy in her lord's absence ("So she can show how faithful she's been," explained Morgan).

"Sir Mordred to see you, my lady," I announced and saw the soft glow in her cheeks as she raised her face to greet him.

He made her an elaborate bow and knelt before her, removing his leather gauntlets so that he could take her hand and kiss it. Anna blushed again.

"Branwen," said the lady, turning to me, her hand still tight in his, "please can you bring us wine and cakes."

"I have urgent documents for you from the King, my lady," said Mordred, his voice worshipful, fishing in his pouch.

I ran lightly down the spiral stairs to the kitchen. I was surprised and pleased to find Nadine there, turning a small spit over the fire.

We hugged and kissed.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you'd left the castle!"

"Morgana arranged for me to work for Lady Anna, instead of in the main kitchen," she explained.

"It's wonderful! Lady Anna's so sweet and gentle." She nodded at the lady-in-waiting, who sat shelling peas in the thin sunlight. "Frances has shown me how to do everything the way my lady likes. And I have my own little truckle bed by the fire now!"

"But why didn't Morgana tell me?" I demanded.

Nadine smiled and shrugged. "Lady Morgana doesn't broadcast her own good deeds," she replied.

When I returned with refreshments on a heavy brass tray, Anna was reading aloud in her soft voice from one of the scrolls - but it seemed to me that it was more in the nature of a love poem than a letter on military matters. She halted but continued to smile shyly at the knight while I served. The she motioned me to leave them.

As I retraced my steps slowly down the stairs, I met Mordred's squire, idly leaning on one of the window embrasures. He was about the same age as me. His beard was still fair and downy like a boy's. On an impulse I reached up and brushed it fleetingly with the back of my hand as I passed him on the narrow staircase. When I glanced round he was staring after me, with a surprised grin.

"What's your name?" I asked boldly.

"Roland," he stuttered.

"Come and eat," I invited and he followed me down into the kitchen.

Nadine gave me a saucy glance as I introduced him.

We sat down to cold pheasant and potatoes. Nadine brought us wine in a leather jug and then, after a whispered conversation with Frances, announced that they had to go somewhere to see about the laundry. And we were left alone.

“Tell me about your life, Roland,” I urged – not having been anywhere or done anything.

“Oh, I was born in a draughty castle in North Wales,” he began, shyly. “When I was ten years, I was sent to study at the monastery at St Dogwell’s. It was a good education, the monks were kind, I learnt Latin and the healing arts and the skill of illumination – but I missed my mother and sisters. The life was very austere – there wasn’t much laughter. Then I travelled all over Wales with David...”

“On foot? What was it like? I hear it rains too much in Wales!”

“Well, yes, you can get soaked to the skin on a short journey, but the mountains and valleys are beyond compare. And sometimes we were lucky to have a mule or a donkey!” he said, answering all my questions in the wrong order. “I learned to ride properly when I became Squire to Lord Mordred. And last year we sailed to Gaul on the King’s business...”

“You’ve sailed across the sea?” I broke in, impressed and excited. “How was it?”

“Extremely rough,” he replied. “I spent most of the voyage puking over the side!”

He laughed a little wryly and looked into my face as I laughed with him. “I’m afraid I’m not a warrior knight,” he added.

“No,” I retorted, “and I’m very glad you’re not! But still,” I continued thoughtfully, “you *have* done things which required courage and strength.”

He reached out and took my hand gently between his own.

“You’re lovely,” he said.

He held my hand solemnly before kissing it and turning it over and kissing the inside of my wrist.

I shuddered with delight.

The shadows lengthened. Nadine and Frances returned with the laundry. Sir Mordred called for his horse to be saddled and I, too, rose to leave.

Frances ran down the stairs from my lady’s chamber and pressed a fresh cambric handkerchief into my hand.

“The lady Anna asked if you could give this to Morgan,” she said meaningfully. Bemused, I took the handkerchief and hid it in my pocket.

“Look for me tonight,” Roland whispered, laying his hand lightly on my shoulder, his lips close against my ear. I smiled, confused, but said nothing.

Morgan received Anna’s gift and smiled a little wryly.

“I can’t count the times that Sir Mordred has ridden this long journey to sit at Anna’s feet and read her poetry,” she said. “This time they’re in luck. And so am I!”

She pulled out her bunch of keys and, selecting the small gold one, handed it to me.

"Is this the key to the...?" I began.

"Yes!" she hissed. "But it must be returned! We can't afford to let it fall into enemy hands!"

Then she went to her chest and drew out a scroll, which she also held out.

"This is for Sir Mordred to take with him," she told me. "But if you're afraid, don't worry," she added.

"I can take it myself."

"No, don't worry," I replied without hesitation, clasping the key and tucking the scroll into my bodice.

Morgana had prepared a simple meal of soup and bread, but I was too nervous to eat much. She smiled as she saw me fidgeting.

"All this excitement for the lady Anna," she murmured with some irony.

I gave her a sharp look. What did she know? What did she see? After all, she was a witch!

Morgana nodded towards the window.

"Go now, before the moon rises," she advised.

And I sped back to the tower.

Frances met me on the stairs with a lighted candle and took the key.

"Don't forget to give my lord this parchment from the Fairy Morgan," I whispered as I drew it out and passed it to her.

"Directly," she assured me in a murmur. "But - can you wait until past midnight - to take the key back again?"

I nodded and looked expectantly around me.

"You might like to wait by the stables," she hinted with a smile.

Roland was lounging in the shadows by the hitching rail. He became alert as he heard someone approach and then relaxed and smiled when he recognised me.

"It's you," he said unnecessarily.

"Yes," I whispered back. "Did you think I wouldn't come?"

I took his hand and drew him away into the trees that stood at the edge of the paddock.

"It's my first time," I told him.

"Mine too," he replied.

We stroked each other's hair. We kissed and kissed until I thought I would melt with longing. Then we helped each other to undress.

"Too many laces," I complained, laughing against his chest.

Finally we lay down together on the sweet grass. The clouds dispersed and the whole countryside - and we ourselves - were bathed in the light of the full moon.

The sign of the owl hooting brought us to earth again.

"Quick, we need to go," urged Roland as he struggled into his breeches. Still, he took his time helping me to straighten my petticoats and lace up my bodice and I had to stifle my giggles...

Sir Mordred appeared, flushed and full. Roland deftly led out the horses from the stable. In another moment they were up and away with a smile and a wave, across the paddock, no knowing when they could return.

Frances slipped the little key into my hand.

"Take care," she warned.

"Don't worry," I said, squeezing her hand.

I flew back to Morgan's room along the dark passageways, lighting my own way as I went...

"Is everything all right?" asked Morgan urgently, when I entered the chamber. She had been waiting up for me, the brazier was still burning bright.

"Yes, they got away safely," I breathed, grinning at her and hugging myself.

She let out a sigh. "He got the scroll?"

"Yes! Frances saw to that."

She made the sign of the cross, a gesture unusual for Morgan, but I made no comment.

After a pause I dared to ask:

"Morgan, what was in that parchment that you sent to Sir Mordred?"

She gazed at me across the fire.

"It contained plans for the overthrow of the King's army," she said quietly.

"But that will also go against Lord Lot's campaign," I observed in surprise.

She made an impatient movement.

"I discussed it at length with Anna. It's one way of trying to stop the war..."

"But," I continued, "Sir Mordred will be in danger if anyone discovers the plot." (And what about young Roland? I demanded silently)

Morgan sighed again. "Yes, well, so ladies and fairies incite our courtly knights to carry out great deeds of bravery - because we ourselves are now incapable of performing them," she answered sadly.

And so that night I learnt that (just as the stories told) time passes slowly beneath the charm of physical love. Then, at last, awakening from this divine drowsiness, shaking off the spell, all at once remembering those things that urgently needed to be done a lifetime ago (how was it possible to forget them?) lovers ride away with undignified haste and badly adjusted clothing.

"Yet only the men leave," I thought to myself as I settled into my little bed. "We women always stay, like beacons in the night - or church bells in the afternoon - hoping to attract attention, to confirm that we exist and have a purpose beyond ourselves."

Morgana paced up and down inside our tiny cell. She was pent up with frustration, not having heard anything from the battle-front, no longer able to influence the outcome. I intuited this, with my own feelings of restlessness, frustrated with inactivity. We were all the same. Anna moped by the window, lovesick, gazing at the empty landscape from the top of her tower. Only Nadine was happy, enjoying new freedoms, but even this began to irritate me.

Finally Morgan turned to me and said decisively, “We can travel further afield now, Branwen,” she said. “Lord Lot’s influence diminishes the longer he’s away. Let’s go off on a journey - to collect herbs and remedies. And on the way you’ll see what problems there are – it’s part of your apprenticeship.”

I eagerly prepared our travel bags. Frances and Nadine helped make ready the horses. Mine was a lively little grey pony which the Lady Anna had lent me. Nadine stood holding the old broadsword that Morgan insisted we take for protection. The pony protested when I began to fasten the buckles on the scabbard.

“Aren’t you afraid?” asked Nadine in awe. She took a hasty step backwards as I wrestled with the reins to bring the pony under control again.

I jumped into the saddle, alive again with the spirit of adventure, and laughed in surprise. It all seemed so natural. Where had I learned to do this before?

“No! Not really!” I replied, smiling down at her. I pushed the sword home. “Well, maybe a little!” I conceded. But I didn’t tell her that was part of the enjoyment.

Morgan, carrying a bow and quiver over one shoulder, mounted her black mare as lightly as a young woman and led the way out of the courtyard. The women from the tower waved bright handkerchiefs to bid us farewell, but we barely looked back.

And so began a journey that was like a dream – and even now, I can’t say for certain whether it was a dream or not. As we put more distance between ourselves and the castle, the countryside became softer and prettier, and there was less poverty to be seen in the hamlets that we passed. In the afternoon we came to a forest and entered into its green leafy depths.

“Look, there’s a stag! Let’s follow it!” called Morgan happily. Pushing her horse forward and reaching for her bow, she was off in full pursuit. I followed as best I could, through the trees and over the streams, giving my pony her head and feeling the wind in my hair.

When I finally caught up with her, Morgan was holding the stag at bay, her arrow drawn ready for the kill. But after a pause, she lowered the bow and allowed the creature to leap away unharmed.

“Oh why?” I wailed as he escaped.

Morgan turned to me, her eyes bright from the chase.

“He was too beautiful to harm,” she told me. “And anyway, too heavy to carry. Still, he brought us to the right place.”

“Where?” I asked, looking about me.

“Let’s go. You’ll see,” she said smiling.

Over the next rise we came upon a spectacular valley, almost hidden by the trees. There were fountains playing in wooded glades and beautiful buildings, decorated in silk, gold and ivory. Young lovers sat entwined or strolled arm in arm, lost in each other’s company.

A servant came to hold our horses. “We knew that you were coming, my lady Niniane,” he said respectfully.

I looked in surprise at Morgan and realised that she had changed in appearance during the journey, now looking younger and more beautiful. But she merely smiled at us both and accepted the name.

We were welcomed into the garden, to join what seemed to be a continual feast, with fine food, music, dancing and games. A serf poured us out wine in silver goblets and offered us sweetmeats. Couples sat nearby playing chess or draughts.

“Surely we’re in the Garden of Eden!” I exclaimed. “All is beauty and innocence here.”

Morgan shook her head. “This is the kingdom of the Fisher King,” she told me.

“They also call it the Valley of False Lovers. The purity you see is an illusion. Only faithful lovers can ever leave... So very few do. And the Fisher King is dying.”

“But who...?” I began.

At that moment Morgan turned to the servant and questioned him.

“The King’s fading fast, my lady,” he said. “Will you go into him now?”

She rose and motioned me to accompany her.

“Bring me my saddle bag,” she instructed the servant.

We entered the ivory tower and found the king raised upon silken pillows, his face deathly pale.

“Sister,” he said, holding out a trembling hand, as Morgan bent to kiss him gently on the cheek.

“Hush,” she murmured. “I’ve brought you a remedy which will help to ease the pain.”

She took out a small vial from her pouch and, pouring out the golden contents into a goblet, mixed a draught for him with water, holding him while he drank it, sip by sip.

At last he lay back again and closed his eyes.

“Arthur’s knights desecrated the Holy Grail,” he muttered fretfully, before drowsiness overcame him. “I can’t do anything now.”

"I understand," murmured Morgan, "let me deal with it."

We left him sleeping peacefully and took our leave of the enchanted valley, riding until we came to the edge of the forest. As we emerged, I turned back to remember the way but trees suddenly covered the path and there was no way to be seen. Perhaps the whole thing had been an illusion. But then I noticed that Morgan wore the furry hooves of the white stag dangling from her belt.

"Why did they call you Niniane?" I asked curiously. "And why were you in disguise?"

"There was no disguise," she told me huffily. "I have several forms – but only because men see me in different ways."

"But I saw you change form!" I insisted.

"Such is their power," she murmured.

"Is the Fisher King really your brother?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "that is, from the fairy world. Together we've tried to combat the evil spells that work through Arthur."

"But you – he – hasn't succeeded?"

"Well, that remains to be seen," said Morgan, carefully. She urged her horse on with a kick. "Let's go further, while there's still time".

I hated it when she spoke in riddles, blowing smoke into my understanding, obscuring my sight. Yet even then I intuited that this might be because she herself did not see the truth clearly. She didn't deliberately seek to deceive or confuse me. And sometimes I could help her clarify things because of the questions I asked.

As we rode on, the contrast became much greater. We traveled through a bleak and barren land, where the trees stood naked and black as if they had been burnt. The earth was dry and opened before us with deep cracks.

"There's a town ahead," I called out in relief, as the afternoon light faded and the horses stumbled. But when we arrived, we saw the streets were deserted. An old man sat by the side of the road tended by a young woman. She stood gaunt, with glittering eyes and her head was completely bald. Beside them was a cart splattered with mud.

"The people are dead or they've moved on," she explained when questioned. "There's evil across the land. I used to serve at Arthur's court, but since they failed to honour the Holy Grail, I was turned out."

Morgan drew in her breath sharply in recognition. "But you are the Demoiselle du Char!" she exclaimed.

"Yes! Look at me now," replied the woman in irony. 'I used to carry the Grail at court, dressed in silk and gold with my long hair in tresses down my back."

She tossed her head in memory.

“Arthur betrayed his own knights – one hundred and fifty of them died,” she continued. “I took their heads - each one sealed in gold or silver – and I was carrying them away to safety.” She nodded towards the cart, which I saw now had been richly decorated at one time. “But we were attacked by the knights in black and the caskets were carried off. Lady Morgan, your nephew Gawain was there and tried to help me – but he was hopelessly outnumbered. Now it’s we who bear the punishment...’

The old man joined in. “First it was the taxes,” he told us. “King Arthur’s men riding out to rob us of our hard-earned pennies. Then, with poverty and neglect, came the plague. Later, just the hunger, the country laid waste and gone to seed. No one left to nurture the children. And anything left of value is bound to be stolen.”

“Can we do anything to help you?” I asked, staring at them there in the desolate dusk. They shook their heads.

“We can only wait,” said the Demoiselle du Char, “until the new law becomes established.”

“When will that be?” I demanded, turning to Morgan.

They all shrugged.

“When the war is over,” muttered Morgan, making the sign of the cross.

“Take care, sisters,” the old man warned us as we rode on, past the crowded cemetery bristling with makeshift wooden crosses. “There are still thieves and murderers waiting in the shadows...”

Without speaking but with a common design we continued riding until we cleared the town and found a small hill where we could camp and keep a lookout over the wasteland. Deeply discomforted, I busied myself lighting a fire to keep us warm and safe.

“But it’s always the same story,” I eventually burst out, “that men spoil everything!”

“These are the ravages of war,” raged Morgan at last, turning to me. “This blind pursuance of conquest and glory, this blatant disregard for humanity. ‘The quest’! ‘The search for truth’! Nothing but a ridiculous journey of dragons to slay and damsels to rescue and rape – as if these trivial acts of mastery could help to solve life’s mysteries... instead of taking the more difficult journey - into their own hearts.”

The bare earth provided little comfort but sometime towards dawn I slept. I was woken later to the sound of shouts and the clang of metal.

“Protect yourself,” cried Morgan as she threw me my sword. I struggled to my feet. Three horsemen had come upon us by chance and automatically attacked us, hoping vaguely for gain or

sport of some kind. Stale-smelling of their own body and other people's blood, they lunged at us without plan or purpose.

They were no match for the huntress Morgan, who seemed to grow taller as she defended herself. And I too battled vigorously, until, together, we despatched them down the hillside.

"You fought well," said Morgan approvingly, as we watched them scramble away. "It's clear you were a warrior in a former life..."

"Was I?" I wondered to myself.

"But you were magnificent," I protested.

She shrugged. "I've trained many a young knight in the martial arts," she told me briskly. "When I was younger. When they called me the Dame du Lac," she added, musing, looking away into the distance of time.

"So many names," I burst out, "so many histories, Morgan! I don't know who I'm travelling with any more!"

"But I'm still myself," she replied simply, looking back at me.

I could see she spoke the truth. But who was I?

We returned home passing the dreadful Castell Mortel: we kept a safe distance.

4

I slept late after the fantastic journey, finally struggling up against a tide of bad dreams into consciousness. The stag leaped at me, turning into a leopard as I fell before it... I took the draught, my hair fell out and I was standing like a ghost in the graveyard...

Suddenly I sat up, the images dispersing, yet still nagging at me as I dressed.

"Let's visit the lady Anna and see what news there is," suggested Morgan, after we had breakfasted on bread and honey washed down with mead.

Frances greeted us warmly, embracing us with a relief that we were returned safely, but with an even greater urgency than that.

"Thank God you're back," she told Morgan, hurrying her up the spiral staircase. "I was getting desperate."

Full of curiosity and apprehension, I followed them. As we entered my lady's chamber, the problem was plain to see.

"Morgan, sister," cried Anna, coming forward, "you have to help me."

She threw herself into Morgan's arms and burst into tears.

Anna was heavy with child.

My first thought was: "Have we been away so long?"

But as we sat and heard Anna's story, watching her drawn white face, the implications became clear to me.

"Mordred is the father, of course. Lot will kill me if he finds out. Every second of the day I live in dread, hearing the horses' hooves on the cobbles in the courtyard, thinking he has returned without warning."

"Why worry?" Morgan scoffed at her fears. "Mordred came visiting not long after Lot had gone. Why would Lot bother to calculate whether it was possible for him to have fathered the child? Why would you need to give him an account of days and times? He'd be only too willing to believe that he can still sire children, given his age..."

"The man has long been impotent," moaned Anna. "He would be bound to suspect something. He's a brute but he's not entirely stupid."

"How many months are you gone?" demanded Morgan.

"Eight," gasped Anna, beginning to sob loudly again.

"Then let's take one step at a time. Let's hope the baby is born ahead of time."

"Can you give me something for that?" asked Anna quickly, clasping her sister's wrist.

Morgan frowned. "I can," she said slowly, "but it's dangerous. You may damage the child. And yourself."

"I love this baby desperately," moaned Anna, placing her hands over her belly, as if to protect it. "I may never see Mordred again but this is his gift to me, the proof that our love lives on. Yet if Lot discovers what has happened, we will both be dead."

"Let me see what I can do," promised Morgan.

She turned to Frances. "Who knows about this?" she asked.

"Lady Morgan," Frances assured her earnestly, "the secret is safe so far. She lives as a recluse, which is not hard to do, and no-one wonders at it. For many months only Nadine and myself have attended my lady. And we would both die for my lady Anna, you know that well enough."

Morgan nodded in satisfaction.

"So let's make our preparations," she said.

Anna removed her heavy dress of gold embroidered brocade so that Morgan could examine her properly. Morgan's hands moved over the swollen belly with skill and confidence. Her eyes were shut in concentration.

"The child is well-formed and in the right position," she pronounced. "And it's a girl!"

Anna sighed and smiled in contentment.

"How can you possibly know that?" I demanded.

"I still have the power," said Morgan huffily. "Just wait and see!"

Every night Morgan kept a vigil and I waited up with her.

"Did you never have children?" I asked her curiously.

"Yes, I have two sons," she replied, turning to me.

"You never spoke of them!" I exclaimed. "What - happened to them?"

Morgana smiled dryly. "You think there's a lurid tale attached. But no, I assure you, they were both born in wedlock! My husband, Urien of Gore, he's a good man who's always honoured and protected me. We had a son, Ewan, a gentle boy with fair hands. I trained him in the arts of riding, hunting and swordplay. He was to have a great destiny... But when Arthur visited us..."

"Him again!" I interpolated, predicting some villainy.

"Yes, when Arthur saw how well our Ewan had developed, he took him away to be brought up as one of his own knights. You see, despite his prowess in war, Arthur had never managed to sire any children – it was another thing he held against me. I'm sure he decided to take Ewan as a form of revenge."

"How could you let it happen?" I demanded.

Morgana sighed.

"I was in my second pregnancy at the time. When I heard from Ewan that he had been enveigled by his uncle to leave me, I went straight to Arthur's chambers and remonstrated with him.

'Can you allow me nothing?' I cried. 'Are you still so jealous, even of my son, that you have to deprive me of this joy too?'

'I'm the king, I'll do what I please!' Arthur replied in his arrogant way. Then he worked himself up into righteous indignation. 'You've cast one of your spells on me to make me impotent, you hag! Well, now you can pay the price.'

"I caught hold of Arthur's tunic to plead with him to leave my son at home. Arthur lost his temper completely and pushed me away. I fell heavily, awkwardly, on the stone floor, I could barely get up by myself, I was so badly winded and then, of course, the labour started, Arthur called for the maidservant and I was out of it for a few hours. By which time he and Ewan were already gone." She said all this in a rush as if she were reliving it in fast forward.

"What an evil man he is," I murmured. "But - you came through the labour?"

"The baby was born prematurely," she replied slowly. "Auberon, my golden boy, he was small, but worse, he was born with a hunched back." She smiled then. "But at least I was allowed to keep Auberon with me - as no-one else wanted him! - and I taught him all my magic arts. Together we devised those magic tests which we used to plague Arthur with."

"And have you seen Ewan since?"

"Oh, sometimes at court our paths have crossed. But – he's stiff with me. We're politically divided. He fights by Arthur's side against the rebels - and of course, Urien, his father, fights against them."

I stayed silent, not knowing what to say.

"Yes, it's a mess, isn't it?" Morgan continued briskly, noting my discomfort.

"It all seems so – unnecessary," I said lamely.

"Yes, and it still hurts!" she concluded, throwing another log on the brazier.

Anna's baby was born early. We were ready when we heard Nadine below the window making the sound of the owl. We hastened to my lady's tower, brushing through the dark passages of the castle with only the stub of a candle to light our way.

Frances was by Anna's bedside, eyes wide with alarm, covering Anna's mouth with her hand to dampen the noise of her groans.

"Good, good," said Morgan in satisfaction, marking the rise and fall of Anna's labour. "It won't be long now. Nadine, quickly fetch my lady a wooden skillet to bite on. I may need Frances to help when the baby's head crowns. Then keep watch for us. We don't want to be disturbed. Stand up now, Anna, squat down, give the baby room to come. We don't have a birthing stool but we can manage. Branwen, can you support her back?"

Holding her steady, I was surprised at the physical strength in Anna as she pushed down, that languid gentle lady for a time transformed through the sheer instinctive power of giving birth.

A final gasp and the baby was born. It was a dainty little girl, with blue eyes and a cap of golden down on her head. As she was wrapped in a soft woollen shawl and put into her mother's arms we could all see immediately that she was beautiful – and the image of Sir Mordred. There was no way that Lord Lot would recognise the child as his own.

"You must take her, Morgan," urged Anna. "You must raise her for me."

"And what about the gossips in the castle?" Morgan protested. "No-one will testify that I've been carrying a child all these long months. You've been isolated in the tower. They could say nothing either way."

"But you too live apart from the rest, with Branwen as your messenger to the outside world. And don't forget, you've been abroad for some time. It would be easy to make out that your baby was born in the valley of the Fisher King."

"Aye, a fairy child?" responded Morgan, mockingly.

"If you take her, I'll always have chance to spend time with her, as her aunt, and show her proper affection, without causing any suspicions," Anna continued to plead.

"But I may return to Avalon soon," warned Morgan. "This war is making me weary - for I can no longer influence the outcome."

"Surely Lot will let me visit you there?" reasoned Anna.

Finally Morgan allowed herself to be persuaded.

“Bring her to me everyday,” begged Anna, holding the baby tight against her breast, “so that I can nurse her myself.”

“But what about a name, my lady?” asked Frances.

“Let her be Lisiane,” replied Anna, sinking back exhausted onto her cushions.

“Then she’ll be known for her faithfulness in love,” murmured Morgan, as she took the bundle from her sister.

Outside the grey dawn was breaking and we slunk back to our own cell.

“Let’s sleep a little,” said Morgan sighing. She looked tired and old. “Then we must find a crib for the baby and work on my story.”

Some days later there was a commotion below in the courtyard and I peeped through the window to see what was happening.

“Lot’s home already!” I exclaimed to Morgan.

“Thank God he didn’t arrive any earlier,” muttered Morgan, rocking the little Lisiane.

“There doesn’t seem to be much rejoicing,” I observed.

And indeed it was a sad straggle of knights that followed their lord into the castle.

We hurried down to the main hall to hear their news.

But it was not to be borne.

Gawain’s young face was grey like that of the old man we had met in the village. He came towards Morgan as she entered the hall and took hold of his aunt’s hands. At first he was unable to speak for tears and his squire had to relate the bare details: King Urien, Morgan’s husband, had been killed fighting. Ewan, their son, had challenged Gawain without recognising him and died in the fight.

“I saw he was dying,” continued Gawain, controlling his weeping, “and so I carried him into the nearby abbey for absolution. There he gave me his name and then we realised – we were cousins, both nephews to King Arthur... It was too late for me to do anything... But before he died, Ewan prophesied that many knights would lose their lives on the quest.”

“Yes,” muttered Morgan, “at least one hundred and fifty, as we learned on the road not so long ago.”

Gawain gave himself up to remorse again and his friend led him away to visit his mother and find some comfort there.

But Lot compulsively continued the story. His eyes were wild, his hair and beard matted, he roared and waved his arms about like a wounded bear.

“Arthur was ready to lead us into the last battle. Then we heard that the opposing army was being led by Mordred. That treacherous knave, Arthur’s own nephew! He had turned against the King! And he must have been helped by fairies! Whatever strategy Arthur employed, he was immediately out-manoeuvred! Finally they fought hand to hand against each other. But it was no use! Arthur was mortally wounded and our army defeated. The war is lost!”

“Now Arthur has really managed to destroy us all,” sobbed Morgan later as we hid ourselves away in her workroom to come to terms with the news. “Both my husband and my son have died, slaughtered by their own kinsmen. The kingdom has finally degenerated. The King has fallen. The souls of mankind are in hell. And there can be no redemption in my lifetime.”

I held her in my arms to comfort her.

“At least your plan worked,” I murmured. “The war is over.”

“For the time being, at least,” she conceded, drying her eyes. “But I didn’t reckon with the cost. I could not see clearly...”

“And Mordred is safe – the lady Anna will be glad,” I said without thinking.

“Yes,” replied Morgan with some bitterness. “Lucky Anna - and her lovechild. Her son survived too, didn’t he? ”

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered, daring to kiss her cheek.

“Oh?” jeered Lot when he saw Morgan with the new baby. “And who’s the father? I haven’t heard of any recent suitors travelling to the northern wastes to court my now venerable sister-in-law!”

“It was a fairy knight, my lord,” she answered tranquilly. “He came riding by while I was in the garden. He must have cast some spell upon me - I fell asleep and when I awoke he was gone. But I knew instantly that I had been blessed...”

“A likely story!” retorted Lot. “Doubtless you seduced some scurvy squire and induced him to pleasure you, old hag!”

He towered over Morgan, seeking to intimidate her, but she stood her ground.

Assorted knights attempted to laugh at Lot’s words, yet they were held back, still in awe of the power of chastity.

For Morgan was the strong wise woman, who lived without men until she chose - and was thus feared by all of them. Her sexual activity was not controlled by men, like the Lady Anna’s. And I realised I too was chaste. For I myself had chosen the time and place and partner and manner of my experience of physical love. I had lost none of my strength in that process. Rather it had reinforced me, filling me with the delightful sensation that I had the power to do whatever I wanted.

“Don’t bring that puling bastard into my presence again,” continued Lot, waving them away.

And we thought that was an end to it.

Yet we should not have underestimated the impact of war on the men who had waged it. Their defeat worked within them, like an illness, eating away at their faith. How could God be real when he had not supported their quest? And how could the clergy be trusted when their prayers had not brought victory to the cause?

"These are the mysteries of the Church of men," Morgan explained to me. "The substance of the communion bread and wine are converted into the body of Christ. You know the story. The disciples sat around the table at the Last Supper and drank and ate in remembrance of their lord. So today in the eucharist, Christ is sacrificed anew and the Church becomes one with Christ through an act of ritual cannibalism.

"The Grail is said to hold the blood of Christ and so began the quest for the Grail. Yet the quest itself has broken up the fellowship of the realm. Only if men repent of their wickedness can they succeed," stated Morgan calmly. "But they are incapable of admitting they have been wrong."

Thus the sin of men blighted the land. The Fisher King died and Arthur's kingdom did not regenerate.

The clergy had begun to lose their credibility. Leaving their monasteries, their learning and their ministrations to the poor, the mendicant friars had first developed a reputation for lustfulness and covetousness. But among other orders, too, there was the move towards the accumulation of money and political intrigue. Lot patronised one such monk, who called himself Pius, who practically lived at the castle, providing spiritual counsel to the embittered lord.

Nothing was going right for Lot. His power and influence was gone, his knights dispersed. He lived estranged from the lady Anna and was despised by his son.

Morgan was crossing the hall with me one afternoon, carrying the baby Lisiane to visit her sister.

"How is it?" Lot, who had already drunk too much mead, roared suddenly, pointing at Morgan, "that this old crone can conceive and bear a child, while my own fair wife, having given me one son, remains barren?"

"That child is the child of Satan," claimed the monk, with instant inspiration. "The Devil has sent this woman to prevent the consummation of sacramental marriage and the procreation of children according to God's command. I will guess that she's aroused hatred between you and your lady wife to such an extent that you've been unable to perform the necessary actions for begetting offspring, my lord."

Lot's thunderous expression lightened. "Of course!" he yelled. "That must be it! Why did it never strike me? Take hold of her!" he ordered two of his henchmen.

Morgan turned quickly and passed me the baby. "Keep her safe," she whispered urgently. "It's time for you to use your powers now."

As the guard reached for Morgan, I slipped lightly beneath his spear and was gone, running like a child down the wide staircase, my heart pounding. Outside in the courtyard, I ran without thinking to the Lady Tower. At least for a short time, Anna could help to conceal the baby's whereabouts. I needed to return to the Great Hall, to collect Morgan's spells and to see what was happening.

The monk was now well into his illusion, standing before the huge blazing fireplace and wagging his finger at Morgan as she hung between two guards.

"Yes, at the same time as she has obstructed the generative forces of sacramental magic – and castrated you, my lord ! - she has lain with the Devil to produce offspring. Do you know how this can happen? The devil takes the form of a succubus by constructing a female body and copulates with a man. Then instantaneously it transports the stolen semen to a witch, changes into an incubus and injects the semen into her body."

"Her child is a devil, then?" roared Lot.

"No, said the monk after due consideration, "but nonetheless it is a perverted offspring, likely to become a witch."

"Like herself," snarled Lot, "the bastard daughter of Ygerne, born of passion and fire, to work evil among men, to lead knights astray in order to destroy them and to leave their orphaned children to fend for themselves..."

I could wait no longer but hurried away to Morgan's chambers, turning over in my mind what had been said. So contrary to all I knew of Morgan, who worked for good, who protected and nurtured those around her - the whole of reality turned upside down in men's mad reasoning.

With a start, I realised I too, as her accomplice, was in very real danger. I forced myself to gather my thoughts, to draw on my strength and to make plans. I had to take the baby to Mordred's family in the north. She and I would be safe there. Roland would help me – there was a flutter of excitement inside me when I imagined I might be with him again. I needed a horse, provisions and some money to buy my life with on the journey.

That night I was allowed to visit Morgan in the dungeon where she had been thrown, pending trial. I brought her food and drink on a tray and sought her counsel.

The steps were slimy and uneven, the walls dripping, as I descended warily into the darkness. With flint and straw I lit a small candle so that we could see each other's faces flickering.

“You must burn my spells, destroy all my remedies,” Morgan told me. “There must be nothing left of my art. It will only be misused.”

I protested silently. “But what if you’re set free after the trial?” I breathed.

“There’ll be no reprieve for me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Can’t you use your magic to escape?” I asked.

“Perhaps, but I don’t need the spell-book for that,” she assured me.

“This can’t be happening,” I wailed helplessly. “You’ve done nothing wrong!”

“You see what he’s done, that mad monk, ” Morgan attempted gently to explain to me. “The Church tries to protect its own reputation for magic. Incorporation – husband and wife become two in one flesh, the man as the head and the woman as the body. Human marriage is a miniature imitation of the greater Incorporation – man becoming one with God. Anything else is against God, it’s bad magic, because it threatens the power of the Church...”

“And so the power of men,” I concluded.

But it was much more than that. I intuited that Morgan was being punished for Lot’s sin because it was inadmissible that he should be guilty and punish himself. Everywhere I looked about me, women bore the sentence for men’s wrongdoings, imprisoned for life and in such conditions that in the end they too considered themselves responsible for all the crimes they stood accused of.

“It’s true,” moaned Anna, when I brought her the news of Morgan’s imprisonment. “If I’d been a dutiful wife, if I hadn’t fallen in love with Mordred, if I hadn’t succumbed to passion, if I hadn’t borne a bastard child, if I hadn’t tried to deceive my husband, Morgan would not be in the dungeon, she wouldn’t be awaiting the ultimate fate. It’s all my fault!”

But I knew it was women like Morgana who had committed the greatest crime - that of carrying within them the secrets of knowledge and freedom: they and these had to be destroyed at whatever cost.

I stood by the window of the tower as dusk gathered outside. The pale wintery sun was disappearing behind the hill and the bare trees stood out like crosses on the horizon. From below I heard the sound of hammering as the scaffold was erected. Helplessly I wracked my brains for what to do. No harmless magic test for truth or faithfulness would be sufficient here. Morgan would be burnt at the stake. I was filled with horror at the ordeal. Anguish at my own loss clashed with anger at the world and Anna’s petty rantings infuriated me.

“Yes,” I burst out, without compassion. “Yes, it *is* your fault! Because you stood by and did nothing! Can’t you at least try and intercede with Lot?”

"I tried! I did!" sobbed Anna. "But I'm powerless against him."

"Yes," I retorted with finality. For that was her real sin, that she had chosen to be a victim in the world of men. I left her weeping.

6

At daybreak they dragged Morgan out into the courtyard towards the wooden scaffold where the waiting crowd surged in expectation, loosely held back by the armed guard. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Frances and Nadine holding on to each other. There was no sign of Lot (or Anna) but the monk stood smugly by the steps to the pyre.

I had been allowed to accompany the prisoner and, as she was momentarily released, Morgan clutched my upper arm.

"Wherever you travel, Branwen", she hissed urgently, "you mustn't forget the symbols that help us hold on to our power. We mustn't lose the ability to interpret them... They say we are the harbingers of war and death but as you've seen here, it's the reverse that is true. Only by reading the signs accurately can you disentangle the truth and remain strong... We learnt a lot together, didn't we?" she added softly and kissed my cheek before letting me go.

I staggered back as the guards moved in to push her up the steps. Then, as if in slow motion, the miracle happened.

Morgan's beautiful face became dark and her brown cloak seemed to swell about her. I stood mesmerised by her knowledge, trying to keep it clear inside myself for all time. In that short moment I saw her shrink and rise from the cobbles, suddenly taking on the form of a crow. Then, as I called out in astonishment, she was gone, rising high above the castle, and in a harsh cry I heard her parting words:

"I'm going back to Avalon. There is nothing more that I can do here."

The unwashed crowd fell back, knelt and crossed themselves. The guards dropped their spears. I heard a shout of jubilation, perhaps an involuntary utterance from Nadine, but I must have fainted because the rest is all a blur.

I like to think that I evaded the guard and managed to carry the baby Lisiane to the safety of her father's court, that I was strong for Morgana's sake. To be honest, I don't remember. I was on with my next life, not really knowing what I'd learned.

PART THREE SANDRA

"I'm looking for a photographer to work with me. Are you interested?"

I found myself now in a hotel lobby, leaning against the bar. There was a wooden fan whirling above me, raising the hairs at the back of my neck, but despite that, sweat was dripping down both sides of my face. I had the smell of nameless guilt about me and it made me feel uneasy, as if there was something I had forgotten to do... Idly I played with the charm on my gold bracelet - it was the tiny crescent moon but I couldn't quite remember then who had given it to me.

A woman in a white T-shirt with her hair bundled up in a loose bun stood looking at me intently.

"Sorry, but are you OK?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied, shaking my head to clear it and trying to wipe the sweat away casually with two fingers.

"Are you here to work?" she asked, motioning towards the equipment I had spread out on the counter in front of me. "I'm in need of a photographer," she reiterated.

"Sure," I said again, attempting to sound alert. "When do we start?"

Still looking at me with some concern, my new companion made a quick decision. She turned and beckoned to the bartender.

"Let's have a shot of brandy to steady the nerves and then get out of here while it's still early. The militia won't have started drinking yet. I'm Sandra, by the way."

"And I'm Marie-Therese." At least I knew my name this time.

As we got up to leave there was a shout from the opposite end of the lobby where a big man in baggy trousers had just reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Sandra, honey," he called. "Is it you and me out on the streets together today?"

"Sorry, Dave," she replied smoothly as he crossed our path on the way to the doorway. "I've just found a new partner."

His face flushed. Looking me up and down dismissively, he turned back to Sandra and said with a slightly nasty sneer, "All girls together again, is it?"

"That's right," said Sandra lightly.

"Heard from Myrna recently?" he sneered more openly.

"She'll be back," was the calm confident reply.

"You'd better be careful," responded Dave, getting nastier. "The authorities here like deviants even less than they like reporters."

"Sorry," said Sandra ironically, "I'm forgetting my manners. Marie-Therese, this is Dave Montgomery, foreign correspondent from the Washington Post. He's also a photographer. This is Marie-Therese, she's a freelancer."

"Where did you spring from anyway?" asked the big man, giving me another glance, with slightly more curiosity in it this time. "Some of the agencies are pulling out of here already - how did *you* manage to get a permit?"

I shrugged nonchalantly. "I didn't know I needed one," I replied truthfully. "I'm just visiting." I looked to Sandra for further inspiration.

"You know it's easier sometimes to travel independently. See you later, Dave," said Sandra pleasantly, ushering me away.

The tropical sunlight blinded us both for an instant as we stepped outside the hotel.

A broad avenue led down in front of us, lined with palm trees at either side, to a large roundabout decorated with some kind of militaristic statue. It must be made of metal, I thought, as I saw how it glinted hard under the sun. The place was practically deserted except for a small group of policemen lounging untidily at some distance from the hotel, with rifles in their hands.

"God, you saved my life," breathed Sandra. "I was dreading having to go out with him."

"Why?" I protested weakly. "He must be much more experienced than I am..."

Sandra snorted. "That means nothing when you're up against it. None of us would *choose* a male companion for a dangerous trip. You see them lose it too quickly... Since Myrna left I've been trying to manage, but I know it's not sensible to go out on your own, and I really have to cover this story today. If you hadn't appeared, I would have *had* to take Dave."

"Oh," I responded, wishing that perhaps she had.

She looked at me. "You don't seem very experienced at that. Are you sure you're OK?"

I nodded in determination.

She smiled a little. "I can tell you a story or two about Dave if you want, when we have time..."

She walked briskly and purposefully along the pavement, with me doing my best to keep pace with her and trying to get my bearings at the same time.

"Wait here, I'll bring the jeep out," she suggested. We came level with the police officers and she turned off into the hotel car-park.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a figure in white dart out of the shadows, brandishing a handgun. One of the policemen, suddenly alert, moved forward quickly and grabbed hold of him, deflecting the man's aim. But there was another click and a flash. Sandra turned round to me with eyebrows up. Instinctively I had raised my camera and caught the moment on film.

"Well done," grinned Sandra. "That should be a good shot. Did you get me in the frame too?"

"I think so," I grinned back, although my heart was thumping wildly.

"You see what I was saying about women keeping their cool," she murmured as we got into the jeep, together. "But, all the same, I shouldn't have left you like that on your own."

"Aren't you scared?" I demanded, suddenly angry. "Wasn't he aiming at you?"

She grimaced. "Possibly, but I don't take it personally. He didn't know what he was doing. A crazy place to try anything. There's still an unwritten law against killing westerners here."

As we drove out of the car-park we saw the police remonstrating with the attacker.

"They'll wait until we've gone and then let him go," predicted Sandra.

I looked a question at her.

"They're all on the same side in the end," she stated. "They all want to exterminate the East Timorese, don't they? Both the militia and the police," she paused, "the Indonesian government, the United Nations, the United States, the United Kingdom..."

This went over my head at the time. I kept looking behind us. Sure enough, by the time we reached the roundabout, the white clad figure had disappeared.

I sat back for an instant. It was a small jeep with two doors and a hard top, rather dusty and slightly delapidated.

"It's a Niva," Sandra told me, noticing me look about. "I picked it up second hand. And it's served me well so far, touch wood. I hope you drive?"

"Sure," I said, also hopeful.

"Where are we going?" I ventured to ask after a moment.

"Yeah! Good question!" She laughed at her own omission. "Downtown. I had a tip-off about a student leader who's willing to give an interview... but the militia are after him and he's in danger of being caught. That's why we're in a bit of hurry. By tomorrow he may have already got out of town - gone into hiding in the mountains."

"Fine," I said, checking my equipment. "You want a portrait of him?"

"Yes," she replied. "It's important that the Indonesians know we have contact with the leaders of the East Timorese, that they're still alive. The more evidence of that, that we can send back to be published, the better. Otherwise everyone here will be forgotten."

Downtown was slightly less deserted but there was still the feeling that real life had gone underground, leaving the dusty streets for some strange cruel game to play itself out, some strange cruel play. And we were foolish enough to be crossing the stage in front of an invisible, hostile audience. I felt so completely vulnerable, it seemed the entire surface of my skin prickled with fear. To occupy my mind, I took a few pictures as we drove along: police at the corner; two skinny children, maybe brother and sister, holding hands and, with backs to the wall, slithering their way as quickly as possible down the main street before they disappeared into a side alley; graffiti defacing the church; a bombed out building, now just a pile of rubble.

"That was the Swiss Bank," murmured Sandra as we passed by.

"So what brought you here, in fact?" asked Sandra, as she turned right at the non-functioning traffic lights.

I shrugged and lifted my camera again. "I'm just observing," I replied.

"No," said Sandra bluntly. "That's not possible."

I was taken aback. "What do you mean?" I asked brusquely in turn.

"Firstly, it's simply not possible to be in a situation like this and not become emotionally involved. And secondly, I knew, when I saw you this morning, there was a look in your eyes, I knew I could trust you. You're not just an observer."

I made no reply and she didn't pursue the topic.

The house we were to visit was in a narrow street behind the cinema. It felt like a trap and I was glad to see there were other streets at right angles. Sandra parked at the back. Someone was watching at the window and we were given a sign to come in.

"You're Sandra?" asked the young woman who greeted us, a little anxiously.

Sandra nodded. "And this is a friend, Marie-Therese, she's a photographer. You can trust her."

I shot a bemused look at Sandra, but she was paying attention to the situation.

"I'm Silvia," said our hostess. "Manuel is upstairs resting. How long do you need?"

"Whatever time he can spare," said Sandra, "however long he wants to talk."

"Come up then," said the girl.

Manuel was a slim young man with a lot of black hair. He had been lying on the bed but, as we entered, he jumped up to welcome us with an attractive wide smile.

"Hello," he said. "It's good of you to come. I know it's not quite safe to be out in the town."

There were two chairs in the room. Sandra sat down on one and took a small cassette player out of her bag. Manuel gestured for me to take the other, but I shook my head and indicated that I would move about to take pictures. I went towards the window. The curtains were drawn across but I managed to perch on the window-sill.

"Be careful," warned Manuel. "Best to move away from there."

I decided to sit on the bed and got my camera ready.

"I'll get some drinks and snacks," said Silvia, going downstairs again.

"Is it true that you're related to Xanana Gusmão, the famous resistance leader?" asked Sandra, switching on the cassette recorder.

Manuel nodded. "He's my uncle. He's being held in Jakarta. You know he was sentenced to life imprisonment?"

"Yes, although Amnesty International claimed the trial was rigged."

"He's not the only hero in our family. There's my mother - she's Xanana's sister - she's a doctor out in one of the refugee camps -but you won't have heard of her."

"And how long have you been involved in the resistance?"

"I grew up in the resistance. Ever since I can remember, even when I was a tiny boy, my parents, uncle Xanana, their friends, would be talking about the oppression we had to suffer. Then I experienced it myself as I got a little older. We weren't even allowed to speak our own language in school. In 1989 my father was one of the organisers of the big pro-independence demonstration here."

Manuel told his story fluently and passionately. His face became beautiful as he spoke of the struggle. I managed to get some good shots of him even though I had barely enough room to change position.

"It was a peaceful protest, no-one was carrying arms. The Indonesian army turned out and fired on the crowd - they killed two hundred people, they killed my father, and many more were seriously injured. Xanana brought home my father's body. I was ten years old then. It's not something you can ever forget. So we kept on struggling against the oppression. When Bishop Carlos Belo and Jose Ramos Horta were awarded the Nobel Prize in 1996 we thought, surely now, surely now we'll get independence, that was such a major public relations blow to the Indonesian government. But no, things just continued. Then there was the referendum and we voted for independence and we thought, yes, yes, this is the time, now we can begin to be free. The UN peacekeeping forces were there to make it happen. But the following day, the militia came onto the university campus with guns and knives. They sought out those who had been listed as resistance members, they herded them into the square and shot them down."

The flow stopped and Manuel buried his face in his hands. We sat, mute, waiting for him. Suddenly I shook myself, recalling why I was there and took a picture of him. And hated myself for doing it. He raised his head at the sound of the flash and looked across at me.

"Since then, I've been leading a student cohort for the resistance," he continued a little wearily.

"Can you tell us more about the militia?" asked Sandra.

"How much do you want to know?" he began.

We were suddenly interrupted as Silvia threw herself into the room.

"Manuel, Manuel," sobbed the young woman, clutching at him. "They're coming for you – get out, get out!"

"Come with us," said Sandra in her decisive manner. Snapping off the cassette player with one hand, she grabbed Manuel's arm and took him down through the kitchen to the back door. I followed with my equipment in a tangle.

Sandra was already revving the engine as I clambered into the jeep. Manuel had tumbled into the back seat and was keeping low.

"Let's go!" she said, and the vehicle leaped forward down the narrow lane. We had almost rounded the corner when I saw a gang of militia appear, on foot, from the other direction. But we were away, they didn't even seem to notice us as they burst into the house.

"I hope your friend got out too," I muttered, thinking of the girl who had come to warn him.

"There's a side door," responded Manuel. But his voice was strangled.

We crossed the empty town again, the streets white hot now under the midday sun. The expectation of further danger was palpable. But the journey passed silently, without incident. Sandra drove right up to the hotel entrance.

"Take him up to my room," she said urgently, "Here, the key's in my bag. Room 305. It will only take me a minute to park."

With relief Manuel and I slipped from the jeep into the cool of the hotel. Another minute to readjust our eyes to the darkness of the interior. As before, the lobby was busy with journalists, and I spotted the man Dave holding forth to someone else at the bar.

"Let's just go up the stairs real casual," I suggested quietly to Manuel, not wanting to attract attention. For the moment it worked.

There was a knock at the door. "It's Sandra," she hissed.

I let her in and turned the key again.

"I called the bar to send up gin and tonics," I told her. "I thought we could all do with something strong."

Manuel had collapsed into one of the armchairs, one arm covering his face.

"Good idea, kid," said Sandra.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"I've got friends in the resistance," she explained. "I'll call them and see if they can arrange for Manuel to get out to Australia."

"Is he going to be safe here?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah, for a little while, but the militia's likely to come in any time they want - and there's too many busybodies staying here for my liking. We'll need to keep him secret..."

Manuel came to himself again. "I don't want to put you both in danger," he said, looking from Sandra to myself and back. "I should leave now..."

"Let me ring Fernando," suggested Sandra calmly. "My guess is it's way too risky for you to go out of here on your own without a plan. Let's see what the resistance have to say."

She went into the bedroom to use the telephone. There was another knock at the door. For an instant I stood poised for flight.

"Room service."

I took charge of the tray with the full bottle of gin, two glasses, three cans of local tonic water and a bucket of ice. I went into the bathroom to find a third glass and then poured out generous shots of gin.

"That OK for you?" I passed a glass over to Manuel.

He had come to stand beside me and as we were suddenly together, he put his free arm around my waist and pulled me gently to him, burying his head in my neck, like a child might do. I held him close for comfort, too. After a few minutes he raised his head and looked intently into my eyes, before kissing me softly on the mouth and smiling the smile that made his serious face attractive, though still sad.

Sandra came in from the bedroom as he let me go.

"Oh, sorry," she said automatically before shooting a fierce look at me. "This for me?" she asked, picking up the third glass.

"What's the news?" inquired Manuel.

"There's a small plane leaving soon," she reported. "If we can't get you on that, we should get you to the UN compound. The you can fly out with other refugees."

Manuel nodded and turned away, obviously unhappy.

"Do you have a room already?" Sandra asked me a little later.

"No, I guess not," I replied. "And no luggage either. I seem to be here just with the clothes I stand up in."

Sandra shrugged that aside. "We'll talk about all that another time," she said, not without a gleam of interest. "But right now let's see if we can get you a room you can share with Manuel. Would that be OK?" she asked, looking at each of us in turn.

I flushed a little. It all seemed to be going too fast. "Can't I share with you?" I asked.

"It would be easier for us to book a room for a Westerner rather than a Timorese," she replied. "As I said, there are a lot of busybodies in this place."

"Can't Manuel share with you, then?" I asked.

"I'd prefer not," she replied bluntly, then gave a rueful grin. "It'd ruin my reputation. They all have me tabbed as a lesbian here. I'm not, actually. But it's a hell of a good protection."

I laughed and turned to see what Manuel was making of the conversation. He put up his hands in mock surrender. "I'm at your mercy," he said. "For the moment I have to do what you think best."

"We're in luck," said Sandra as she put down the phone. "Room 308 has been vacated today, it's just along the corridor. You can go down and pick up the key. Oh and by the way, there's a little shop at the back of the foyer. You can get some basics there for you and Manuel. Toothbrushes, knickers, they have a few casual clothes there as well, put it on my tab for the time being."

Room 308 was identical to Sandra's room with the same dreary decor. But it was clean and the window looked out onto the back of the hotel where there was a deserted swimming pool and a tidy little garden. The late afternoon sun splashed into the bedroom but despite that I shivered suddenly. I felt trapped there.

By the time I had unpacked my few purchases and washed my face, Manuel had fallen asleep on one of the beds. His face was pale and drawn. I bent down to kiss him lightly on the forehead.

"Sweet dreams, if that's possible," I murmured.

I called Sandra on the internal phone.

"Let's go downstairs to eat," she suggested. "Just leave a note for Manuel. He'll be OK for a while."

"He shouldn't leave the room, right?" I checked.

"Best to keep as low a profile as possible. You can check up on him later."

"My friends in the resistance are saying we should get out of here ourselves," mused Sandra, glancing at me across the table, as we tucked into curry and rice. "Leave for Australia or at least go into the mountains..."

I grunted in reply, concentrating on my food. I hadn't realised how hungry I was until it was placed in front of me. After a few minutes I looked up to see that Sandra had finished before me.

"Let's order something else," she urged, beckoning the waiter over. She picked up the bottle of local wine and refilled our glasses.

"Here's to partnership," she said, toasting me.

"To partnership," I replied willingly.

"So what *are* you doing here, Marie-Therese?" she asked, after the waiter had gone.

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said slowly. "I feel as if I'm on a long journey. I'm looking for something but I've forgotten what it is. There are times when I think I've glimpsed it, half hidden amongst the trees, but when I try to catch hold of it, it slips away from me and it's gone again."

The waiter came back with a plate of sliced pineapple and two bowls of sweet rice pudding. I took another drink of wine.

"And then there are other times when I feel that something - or someone - is looking for me, looking *at* me..." There was that tingling sensation at the back of my neck. I shivered and turned my head, but there was no-one and the sensation passed.

Sandra watched my face intently as I spoke.

"And you?" I asked.

"I suppose my purpose is to expose oppression," she replied, with a grimace to belie the pomposity, "to keep telling the story of the oppressed."

"Keep telling?"

"It's a story people don't like to listen to... And they find it difficult to remember... Although you find the same story all over the world."

"You've worked in other situations like this?"

She shrugged. "I was in El Salvador, Kosovo, Sierra Leone," she reeled them off.

"But I'm not sure any of that was as bad as this... the Indonesians have destroyed the culture and the religion - they've targeted priests, nuns, churches... When you look into old people's eyes you see them completely withdrawn. When you speak to them, they literally cannot speak. Maybe the young people will have the resilience to start again..."

"Like Manuel?" I asked.

"Yes, Manuel," she said slowly, looking keenly at me. "What was going on there?"

"I'm not sure," I laughed.

"I'm not a prude," she said carefully, "but he's so much younger than you."

"Is he?" I asked in surprise.

We sat at the bar sipping gin mixed with some local brand of tonic. Night had fallen some time ago. I had been upstairs to check on Manuel but he was still sleeping soundly. Then the electricity had failed so we drank by candlelight.

"I don't know how you do this job," I said. "I couldn't."

"Perhaps you have a different story from me to tell," she said lightly.

But I wasn't sure if she was right.

"You don't get scared here?" I continued. "You don't carry a weapon?"

"No," she answered coolly. "If you plan carefully, it's possible to survive. And I have my talisman."

She fished out a chain from inside her blouse and showed me the pendant hanging from it; it was smooth, oval, silver and had a small portrait inside. "It's my mother," she explained. "I find it life-affirming."

"But what do you have to protect you?" I persisted.

She smiled and took the smart red pen from her shirt pocket. "The pen is mightier than the sword," she said, signing her name on the bar chit with a flourish.

"What about hassle from men?"

She felt in her pocket again and brought out a battered lipstick case which it had its own tiny mirror. Peering closely in the gloom, she applied bright red lipstick and smacked her lips together.

"There! Completely safe! "

I laughed and looked at her quizzically.

"All that red and those dark orifices. It terrifies them. They're afraid they'll get never get out, they'll just be reabsorbed."

We were laughing so much that I got a shock when I felt a large hand heavy on my shoulder. Despite the gloom, unfortunately, Dave Montgomery had managed to recognise us, but that must have partly because we were the only women staying in the hotel.

“Mind if I join you ladies?” he asked, sitting down without waiting for an invitation. He had a bottle of whiskey with him and he half filled his own glass before offering it round. We declined.

“Mike’s got a message from Reuters to move out this week,” he began. “And I heard Stefano saying that his agency was thinking of recalling him... All the television networks have already pulled out their teams... Pretty soon this place is going to deserted.”

“What’s going on?” asked Sandra indignantly. “I can’t ever remember a big story like this where the news agencies pulled out. What’s going to happen if there’s no-one to report on the fate of the refugees in the UN compound? The UN don’t want to be there, the UN will simply abandon those people and you know what will happen then – the militia will move in, those fifteen hundred people will just be slaughtered...”

“My editor is putting pressure on me to leave as well,” said Dave hurriedly. “What can I do? I can’t change things here...”

“If all the journalists leave, the Indonesians will have won,” Sandra tried to point out to him. “With no witnesses they can commit whatever crimes they wish.”

“Oh come on,” he said patronisingly, “don’t you think you’re exaggerating a little, my dear?”

“No, I don’t think so,” replied Sandra, her voice rising with impatience. “This whole situation stinks of masculine complicity. The US and the UK are conniving in the Indonesian atrocities – it’s capitalism, patriarchy, neocolonialism, militarism and - and – and arms sales all rolled into one...” She paused for breath.

Dave put up his hands in mock surrender. “Whoah,” he said sardonically, leering at her. “Please save me the feminist lecture! I’m a simple cameraman. Me no understandee politics!”

“Don’t give me all that crap,” snapped Sandra. “Don’t you care about anything but yourself?”

Dave shrugged with studied indifference. “The UN are here to keep the peace. There’s no danger to the natives now, is there?”

Sandra was really losing her temper and blurted out her reply without thinking.

“I don’t know how you can say that, you moron! Just this morning we had to rescue a student from his home because a death squad was coming to get him. He’s waiting upstairs until we can fly him out. Anyone who speaks out is at risk of...”

Too late she realised what she had said.

“What the hell do you mean?” demanded Dave violently, flinging the chair back as he rose from his seat. ‘You’ve got a resistance fighter in the hotel? Are you crazy? You’ve put us all in danger, you stupid meddling bitch. What’ll happen if the militia find out?’

He leaned over the table at Sandra with his hand up as if about to strike her. I noticed his face shining as the sweat of fear trickled down it. He hit the table hard with his fist, making the glasses and bottles ring. Then, wiping his hand across his face, he moved away blindly, bumping into the furniture as he went.

"He'll be back for his whiskey," murmured Sandra callously.

"I hope he'll keep quiet," I murmured.

"It's in his own interests to," she rejoined after a moment's thought.

Manuel was sleeping like a baby when I slipped into the room, which was bright with the moonlight. I drew the curtains, undressed silently and climbed into bed. It had been a very long day.

I awoke at some point to find Manuel had crept in beside me. I turned over to see the new day was dawning and at the same time he reached out for me. Sleepily I accepted and returned his caresses...

2

The following morning Dave was at reception with his bags.

"I'm checking out, moving out," he explained hurriedly when he saw us. "My editor is insisting I go down to Darwin."

"Good luck, then, Dave," said Sandra in her generous way.

"You two should get out now," he shouted at us as we walked on towards the breakfast room, "while there's still time. It's only a matter of time, Sandra."

"Thanks for the concern, Dave," she replied. "But we're committed to staying."

After breakfast we drove down to the UN Headquarters.

"It's not just UN staff," Sandra told me. "There's staff from non-governmental organisations as well. They have highly trained security officers to protect them. And there are two thousand soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan and Fiji in East Timor to keep the peace."

"But why are they planning to leave?" I asked.

"Oh! The UN always move out when the going gets too tough. After all, it's not their problem. Anyway, they claim they've made transition arrangements, so they can withdraw with a clear conscience."

We asked to see Brigadier Smith, the commanding officer.

"He's busy at the moment," stalled the secretary.

"It's urgent," Sandra insisted.

"Can you wait twenty minutes or so? I may be able to squeeze you in before his next appointment."

A blond obviously Teutonic man came through the foyer and greeted Sandra as he passed.

"This is Marie-Therese," she introduced us. "This is Hans Weber – he works with the ICA – the International Conflict Agency."

Hans smiled and we all stood there chatting about this and that until he looked at his watch and drew in breath.

"Sorry, must go," he said, taking his leave. "I've got a meeting due to start five minutes ago."

"He seemed nice," I remarked idly as he hurried away.

"Oh yeah," replied Sandra. "I'd advise you to give him a wide berth."

I looked a question at her but she refused to be drawn.

As twenty minutes turned into forty, I got restless and began to wander about the reception area, looking at the notices.

"You new here?" asked a security guard who was stationed at the entrance and looking equally bored.

I fell into conversation with him, idly picking up information as he talked.

"I'm not doing badly for myself here," he boasted to me. "I'm earning £7000 a month tax-free and I get a daily allowance of £60 on top of that."

"Is that why you're here?" I asked curiously.

He shrugged. "I didn't choose this," he replied. "I just applied to the UN and they decided to send me to Dili."

"You don't find it a disturbing situation?"

"It's not my problem," he said. "My job is to protect the officials."

"Well, take care," I said inately, as I saw Sandra beckoning me.

Brigadier Smith's office was palatial, Smith himself an urbane Black American diplomat, aging and distinguished, to match his surroundings. We sat comfortably in velvet-covered armchairs and sipped strong black coffee from tiny cups.

As Sandra briefly outlined her story, Smith sat with fingers together in front of him, listening intently. I saw his neat eyebrows shoot up at the part where she described how we had rescued Manuel - but his expression continued to show only polite interest.

When she had finished, he nodded sagely. "Yes, we know about Manuel Gusmão. And we can airlift him out to Australia. But you'll have to bring him into the UN compound. And you're going to have to be careful doing that because the militia will still be out looking for him."

He looked us both up and down for a moment and swivelled round in his high-backed chair to stare out of the window behind him.

"Please don't think I'm being patronising, ladies," he continued, turning back to us, "but don't you think it's time you also thought about leaving? Dili is becoming a very dangerous place to be."

"Yes, the Indonesians have got what they wanted," retorted Sandra. "A lot of the media personnel are going."

Smith picked up a sheet of computer printout from his desk. "To be precise, 480 out of 500 journalists have left East Timor in this last week," he informed us. "Perhaps 480 out of 500 journalists can't all be wrong?"

"And how long will it be before the peacekeeping forces also leave?" asked Sandra scornfully.

"Our orders come from Geneva, as you know, Ms Knight," replied Smith smoothly, without answering the question. "We will always make room for you in the compound, ladies, but please don't leave it too late."

Making all the conventional noises, we thanked him for his time and he ushered us out. Sandra flashed one of her speaking glances at me – the one that said simply, "Men!"

When we got back to the hotel, we witnessed a scuffle at the entrance between two militia members and three of the hotel staff. After a few words the militia moved away, brandishing their rifles.

"Things are getting a bit heavy," murmured Sandra. "And our guys here are great at serving up the special curry with a sweet smile but I can't see they're going to be much good at protecting themselves – or us - if the going gets rough."

We ordered gin and tonic at the bar. The hotel manager approached and asked to speak to Sandra. She sat down at a table in the corner with him, under the wooden fan. The conversation was brief.

Sandra grimaced at me as she returned to the bar. "We've had our five-minute warning. It's no longer safe to keep Manuel here... for any of us. Mr. Varig is very worried that the militia will attack the hotel in force. And then anyone could get caught in the crossfire."

"We'd better go up and talk to Manuel," I suggested.

Manuel was pleased to see us, jumping up from the bed as I entered the room. He was restless from inactivity and uncertainty. He tried to hide his anxiety beneath his charm, but it was difficult. I gave him a quick run-down of the morning's events and then ordered coffee and sandwiches for all of us, while Sandra went next door to make another phone call to her resistance friends.

"Let's plan carefully," said Sandra as she sat down and took a grateful sip of coffee. "Manuel, we need to get you into the UN compound as soon as possible. Nowhere else is safe. The churches are targeted - and the mountains ... From the compound you can be flown out to Australia."

Manuel protested with his hands outspread. "I can't leave Timor," he stated simply.

"I don't see that there's an option," replied Sandra gently. "Fernando and Lucia both agree that you're important for the future of the country. We can't knowingly put your life at risk. Eventually you'll be able to get back and help rebuild... Besides, you can't stay here. Everyone in the hotel is at risk because of you."

Manuel bent his head in submission but it was hard for him. Anyone in his place would feel a sense of betrayal at leaving his country, the country his family and friends had fought and died for over the years.

I fished out a map of the city from my shoulder bag. "Let's look at the best route to the compound," I suggested.

"The Indonesian militia tend to keep to the main streets," said Manuel, leaning over and pointing. "If we leave the hotel this way and go towards the outskirts we can avoid most of the road-blocks."

"Then we can cut through the Shell compound and head straight down to the UN," continued Sandra. "It makes the journey a little bit longer in distance but it might be safer."

Manuel nodded in agreement.

"Good," said Sandra decisively. "It's too late to go now. Can you two be ready by seven in the morning? We should be at the compound within an hour, before the militia are really awake..."

After Sandra had gone, Manuel moved over and put his arms round my waist.

"This may be our last night together, *querida*," he murmured, nuzzling my neck and pressing himself to me.

What could I do? The boy was about to lose everything. I took off his clothes and tucked him into my bed.

"Lie down on the back seat," advised Sandra, as Manuel climbed into the jeep next morning. "If we're stopped, we'll say that you're ill and we're taking you to see a UN doctor in the compound."

'OK, I'm probably suffering from typhoid,' grinned Manuel, doing as he was told. "They'll likely leave us alone then."

Sandra threw an old blanket over him.

We set off in the haze of the early morning, turning of the avenue into the smart suburbs of Dili, with their large villas in their self contained security guarded compounds, where wealthy Indonesians and visiting Australian businessmen lived.

As we turned the corner into the Avenida Kaikoli, we unexpectedly and almost literally ran into two militiamen. I gasped and clutched the dashboard. Sandra braked to avoid them and wound down her window.

“Sorry about that,” she said with a sweet smile, letting in the clutch to start forward again when one of the men grabbed her door and motioned her to stop with his rifle.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” he demanded, leering at Sandra.

“We’re journalists from Belgium,” explained Sandra in her friendliest tones. “We’re taking our colleague here to the UN compound for medical treatment. We just phoned there and they’re expecting us...”

The other man peered casually into the back of the jeep. But fortunately, they were both more interested in us.

“What are you doing here? Where are you living?” demanded the first one again.

“We’re at the Belmont Villas,” lied Sandra smoothly. “We’re just taking a short cut. Is there a problem?”

The man growled and let go of the door handle as his two-way radio burst into life.

“Yes, yes, understood,” he yelled into it and stood back, waving at us to pass.

Sandra moved off sedately and somehow managed to resist the urge to speed until we had turned the next corner.

I drew a long breath.

“Why didn’t you just carry on driving when you saw them, instead of stopping?” I asked. “They were startled enough at first.”

She shrugged. “I suppose I was afraid they would shoot – and if they’d shot at our tyres, we would be going nowhere fast now.”

At the gates to the UN compound we were interrogated again. Manuel now emerged from his blanket as the Australian soldier rapped out the questions.

“We had Brigadier Smith’s personal assurance that Manuel would be allowed into the compound,” repeated Sandra for the third time.

“What about you two?” he demanded. “I thought all the journalists were pulling out. This is no place for women. You can’t count on UN protection for much longer...”

“Is it true, then,” jumped in Sandra, a reporter to the last, “that the UN forces are pulling out soon?”

“I didn’t say that, did I?” growled the soldier. “Here, take that man down to the office, third building on the left. He has to check in there. But you’ll be lucky if there’s room for him. The place is crammed full already...”

We both went in with Manuel but the office was tiny, dark and busy. Suddenly, I began to shiver with delayed reaction, so I went to wait outside. I sat on the end of the verandah, eyes closed and face to the morning sun. As the warmth seeped in, I felt calmer and began to relax, swinging my legs like I might have done in a long forgotten childhood memory of a place I felt safe...

“You’ll be wanting to take pictures,” said an attractive deep voice, breaking into my reverie. I snapped open my eyes and saw a tall good-looking soldier watching me.

"You're a photographer," he stated as I looked my surprise.

It was true. I had my camera with me but it had been for appearances only.

"I'm Greg, I'm with the Australian peace-keeping force. Want me to show you around?" he asked helpfully.

"Let's wait till my colleague comes out," I urged, in a strange panic. "She's a journalist. But – if you have time - tell me what it's like here," I offered, to keep him interested.

Sandra emerged with Manuel, she looking relieved, and he resigned.

"So that's all fixed," she said in satisfaction. "Where do you go now?"

"Building 32A," said Manuel, checking his card.

"Let's go then," said my new companion. "I'll show you the way."

"Who's your friend?" hissed Sandra as she grabbed me so that we walked for a moment behind the two men.

"Not sure really," I hissed back. "But he's very informative and he says I can take pictures."

Building 32A was one of the many prefabricated Nissan huts laid out in neat rows within the compound. It was almost bare inside, with small windows, gloomy, airless and musty-smelling.

"Well, you won't be here long," said Sandra encouragingly.

"Marie-Therese, you want to take a picture?" she went on, professional to the end.

It almost broke my heart to snap Manuel sitting bravely there on the camp-bed, still clutching his card. But he forgave me.

"Ciao, *querida*," he said softly when we made a move to go.

"We'll stay in touch," I said to him as we embraced, holding on tight to each other. But I wasn't sure it was a promise I could keep.

We went out into the sunlight again and waved goodbye.

"Manuel's due to leave any day," I told Greg, looking up at the tall soldier. "I'd appreciate it if you could keep an eye on him till then."

"Sure," Greg replied with his friendly drawl and his easy grin. "Shall we make that tour now?"

We picked up a number of stories that morning: from the old couple with their baby grand daughter who had been tortured by the militia; from the woman who had been covertly sterilised under the Indonesian family planning programme; from the young girl who had been raped by one of the Indonesian soldiers.

And I took photographs of them all, as that was my job.

Sandra took notes, but her hand trembled as she wrote.

"You see how over and over again women's bodies are translated into male power through sexual violence," she said to me, her voice tight, trying to keep her anger from exploding.

“Call me any time,” offered Greg, as we got back into the jeep. He handed me a scrap of paper with a cell-phone number scribbled on it. “It’ll be a pleasure to serve you – any way I can.”

“Hrmph,” said Sandra.

Then, as we set off through the gates, she cast a fierce look at me. “What is it with you, anyway?” she asked. “Are you a nymphomaniac or something? With all this man-made destruction, suffering, cruelty – and fear - around us, you just *have* to give the come-on to the military?”

“They *are* the peace-keeping forces,” I replied mildly, though I resented her attack.

“Oh yeah,” drawled Sandra sarcastically. “You’ll learn.”

“And not all men are the same,” I continued, reflectively. “There is a gentleness in some of them.”

“And what about Manuel?” she demanded.

“Manuel just needed someone to help him make it through the night,” I replied simply.

“Your compassion astounds me,” she retorted. But she was no longer mad.

3.

The following day, the military arrived at the hotel and insisted on escorting us to the UN compound. There was nothing we could do. By that time, we were the only reporters left in the hotel and it had a mournful air. The shabby armchairs and the faded blinds became more noticeable now the hustle and bustle of people was gone.

We queued to check in at the compound office and I took the opportunity to inquire after Manuel. Apparently he had already left that morning by helicopter, heading for Darwin. By the time we had been allocated space in a small dormitory (building 16D) it was growing dark, I was hungry and feeling anxious about what was going to happen next. I lay down on my camp bed, trying to calm myself. I felt claustrophobic, surrounded by fifteen hundred desperate people inside the compound and thousands of others outside still trying their best to get in.

“We should go into town tomorrow,” said Sandra, “to see what’s happening there. We haven’t been downtown for a few days.”

I groaned and rolled over, covering my eyes and trying to sleep.

It was no good.

At one point I heard a commotion coming from one of the buildings further along. Frustrated by my own wakefulness, I got up and went out to see what was happening. Sandra was fast asleep and snoring gently.

A small group of refugees surrounded a young woman. Her face was bleeding and her dress was torn.

“What’s happened?” I asked, recognising the old woman I had spoken to the day before.

“She’s been raped by one of the soldiers,” she replied. “She just went down to the well to collect water and he attacked her. She was foolish to go, it’s dark down there, there are no lights at this time of night.”

“What do you mean?” I asked incredulously. “Not one of the UN soldiers?”

“Yes, of course,” came the impatient reply. “It happens all the time. She was foolish to go at this time of night,” she repeated.

“Aren’t you going to report it?” I asked.

She shrugged. “We can try. But it won’t make any difference.”

“I’ll go,” I offered, eager for action and feeling there was nothing I could do here.

I jogged round to the guardroom at the entrance - but I was careful to keep under the lights, as I, too, may be in danger within the compound.

The soldiers smirked when I spoke to them. I got angry but they smirked even more and I had to fight down my fear. The guardroom was badly lit and I was alone in there with the two of them.

“I’ll speak to your commanding officer in the morning,” I threatened. “What’s his name?”

“That’ll be Brigadier Smith,” came the reply. “But don’t expect him to do anything, lady.”

I turned to leave and as I came down the steps I saw the German ICA worker - Hans - approaching the gate-house. There was now the red glow in the sky at the horizon, which heralded dawn. I felt relief flooding over me.

“What are you doing here?” he asked in concern as he recognised me.

“There was a rape in the compound,” I began, when I realised that he was not alone. Keeping to the shadows of the building was a young girl in a pretty flowered sarong.

I stopped and stepped back.

Hans took the opportunity to nod at the two guards, one of whom, still smirking at me, came out and unlocked the pedestrian gate to let the girl into the street.

I moved off towards my billet. Hans moved to accompany me.

“I’m fine on my own,” I told him shortly.

“That’s nothing,” he hastened to reassure me, nodding to indicate the gate and the girl who had disappeared beyond. “She’s just a kid who needs a bit of extra money. She’s not a real prostitute. It’s just for company really, you know. I’m just trying to help her out...”

I was too disgusted to respond. Shaking him off, I reached my block and slipped inside. Sandra was still fast asleep and I lay down across from her, releasing a deep sigh and closing my eyes.

God, I thought, I don’t care how opinionated she may be sometimes, I’m glad she’s with me, she’s the one person I can trust to be honorable. I couldn’t survive here without her.

I awoke late and Sandra was already dressed.

"I spoke to Greg, your friendly Australian," she said. "There's a convoy going downtown today. We can hitch a ride. I want to see Fernando and Elvira."

"How'll we get back?" I asked, getting up slowly.

"Greg'll fix something, he said, he'll swing round and pick us up," she answered.

"Mm, are you sure?" I asked cynically. "I don't think I trust anyone after last night." I told her briefly what had happened.

"Hah!" she responded. "Well, I'm sorry, kid, but I tried to warn you. Let's catch the convoy now and when we get back we can talk to the Commander. That'll be a very interesting interview..."

Greg was lounging against the side of the lorry, waiting for us.

"Quick, climb up in back," he said softly, "before anyone notices you."

"Hey, princess," he cajoled, glancing over his shoulder at me as he let out the clutch, "where's that sunny smile of yours this morning?"

He was irresistible. I had to grin. Sandra snorted and rolled her eyes at me.

We arranged to rendez-vous with Greg in an hour, at the corner of the main street by the empty cinema, the *Espléndido*, now sadly delapidated. Fernando and Elvira lived not far away, holed up in a third floor flat.

"It's impossible," they told us. "We've got to move out, go into the mountains. We'll probably not be able to keep in touch after tomorrow. But you yourselves will be leaving soon, I guess."

"The UN are planning an evacuation, I'm sure," replied Sandra, "although they won't admit anything officially. Why don't you come into the compound for safety?"

"No," said Elvira. "There are a lot of people in the mountains, a lot of women and children – living in really difficult conditions. We need to see how we can help them."

"Perhaps Manuel would have been better off in the mountains," said Sandra, "Perhaps we made the wrong decision..."

"There was nothing else you could do in the circumstances," said Fernando quickly. "Don't torture yourself over it. It's very important for us that Manuel is safe."

"We can let you know when the evacuation is going to take place," offered Sandra after a pause, "just in case you're still here..."

"It'll be a bloodbath for those left in the city..." said Elvira, shaking her head as if to shake away the images.

"Where will you be in the mountains?" demanded Sandra. I could see she was forming a plan and it made me uneasy.

“We’re heading for Maliana,” answered Fernando, who obviously felt the same. “You’re not thinking of coming out? Of course, it would be great to have a reporter there. But it’s so dangerous...”

Sandra insisted.

“The camp is quite isolated,” said Elvira reluctantly. “But there’s a Church in the neighbouring village - you might be able to leave a message with the priest. Now, where’s his number?” She dug in her handbag. “Yes, 35619. Have you got that?”

Sandra nodded and closed her notebook.

“Time to go,” she said. “All the luck in the world, you two. I hope we meet again – soon!”

As we left the building there was a sudden burst of fire to our left; it was a shooting match between one of the UN lorries and a jeep belonging to the militia. We fled to the right, I heard Sandra call out but was too frightened to stop and when I did, she was out of sight. I found a narrow side street and halfway down there was a small Hindu temple where I took refuge, looking over my shoulder instinctively, to see if anyone was following me. I sat down on the cool stone slab, which served for seating around the walls. My breathing eased and I fell into a calm space of contemplation. The temple had been damaged by the militia, like the Christian churches. Yet there still remained clearly before me the image of the goddess Kali – the mother goddess of creation and destruction.

For a moment I was full of consciousness - everything in the room seemed to be soaked in bliss, flooded in peace. I held clearly for an instant the perception of inter-relatedness – good and evil existing together. The power of the mother in everything, vibrating.

I shook myself out of the vision and began to intellectualise. I had been reading in an old Time magazine in the hotel about ‘the resurgence of the mother into the consciousness of the world’s population.’ Patriarchal religions had forced her into hiding - in the unconscious. Now, apparently there was fresh impetus for the worship of the feminine principle... with ritual celebrations for young girls entering womanhood.

I snorted mentally when I remembered this. I would like to see some evidence of the feminine principle here, I thought, in this place overwhelmed by militarism, that ultimate manifestation of masculinity, the linear path to final annihilation, from which nothing can ever be reborn.

When the noise had quietened down, I ventured outside and slipped along to the rendez-vous point. Sandra was already waiting in the shadows and we clutched hands wordlessly. Then somehow, miraculously, Greg drove past at a crawl, craning his neck, looking out for us. We clambered aboard the moving vehicle, crowding together into the front seat and, for the moment, were safe again.

“Phew, that was a close one,” breathed Greg, as he picked up speed and squared his shoulders with more of his usual confidence. “I thought I was going to circle that block forever and never find you again.”

“Our hero,” I said affectionately, only half joking, and laying my head on his manly chest. It was a gesture of pure light-headedness from the adventure.

But Greg was a man who could always respond to an advantage. He put his arm around me and held me there.

“Well,” he said cheerfully, “if you ask me, it’s you two shelaghs who are the heroes, out on the streets with only your ethics to protect you. At least I’ve got my sub-machine gun handy!”

“Plus,” he continued, swerving round a corner as he drove clumsily with one hand, “ I see the princess has got her bright eyes back and I think I’m justified in claiming some unspeakable reward!”

“You got it!” I said, looking up at him adoringly.

Beside me, Sandra burrowed her face in her hands and groaned audibly.

I laughed and nudged her. “Lighten up, shelagh!” I murmured naughtily.

“By the way, Amazons,” drawled Greg as we neared the UN compound. “The evacuation is set for Wednesday morning.”

I sat up. Three days time. My heart leapt. In three days time we would be out of there.

“We don’t want to leave, we want to get out to the mountains,” Sandra told Greg. My heart sank. “To a place near the border. Our friends have been telling us what’s going on with the refugees there. Those people have been completely terrorised and now they are starving. Can you help us get out there before the evacuation?”

“I’ll ask around, honey, but I think you’re completely crazy,” answered Greg genially, looking across at me with one eyebrow raised in expectation. But I said nothing.

“I’d be really grateful if you could,” said Sandra.

“OK, I’ll meet you later in the canteen. Say around 8 o’clock?” Again he looked at me, less confident this time.

I smiled sunnily at him. “We’ll be there,” I promised.

But first I had to see Brigadier Smith.

“It’s a scandal,” I told him. “There’s rape, prostitution and exploitation going on in the camp under your nose, the perpetrators are soldiers under your command and you do nothing about it.”

“We’ll be looking into the facts of the case, ma’am,” responded the brigadier blandly, closing his file, “ and we’ll inform you as soon as possible of the outcome.”

"I'm afraid I don't see that as an adequate response," I continued. "Some of these crimes are carried out against minors and in the United States would attract long-term prison sentences. There are witnesses."

"We're in a state of war here, ma'am," the man replied with studied patience. "We play by different rules."

"What about equity and justice?" I demanded. "I would have thought that you, as an African American, would be more inclined than other officers to see the need for a different response."

He flushed a little. "This is not about racism," he said flatly.

"Isn't it?" I asked. "Perhaps now you're so far up the hierarchy you no longer see yourself as black?"

I heard Sandra gasp.

"This is not about me," said Brigadier Smith carefully. "But I promise I will look into the matter and let you know."

"You realise that, unless we hear anything within twenty-four hours, we'll file a story about this?"

Brigadier Smith was becoming a little less suave.

"You're free to do that, of course," he replied, "*if* you still have access to the necessary telecommunications."

"Oh, we have the technology," I assured him. "Shall we come back around this time tomorrow?"

"Please do that, ma'am," he said, obviously hating me. We turned to leave.

"You ladies are expecting to be airlifted out of here?" he stated as we reached the door. I turned back.

"That's not a veiled threat, is it, Brigadier?" I asked.

"I don't like threats," he said darkly.

"Then we're agreed on one thing!" I said brightly and pushed Sandra outside in front of me.

"You did good in there," said Sandra, admiringly as we walked down the steps.

"Yeah," I said slowly. Maybe, after all, I could be a hero too?

Greg was sitting at an empty table when we arrived at the canteen. We both sat opposite him with our trays of institutional food and he leant towards us over the table.

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sandra. She turned to me. "Aren't we?"

The woman was a saint. She must be the bravest person I ever met, in any of my lifetimes. She is still in a class of her own. I couldn't hope to match her.

Oh come on, mum!

"Haven't you done enough?" I asked, cajoling her. "You can't take responsibility for the whole world."

"But I have to fulfil my responsibility to people here," she replied in astonishment. "They're counting on us, we can't give up on them."

And somehow I was still part of the pact...

"But what about the Brigadier?" I tried again. After all, that was my contribution...

"We'll write that story anyway," she said confidently. "It'll be easier for us to send it from the mountains, in any case, through the underground channels."

The plan was to leave at daylight in one of the army landrovers, which were headed for the town of Suai, on the border with West Timor. It seemed some supplies were being taken over there before the evacuation.

"We go through the mountains south of a place called Ainaro," said Greg. "That's not too far from where you want to go. I can make a quick detour and be back with the convoy before we reach Suai. I can say I broke down, got a puncture, something like that."

"You're taking us, then?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied in some surprise. "Got to do my best to make sure you're safe, don't I, princess?" And he reached over and took my hand.

"Well," said Sandra, wiping her plate clean with her chapatti, "I guess I'll leave you two alone. There's not much time left for that unspeakable reward." Her lips twitched in a smile, despite herself, as she stood up. "He really deserves it," she added softly, walking away.

"There's a little place I know," said Greg, holding my hand at the canteen door. And I chose not to ask him how he knew.

Greg walked me back to the dormitory in the moonlight, still holding my hand.

"I know you have to go with her," he said, hesitantly. "But I sure wish you didn't. I may never see you again."

"Will you going down to Darwin with everyone else?" I asked. He nodded. "Do you have a number I can call you on?"

"You have my cell phone. But I'll give you my mother's home number, too," he decided, scribbling on the back of an envelope he found in his uniform shirt pocket.

We kissed goodbye at the door, not passionately now but sweetly and sadly.

"Another broken heart," observed Sandra dryly as I entered the dormitory. "Lighten up, shelagh!" she continued as I started to protest. "I'm not criticising. Greg's been really helpful. He's a really good man."

"Yeah," I replied, grinning. "He's really good!"

We packed up our clothes and equipment. There wasn't much. We'd saved some rations from the canteen, bread rolls, fruit and bottled water.

“Let’s take some of this spare bedding with us, as well,” suggested Sandra. “It won’t be needed here after Wednesday.” So we each made a roll of blankets and pillow. Then we settled down for a few hours sleep.

I was awakened while it was still dark and for an instant was completely disorientated, not knowing where or when or why I was. Then gradually coming to and recognising the dormitory, I began to distinguish shouting outside the compound and also within the walls. I reached out to gently shake Sandra and she woke immediately, sitting straight up in bed. There was the sound of helicopters above us.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Something’s up.”

We dressed quickly and ran outside, joining the refugees who were jostling and shouting, also wanting to know what was happening. An atmosphere of panic was rising almost palpably in the compound.

“The Indonesian military have surrounded the compound. No more Timorese can take refuge,” someone told us.

“And no-one can get out either!” exclaimed Sandra. “We’re all trapped in here.”

“The evacuation’s been brought forward,” Greg told us when we found him. “And it seems the UN informed the Indonesians and asked them to stop anyone else getting into the compound. There’s no capacity for airlifting any more than the numbers we already have.”

Sandra was furious. “That’s just typical masculine complicity,” she spat. “Hand in hand with the oppressors. That bastard Smith had this planned all along. The place will become a bloodbath as soon as we’re gone.”

“Hey, don’t look at me, honey,” Greg protested. “I knew nothing about all this until just now. I’m real sorry, but there’s no hope of doing anything about it. We’re all going to have to leave.”

We went to get our bags. To tell the truth, I was glad to leave this place that had become like a prison to me; it was not just the compound but the whole of the island that was redolent with oppression. As I thought about getting out of there for good, I found myself feverishly making a triage of my effects to ensure I had the essentials with me, in case I was called to leave immediately.

Sandra still had her mind on the people, not on her own safety. “There’ll be no-one to tell the story,” she worried. “What about Fernando and Elvira? They weren’t due to go until today...”

But, for once, there was nothing she could do.

There was chaos in the compound, as frightened people fought to get a place for themselves and their family in the helicopters and distraught people clamoured for information about their family outside the walls. I glimpsed Greg from time to time but it was impossible to stay together. He was

busy trying to control the crowd. I noticed Hans had got the young Timorese girl with him as he climbed aboard the first helicopter. I wasn't sure whether I should think any the better of him for that. Maybe she was luckier than some, for the moment. But what would become of her in Australia?

There was a rumpus at the border fence – a woman was reaching up to catch her two children who were climbing over into the compound.

“Put them back,” screamed one of the soldiers, waving his AKA 7 at them, “or none of you'll get out of here alive.”

I recognised him instantly – it was the sergeant who had raped the woman by the well, the one they said had killed the baby in cold blood. He raised his weapon to shoot as the woman collected her children to her, cowering in front of him.

At the same time I felt that hot rage boil up inside me and somehow - I still don't exactly know how it happened - I grabbed a handgun from the soldier standing next to me, took aim and fired. It was a clean shot, the target fell, slowly, splattering blood over the family group and the children began to cry.

I stood for a moment outside time as I finally came face to face with the dark side, the side I suppose I'd always known, that lived in me. I felt cool and calm – and even glad that it was there to draw on...

“Fall back! It was an accident!” Miraculously, it was Brigadier Smith, protecting me from his men, taking the gun from me and slipping it back in his holster. “Put those children on the next flight.”

He turned and grasped my shoulders. “Say nothing,” he told me urgently in his expressionless voice. “There's no point now.” But his eyes spoke more to me - shame, pride, relief? Yes, all of these. Most of all I felt: Complicity.

“What the hell is going on?” demanded Sandra who had been out of sight.

“Let's go,” I said, taking her arm. She didn't even notice that I was trembling. For her, I was still the same person. But I had discovered something which placed me apart from her and I couldn't share it.

It was already daylight by the time Sandra and I were airlifted over to Dili's half destroyed airport. From there we traveled by military plane down to Darwin. There were virtually no portholes, but we did manage to sit near one and strained to see out of it. As we rose above the beautiful island, my eyes filled with tears.

“We'll never be able to get an Indonesian visa again,” said Sandra, laying her head on my shoulder, utterly defeated.

In Darwin, we checked into the Sheraton Hotel and went looking for Manuel.

"I'm just waiting now," he told me sadly. "Just waiting to see what will happen next. I don't know how I'm going to get back home. Or when. Or what I will find there."

We had no good news to tell him.

"I hoped I'd find you here," said Greg, as he caught up with me on the terrace later and gave me a big bear hug. "Gee, you look good, honey. Listen," he continued, "I'm due some leave and you must be too. Why not come over to Cairns to visit my family? We can hang out on the beach all day, have barbies, do wild sex beneath the stars..."

I was so pleased to see him my heart ached but I knew that other duties were calling me. It was confusing, because I still didn't know what or why... All I knew was that a change had come upon me - and at least this time I made a conscious choice.

"I'd really like to do that, Greg," I said slowly, "but I'm just not sure I can. I have to - move on."

His face fell a mile yet he continued to smile bravely.

"So it's goodbye then, princess," he said, kissing me one last time.

"Never forget," I called out tearfully as I let him walk away, "you really were my hero."

Sandra had found a telegram waiting for her. "That's great," she told me. "Myrna will be back day after tomorrow."

"I'm glad," I replied. "You need companionship. And it's time for me to go."

"I thought as much," she said as we hugged each other goodbye. "Take care - wherever you are. It was good, travelling with you."

"You too," I said. I handed over several rolls of shot film. "Hope these are some use in the stories you tell."

My last memory of Sandra is her walking back into the bar of the Sheraton, to where a table of male journalists were swapping tall men's tales. And a wave of admiration and compassion washed over me, knowing that she would never win but nevertheless would always go on fighting.

Now suddenly I was thrown up above the cosmos, reeling with vertigo. When I recovered from the fear of falling, I saw I had a goddess eye view of the entire firmament - on and on it went, galaxy after twinkling galaxy that I could almost reach out and pick up in my hand. There was no time for regrets or remembrances for I realised here I was before the dawn of time itself, to witness the cosmic battle – a battle that played itself out against the stars.

Demonic male forces dominated the universe. In fact, their exaggerated ego was destroying the balance of the universe itself. First there was the Great Demon Mahisasura, ruler of the First World, whose desire was to control the entire cosmos. But Mahisasura was cunning – he manifested himself as a god and claimed his actions were motivated by morality and altruism. Only he had access to the knowledge through which the universe could be saved. Using this lie, he sent out his emissaries to all corners of the cosmos to form alliances. After the emissaries he sent merchants, to control through greed, and armies, to control by force. At home his followers lived blind, unaware they were oppressed by falsehood. And across the universe, he saw populations grow weak with hunger, disease and civil conflict, making it easier to extend his dominion.

Then there was the demon Sumbha, whose power spread throughout the Second World. And similarly, Sumbha called upon the gods, claiming that his was the one true way. Using this lie, he oppressed his followers by the imposition of cruel and arbitrary laws. Laughter, music, sexual pleasure were all banned and the slightest transgression was punishable by death. People lived in poverty and hardship. Nevertheless, with his brother Nisumbha, he was able to raise an army of fanatical young fighters who were prepared to sacrifice themselves in the power struggle against Mahisasura. Some were sent by stealth into the heart of Mahisasura's realm, acting as living weapons, self-destructing and causing mass destruction.

“How is it possible?” roared Mahisasura, “that anyone dare threaten the safety of the First World - which is a symbol of truth and freedom in the universe?”

“You had it coming but you didn't see it,” came the cheeky reply from Sumbha and Nisumbha.

Thus began a war of attrition, with Mahisasura deploying his forces against Sumbha's realm. Throughout the cosmic night, battleships cruised across the sky in the Second World, dropping weapons that exploded immediately over towns and villages - always before dawn, the bright light of indiscriminate destruction - and many other smaller, devilish weapons that did not explode until a small child touched them sometime the following day by mistake. Living already on the edge of poverty, Sumbha and Nisumbha's subjects were unable to withstand the onslaught and were

forced to flee for their lives. Starting their long march across the sand dunes of time, shrouded in dark cloaks and hoods, in single file, they climbed wearily, looking for a warm cave that could shelter and protect them.

“We wish no harm to the people,” proclaimed Mahisasura. “We are only out to get Sumbha and Nisumbha.”

Sumbha’s army retreated as the enemy forces landed their battleships and set up their ground weaponry. The legion followers of the great demons of the Second World disbanded, seeking refuge in the crumbling cities and finally surrendering. They were corralled together inside school compounds, hoping for reprieve.

“There will be no survivors,” said Mahisasura.

And then the bloodbath began. There was no mercy.

But still Sumbha and Nisumbha were nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, on a nearby world, one of Mahisasura’s demon allies was waging his own little war. Raktabija, yes, he too, created the illusion that the gods were on his side and that he was battling against an evil enemy (Munda, a cousin to Sumbha and Nisumbha). This war played itself out in micro-terror. Munda’s people were constantly policed by Raktabija’s forces, hindered in pursuit of their daily tasks by regular checkpoints where they were forced to wait, be searched, sent back; women went into labour and gave birth by the wayside as they waited. For Munda’s people occupied small separate tracts of land within Raktabija’s realm and their only means of reaching another safe area was by crossing the enemy zone. Even these designated areas were invaded by force, stealth or legal trickery, so that Munda’s fragmented realm grew ever smaller.

Raktabija finally desecrated one of Munda’s holy places and the situation escalated. Following the example of Sumbha and Nisumbha, young fighters banded together to plan counter-attacks on Raktabija. They went singly into the heart of the enemy as living weapons, exploding themselves in public places, on buses, in cafes, along pavements, killing whoever happened to be near them. Raktabija retaliated by sending his mighty forces into the different parts of Munda’s realm, laying waste the cities and villages, leaving behind weapons in the sand that would explode on impact. Munda was held captive in his place of government; his people sought refuge in the holy temple, where they were besieged by the enemy.

Then Mahisasura started another dreadful war.

“Look,” he stated, when people tried to protest. “I’m only trying to liberate the free world from Sumbha and Nisumbha. They could destroy us all. Everyone will be happy when they’re decapitated.”

So we saw how Mahisasura’s generals unleashed their superior firepower across the night of the Second World to frighten their enemies - and how, on the ground, women and children and old people were cut down by lesser demons.

And still Sumbha and Nisumbha were nowhere to be found.

The male divinities looked on from the grandstand, seeing themselves become impotent in this long drawn-out struggle between the demons. Finally the gods retreated to the edge of the universe in utter humiliation and met together to come up with a solution. It was drastic. They went supernova. They sent forth their energies in streams of fire. That power and light combined into one – and became a female form.

Thus emerged the goddess Durga. Her golden body blazing with the splendour of a thousand suns, her multiple arms wielding auspicious weapons, she was a spectacular power poised to wipe out ignorance, falsehood and oppression. Riding on a tiger, she swooped down to engage the great demon Mahisasura and his forces in battle.

“Ha!” scoffed Mahisasura, “ I’m not afraid of a woman.”

But as Mahisasura sent out his followers and combat began, Durga created her own female battalions from the sighs she breathed during the fighting. They gathered behind her, the combined energies of all the female divinities. Before long she had destroyed the demon’s army and Mahisasura, enraged, took on the form of a buffalo in order to defeat her. Each time Durga managed to run him through, Mahisasura managed to transform himself into another form. But finally Durga struck the demon head from the animal body and the great demon was dead.

The male gods rejoiced and bowed down in worship before Durga, calling her ‘Great Mother, the power of the universe,’ acknowledging her supremacy over all.

Yet the battle against evil was not over, as Sumbha and Nisumbha were still at large. Durga returned to the Second World, manifesting herself as a beautiful woman rather than a warrior and taking up residence in the mountains of the East. Hearing of this beauty, Sumbha desired to possess her and so sent the demon Sugriva to seduce her for him.

This Sugriva was previously a close ally of Mahisasura, holding dominion over a small insignificant realm in the First World. Through association with Mahisasura's much greater power and a determined process of self-aggrandisement, like the other demons describing his actions as divinely motivated, Sugriva had managed to create the illusion that he too could control the universe. He had developed a role for himself as holy emissary, suddenly jetting off to the Second and Third Worlds to make multiple visits to the great demons there, allegedly acting as a mediator on behalf of Mahisasura, though with little success. His interference was publicly disparaged by more than one ruler. Since Mahisasura's defeat, Sugriva had begun to court the patronage of Sumbha and Nisumbha, and indeed any other demon likely to boost his power.

Sugriva arranged to meet Durga and spoke on Sumbha's behalf:

"Goddess, Sumbha wants you to know that he is rich and powerful and that if you marry him you will enjoy wealth beyond compare. Sumbha is the great demon, master of the Three Worlds, who has vanquished all our foes."

"Is that so?" replied Durga sweetly. "But unfortunately I have made a promise to myself that only he who can conquer me in battle, shall be my husband. Let the great Sumbha come to me and win my hand."

Sugriva was taken aback by this. "Goddess, how can you, a mere woman, possibly stand against Sumbha and his younger brother Nisumbha? If they come here it will be to drag you back with them by the hair. Be careful, there's no way you can win."

Durga shrugged and smiled. "I'm sorry but that's my answer."

Sugriva went back to Sumbha, who was furious at the message and immediately sent out his army to drag Durga to him.

The army chieftain gave Durga one last chance. "Either come quietly or we'll take you by force."

"In that case, what can I do?" responded Durga.

And as the chieftain moved forward, she reduced him to ashes with a single sound, a supersonic Hmmm. Meanwhile, her tiger ran wild and destroyed the army camp.

On hearing the news, Sumbha angrily despatched Canda and Munda with another, larger, army to drag down the goddess by her hair. As they approached, they saw Durga mounted on her tiger on a high mountain, the archers drew their bows and the foot soldiers began to attack her with swords drawn.

Confronted yet again by these most arrogant and truculent man-beasts, Durga became terrible in her anger and her face darkened into black. From her frowning forehead came forth the awesome goddess Kali. She was black, emaciated, with sunken red eyes - and naked except for a tiger-skin cape. Laughing horribly with rage, she began to devour the demon army, stuffing elephants in her mouth and crunching chariots with her sharp white teeth.

When Sumbha heard about the defeat he set out himself with another army. As he approached, Durga began to make a terrible noise and Kali filled the Three Worlds with the syllable Hmmm. The energies of all the gods emanated from their bodies, producing legions of female warriors armed with weapons and mounted for battle. Sumbha's army was soon put to flight, pursued by violent laughter.

The struggle against the demons was not yet over, as now the great demon Raktabija arose wounded from the battlefield, and from his blood sprang thousands of fresh combatants. To annihilate the destructive male principle, Kali too drank from this seed blood - thus taking possession of and rendering harmless the archetypal phallic power - and continued to do so until Raktabija and his army were defeated.

Realising that his brother Nisumbha had also been killed by Durga, Sumbha challenged her:
"Don't think you're so invincible. You only depend on others to help you win."

Then Durga drew all the female combatants, the female divinities, back into herself and said to Sumbha:

"Here I stand alone. Now fight me hand-to-hand in close combat."

Seizing the goddess, Sumbha sprang up into the sky and there they fought for many days and nights above the cosmos, until at last Sumbha fell, pierced by one of Durga's arrows.

The gods rejoiced and praised Durga for protecting the universe and destroying the sins of the masculine principle. The world was at peace again. But after her victory over aggression, Durga vanished forever from the battlefield - for the feminine action in the cosmic drama is without ego-seeking ambition.

She left behind her daughter Kali.

Mounted on her great tiger, Kali prowled the Three Worlds, seeking out the remaining ego-bound forces in every corner. With her sword she destroyed them by cutting off their heads. With the same sword, she liberated those who had lived so long in oppression, bringing them out of the

caves where they had hidden in terror. She raised one hand to dispel fear, as she thought, forever, and with the other she exhorted those she saved to take on spiritual strength.

From this time, Kali became the shining one, the universal energy from which all life came and to which all life returned. She was the great womb into which the entire universe entered and from which the cosmos was constantly reborn. She existed in multi-form and multi-colour– sometimes as the straight red sword in her role as protector - or as the black circle if she had to destroy and reabsorb evil - and as the bright white triangle, when she was involved in creation. At one and the same time she was substance and non-substance, male and female, relative and absolute. But whatever form she took, whether the form of a man or a woman, she was Woman, the creator of the universe.

As Black Kali she was garbed in space, sky-clad, naked and free from all covering of illusion, all colours, names and forms disappearing within her. She gave birth to the cosmos parthenogenetically, as she carried the male principle within herself.

Kali spoke in my ear:

“I divided my form for the purpose of creation into the dual aspects of male and female. But sexual union is a realisation of non-duality, in which there is no separation, no linear flow, just fullness, completeness. To maintain the macrocosmic equilibrium, the masculine and feminine must continually merge.”

“Kali is, and exists in, everything,” she continued. “Look, here is an image...

“It is nineteenth century India. A prostitute is taking part in a play (as all actresses are prostitutes at that time, that is, prostitutes are the only women allowed to act). In the magic lamplight of the theatre she shines. A young man is struck with admiration and wishes to possess her. He sends a message backstage and she agrees to meet. She takes him along the back streets of Calcutta to her lodgings in a poor part of the city. The room is sparsely furnished and badly lit. Stale cooking smells clog the air. The young man begins to feel distaste for his adventure. The actress, without her stage paint, is sallow and plain. Yet, as she removes her sari and stands boldly naked before him, he is gripped by a terrifying emotion. He adores her. For who can be in the presence of a naked woman without sensing the power of the goddess, without awe at the unfathomable secrets of nature, the mysteries of the cosmos? There is no act of possession as they lie joined together. He does not enter her, but rises out of her in a process of recreation. Afterwards he feels not pride, but liberation...”

I saw Kali above the cosmos waiting for Mahakala who is Time, the All-Destroyer. He approached out of the darkness in arrogance but Kali as Power of Time destroyed him, over and over again. Kali as Great Time danced on the breast of eternity. Around her neck she wore a garland of fifty human heads, representing the power of knowledge and wisdom, which swayed in rhythm as she danced. In her many manifestations, under many different names, I knew she held the key to enlightenment which had been lost for so long.

Kali explained to me:

“We cannot attain liberation as long as we remain in relative time and space, our planet, our universe with its billions of stars and galaxies. This is the illusion of existence, *the illusion of separateness* – which divorces us from the cosmic unity, the harmonisation of all differences and paradoxes...”

The cosmic vision was over. Filled with that great sense of power, I spiralled back to earth – too quickly. I awoke with concussion and a bump on my head. I was only human again.

I seemed to be in the primeval jungle. Lianas spiralled their way up into the canopy, the sound of strange birds high above echoed in my mind as I rose to explore. Huge blossoms of purple and orange decorated the undergrowth - there was colour everywhere and the smell of honey.

All my senses were intensely alive, but more than this; there was an understanding in me, a clarity of where I'd been and what I'd done. From disparate bursts of activity and experience, I had achieved some kind of continuity of purpose. I reached out mentally to grasp what it was that I'd been looking for.

But suddenly I was aware of that same sensation of being watched – from close at hand. Someone else was there, among the thick tree trunks, laughing at me (or so I thought). This time I was ready. I spun around and confronted her.

"You!" I yelled, recognising her for the first time. "What are *you* doing here?"

"You mustn't post-judge," said my mother sternly. "I am Lilith, the goddess of night. This is where you were born."

Some more pieces fell into place as I gazed down at her. For in her face I saw Artemis – Morgana - Sandra. How could I have been so blind?

"Let's go," said Lilith and I obeyed her automatically as I always had. She led me through the garden, sharing its beauty. The animals came up to us and nuzzled my hand. Fruit grew everywhere, just within reach. It was a childlike fantasy and very seductive.

"I've always wanted to show you this," said Lilith, as she strolled beside me. "I didn't expect you to get here so quickly."

"But you've been following me," I accused her, shaking off the enchantment and working up my resentment. "You were with me – I know it – why didn't you say anything?"

"Yes, I've been watching," she replied in her hard voice, "but I haven't been physically with you until now. I wanted you to be independent. It must have been the other one..."

"Then who?" I demanded.

Another woman stepped out from between the trees at the side of the path.

"It was I," she said, 'I am Eve."

I recoiled in surprise. They were identical.

"I should have known," sneered Lilith, "that you were trying to tamper with events..."

"And why shouldn't I?" asked Eve sweetly. "After all, we both have a vested interest."

"I don't understand," I said shortly. "Can you please explain what's going on?" For this time I felt I could speed up the process of learning – there was an urgency about me, there were other things I had to do.

"We're twins," said Lilith, fiercely eyeing the other, "unfortunately." Eve glared back.

"Then which one is my mother?" I asked.

Lilith recovered a little of her poise. "We both are," she said haughtily.

I took a deep breath. "Look, I haven't got time for this," I said. "Don't you think you should just tell me the truth?"

Eve came forward and, in a conciliatory gesture, kissed me on the cheek. Her skin was soft and, like her sister, she had the glow of eternal youth. Lilith stood aside.

"It's a long story," they began together.

"Just edited highlights, then," I suggested, "because time is getting short."

"Perhaps it's best if you come on our journey with us. It may feel strange as you're not in the story yet – not until the end, anyway."

"Is it going to be any stranger than what I've already experienced?" I demanded ironically.

"Possibly not," replied Eve simply.

"Let's walk through here," said Lilith, catching my impatience, "where it all began."

As we reached the top of the hill, I could see the sea in the distance, beyond the blue mountains. And the story opened up in front of me...

The twins were relaxing by the side of the stream, enjoying the sunshine. Lilith was plucking on a lyre while Eve wove daisy chains. The harp twanged and Lilith stopped abruptly.

"I'll never get it right!" she wailed.

"You're going to get a row," teased Eve in a sing-song voice. "You haven't been practising enough!"

"Oh shut up!" responded Lilith, swatting her with the back of her hand.

Eve began to chortle and poked her sister in the chest. Lilith poked her in turn and, despite herself, began to giggle too. As their hilarity grew infectious, they embraced each other for support and tumbled backwards onto the grass, overcome with merriment.

"Ooh, it hurts!" protested Lilith, holding her side. Eve continued to guffaw helplessly. Finally they lay, looking up at the clear sky, gasping and giggling and wiping their eyes.

Eve looked at Lilith. "I love you, sister," she said seriously. They beamed at each other and both picked up their work again.

Lilith suddenly raised her head and made an announcement: "She's coming already!" They both rose excitedly as a small dark woman materialised out of the ether.

Eve whispered to me: "This is Pandora, 'the bringer of all gifts', who used to teach us the power of naming. She created herself from the earth and brought with her the fruits and flowers, all the pleasures of the universe.'

"Hello, Pandora," said Lilith as the twins embraced her.

"What's happening?" asked the goddess.

"We're practising our skills," said Eve, giving a secret smile to Lilith. "What about you?"

"Oh, just working on some new ideas," said Pandora, airily.

"Look what I can do, gran," said Eve, eagerly. She cast up into the air the flowers she had been collecting and as they drifted back to earth, they turned to snow.

"Very nice, dear," said Pandora. "But what about your other powers? How is your prophecy coming along?"

Lilith squeezed her sister's hand as Eve's face fell.

"Let's practise our naming, shall we?" continued Pandora, settling down with them on the grass.

"Eve is Life," the twins began intoning together,

"Kali is Goddess,

"Lilith is the Serpent of Knowledge..."

"I've been doing some experiments," explained Pandora later, as they ate slices of pineapple together. She nodded towards a large box which had appeared in the grove and was decorated with metal hinges and locks.

"But I don't have time right now to finish them off. I'm going to leave that here for safe keeping and I'll work on it when I come back. You be careful to look after the box. And whatever you do, don't open it up. It could be dangerous." She wiped her hands. "Come and give me a hug both of you - I've got to be going."

The twins waved goodbye to their grandmother as she slowly faded into the air. They sat back, alternately looking at each other, then at the box. Then they looked away.

"We mustn't touch it," said Eve.

"No-one will know," said Lilith. "We'll leave it just as we found it."

"What if someone catches us?" asked Eve.

"We'll say we didn't know," replied Lilith.

She slid over to the box.

"It's not locked," she breathed.

"I suppose it won't hurt just to peep inside..." conceded Eve.

"Who's going to open it?"

"Let's do it together..."

Eve slid closer and they clasped hands. With the other hand, they reached out and grasped the lid.

It was jammed tight but slowly lifted up. Then all hell let loose.

That was the last time they held hands.

The twins opened the box and everything happened at once. Goodness and evil in all their different forms shot out past them, entering the world everywhere before their helpless gaze. They saw healing, peace, fidelity vying for existence with pestilence, war and betrayal as all the powers of the universe were set free with indiscriminate abandon.

"Stop it! stop it!" shrieked Lilith. Eve merely made wild inarticulate cries.

"Shut the box!" I called out desperately, trying to move. But I was transfixed. It wasn't my story.

Lilith struggled with the lid. But it was too late, by the time she had closed it, anarchy reigned. All the powers of the goddess raged and swirled above them in a vortex of flame.

And innocence was lost forever. Sex was let loose into the world in the shape of a man. He was all new, soft and slippery as if he had been kept fresh in some fluid or other, but almost immediately he began to dry off in the sun and become hard. He was beautiful to look at and the twins gazed at him in wonder.

"I feel as if I'm burning inside," said Eve, running her hands over her body in bewilderment.

"I need him inside me," moaned Lilith, turning a wild eye on Eve.

The sisters parted, their hackles rising. They both wanted him for their own. And they began to fight.

"It was my idea," hissed Lilith as she flung a flash of lightning. "He's mine."

"Don't even think it," Eve replied, sending forth a swarm of wasps.

"Don't think you can beat me!" roared Lilith, spinning a mini-tornado.

"You've got *no* chance!" yelled Eve, creating a small earthquake.

Pandora rematerialised, red-faced and distraught.

"What have you done?" she yelled. "What's going on?"

The twins smirked not so secretly at each other.

"It was Eve's fault!" replied Lilith, trying to get the upper hand. "She opened the box! She wanted to get her share..."

But Eve took advantage of the slight distraction. She ran over, grabbed the man where he stood admiring himself and dragged him off into the ether. I could see her holding him tight and nuzzling his naked shoulder as they disappeared.

“Now look what you did!” snapped Lilith, stamping her foot.

“Pay your elders some respect!” replied Pandora automatically.

Lilith wound her arms round her grandmother’s neck. “Sorry, gran. Create another one for me, *please*,” she begged.

“I can’t,” said Pandora. “This one was a failed experiment. It should have been destroyed, that’s why it was here in the box. I’ve been so irresponsible,” she fretted. “I shouldn’t have left it. I thought I could rely on you both. But you weren’t mature enough. You’ve lost everything...”

“It’s not fair,” wailed Lilith. “I want to play with it, too!”

“I don’t know what’s got into you both,” said Pandora, with a worried frown. “You’re usually so sensible. It was obviously the right decision to ditch the experiment... But it’s too late for all that. You’ve let loose the snake in the garden. There’s going to be big trouble now.”

The story continued to unfold...

As Eve lay sleeping heavily, satiated with sex, she lost her hold on the man. Lilith, stealthily making her way through the garden, came upon them, and in her jubilation, almost crowed out loud.

“Come with me,” she whispered fiercely, gripping him by the upper arm. He was fickle and went easily. So Lilith managed to steal him away for a while. She kept him hidden in an old boat-house at the far end of the lake, enjoying endless games with him. Her whole body began to glow from the excitement and pleasure.

But, since they had always shared everything, the sisters well knew each other’s favourite haunts. Eve found them eventually, grinning, cross-legged and naked, eating fish grilled over a small fire, the air in the hut redolent with sex.

“Don’t think you can keep him!” she snarled, scattering the fire with a careless gesture and causing sparks to fly up into the rafters. She grabbed hold of the man and dematerialised with him.

“Nooooo!” cried Lilith in anguish, once more bereft.

The sisters fought over him constantly, like cats in the night, catching each other with their claws and yowling in pain. But soon a change came over them - as they all became pregnant.

“This isn’t the way we should carry out the task of creation,” grumbled Pandora, strangely powerless. “We can engender our own children, fully grown and ready to start work.”

“But this is wonderful,” breathed Lilith, spreading her hands over her belly. Eve agreed.

And so a truce was called. Beneath the palm trees the three of them would sit with their feet raised and listen to the heartbeat of their unborn babies.

“Did you feel it move?” he asked eagerly, putting their hands on his belly.

“What will it be?” asked Lilith, her powers of prediction waning.

“Two girls, of course!” replied Eve, in surprise that anything else could be imagined.

But the goddesses both bore sons. They went into labour at the same time and their groans and yells at the unprecedented, unexpected pain filled the garden with alarm – the birds scattered and the flowers closed their petals.

“Why does it hurt so?” complained Lilith weakly as she lay back after one great spasm.

“Don’t forget – you let pain as well as pleasure out of the box,” said Pandora, wiping her brow.

Eve’s child, Cain, was the firstborn.

“Look how beautiful he is,” she said smugly to her sister. “He shall inherit the earth.”

Lilith gave birth to Abel.

“My son’s stronger than yours,” scoffed Lilith. ‘When he’s ready, he’ll take what’s due to him.’”

When the man went into labour, the noise was even louder. The sky turned dark, the animals fled; to be frank, I’ve never heard such puling.

“You’ve got to really push now,” said Pandora, beginning to lose patience. “Push harder!”

In the end, he bore the heavenly twins, Artemis and Apollo.

“Another boy!” moaned Pandora as Apollo slithered out into her waiting hands.

The man turned over exhausted and fell asleep.

Pandora lined the babies up along the grassy bank and looked gloomily at them.

“Now what are we going to do?” she demanded. “We’ve got a real mess to clean up! There’s anarchy in the universe and, on top of that, you’ve created a separated male identity – four of them to be precise.”

Lilith and Eve sat with her.

“What are we going to do with that man?” asked Pandora.

The twins looked at each other. Their passion was now slated and they had new priorities as parents.

“I can take him away for good,” Pandora offered.

“No,” protested the twins together. “We still like our little bit of snake...”

“But how will this male race survive?” persisted Pandora. “It can’t be a mere plaything.”

“Let them take knowledge,” said Eve. “For we’ve got to keep the power to bear children. They can’t have that. They’re not strong enough.”

“But we can’t deprive our daughters of all knowledge,” protested Lilith.

"We'll have the power of childbirth and fertility and all the symbols that go with that," returned Eve. "The silvery moon, all phases of the moon, let there be a sign once every lunar cycle that all women have the power over life and death..."

"That will be blood, then," said Lilith, "the colour red, the lotus flower... And the seed, the central dot, the state to which all returns, will be the symbol of the womb..."

"What about the yoni?" Eve asked.

"That form can be everywhere in nature," answered Lilith quickly, "like a simple smooth oval stone - or the tongue - or the third eye..."

"And when women glimpse the truth through these symbols, we'll call it *intuition* not knowledge, so that men won't be afraid and try to destroy it," said Pandora ironically.

"Good idea!"

"And what about the rest of the chaos you've caused?" demanded Pandora.

The twins were on a roll. "It's easy," said Lilith. "We'll channel the forces either through man or through woman, depending on who we decide to give what. Then the world will be calm and tidy again."

They turned to the heavenly twins and divided up the qualities they had released, bequeathing them in turn to the son and the daughter.

"Don't!" I called out, seeing the danger. They paid no attention to me - I had no power then to influence what was happening.

They made Apollo the patron deity of states and colonies, the man-made world, while Artemis became the protector of family, nature and animals. Working together, they drew disease out of the vortex and gave it to Apollo. For Artemis, they harnessed prophecy.

"Mm, we'll have to give Artemis physical courage so she can withstand the perfidy of men," said Eve. Out of thin air Pandora fashioned a bow and arrow, a spear and a shield. (She made them in a hurry and I knew they wouldn't last).

The man began to wake. "Wassup?" he mumbled blearily.

"Just leave this to us, dear," said Pandora.

"It's not fair," grumbled the man, as he saw what they were doing. "Artemis is too strong - Apollo can't compete with her."

"Then let's give Apollo the arts," sighed Lilith, relinquishing her lyre.

And so I witnessed the separation of the male and female principles that afterwards caused conflict between men and women. At last, when the birthright was fully divided, the heavenly twins stood side by side in their glory, admiring each other and themselves.

"Fly away now," said Pandora, giving them each a little pat.

Eve and Lilith cooed around them in pride, before letting them go.

As they rose in the air, the vortex dissipated, the sky cleared and the sun shone again.

"Now, Adam," said Pandora, turning to the man, who stood scowling – for he had taken on a name and face in the process. "It's time for you to leave the garden, go out into the world and take your sons with you."

"But what about us?" demanded Lilith. "Can't we go too?"

"Only if you do what you're told," Adam replied, "I'm more powerful than you are now."

Lilith gasped. "Forget it!" she rejoined.

"That's your choice," shrugged Eve. "I'm leaving."

"You can't be serious!" yelled Lilith. "What will I do without you? We've always been together."

"Not any more," said her sister, taking Adam's hand.

"You're leaving me for him!" shouted Lilith in astonishment. "Take care then!" she snarled. "My son will prove stronger than yours in the end."

"Witch!" shrieked Eve.

"Tramp!" screamed Lilith.

Separation was complete.

"Come on, Eve," said Adam, pulling her away. "You'll have to carry the babies. It's not my job."

"And there you are," murmured Pandora, watching them go in regret. "The man will take with him the knowledge that he's been the cause of conflict entering the world. But he'll continue to deny it."

"No, I won't," he said.

Lilith turned to me.

"So, as you already know, man went out into the world and the race multiplied, they divided up the land, built cities and established kingdoms, then fought wars over them. They tricked, cheated and killed each other, sons, fathers and brothers, raped each other's daughters, slept with their daughters-in-law and their handmaidens, got drunk, beat up their wives. They invented hierarchies of power, enslaved each other and turned women into prostitutes. They invented their own gods, the false ones, the gods of revenge and punishment, the sponsors of war."

"They said it was all my fault!" said Eve bitterly. "They said *I* was responsible for the fall of man!"

"Is this what it's all about, then?" I demanded as the truth dawned on me. "That women like sex and want to have babies? For this we have to pretend that we're powerless? Is that what you did to us?"

"They *lied* about me! They said I'd brought evil into the world!" Eve wailed.

"But you did!" I expostulated.

"But *she* did, too!" protested Eve. "You were there, too, Lilith. You never took responsibility..."

"You think I've had it easy?" her sister broke in, "living out in the cold? You almost managed to erase me."

"They tried to erase *me!*" cried Eve. "They created the virgin birth. So sex, woman, flesh, womb, newborn child (child born of passion) - all these were endowed by men with the taint of *their own* sin. Only the power of chastity (they define that as *no sex for women*) can redeem **mankind**."

"And what about *me?*" clamoured Lilith. "You denied me. I still had *my* power but you abandoned yours, you foreswore all our symbols, you let men turn them into bad magic..."

"It wasn't my fault!" cried Eve again. "He created all kinds of illusions to imprison the truth – he abused the power of naming that we'd given him, so that the meaning of everything we'd originally named was turned inside out. *Woman* became a devious thing, *love* became a trap and *Nature* was wild, needing to be tamed."

"Yes," said Lilith with bitter irony, "he developed misnaming into such a skillful art that women in the end simply accepted that black was white, that night was day, that pain was pleasure, that cruelty was courage - despite all the evidence to the contrary..."

"But *you helped* to give away our birthright..." protested Eve.

Lilith broke in quickly. "... and *you* never told our daughters the real facts of life! At least I tried."

"It just didn't work out as we'd planned," muttered Eve. "We just seemed to lose control."

"You let it go, you wimp," taunted Lilith

Finally I'd heard enough.

"Can't you simply agree?" I said in exasperation, " that you made a terrible mistake? I don't think it's that easy to divide good and evil. The division is all on the surface and that's what causes the problems, that's where the conflict comes from, because we still keep the two together inside, but we refuse to recognise them both, we're constantly hiding from ourselves. All you've achieved is to divide up the blame..."

"And it's the same with you, mother," I continued, inspired. "You don't have to live as the winged demon of the night in order to be free or to live in subordination in order to be good. That's just a figment of your own imagination, the corollary of your own flawed logic. You're not separate entities, you're working from a false premise there, you're really the same person."

And it was true. As soon as I'd finished speaking, I found myself with a single companion at my side.

"Oh, that's better," said Lilith /Eve, giving herself a little shake as we rode on.

Experimentally, I turned around to look behind me. Then turned back, smiling.

"The watcher's gone," I said with grim satisfaction. "I should have known. It was never really you I was afraid of disappointing after all. The watcher was, of course, always inside myself."

We continued to ride side by side in comfortable silence.

"So what's next?" I asked. "Things have fallen apart. Is it really too late to do anything?"

“There *is* a final solution,’ said Lilith / Eve, looking at me proudly.

We had come full circle. We arrived back at the grove where we had started the journey. The box lay on its side, neglected, covered in lichen. But from inside came a muted cry. We dismounted and left the horses to munch on the sweet grass.

Lilith/Eve bent down. The lock was rusted but still held fast as she wrestled with it.

“Oh no!” she said in despair. “I forgot! Pandora locked it up after all that fuss.”

“Well, what now?” I asked impatiently.

“Can’t you help?” she asked, looking up. “Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, feeling in my pockets. For I realised that I could - Kali had given me the key.

Lilith held her breath. Eve crossed her fingers. They were both scared and excited. They struggled with the lock and peeked cautiously inside.

“Ooooh!” Lilith breathed.

She put her hands down and drew out the last of Pandora’s gifts.

“Let’s share and nurture this one,” said Eve softly. “And when she’s grown, we’ll send her out into the world to recover our birthright.”

It was a skinny scrawny baby with splayed hands like a frog’s and yelling its head off. They laid her gently on her back in the warmth of the sun. She was beautiful. She was me. She was Hope.

My mother looked up to me and, with surprise, I noted that she had aged – a lot. Her face was lined and her spine was bent. She said, simply, “It’s your turn now. You can reclaim our destiny. Good luck.”

And so, having assisted at my own rebirth in this weird manner, *my* story began again. I knew it was time for me to head for home.

Suddenly I was back where I belong - this time I recognised where I was. Seated at the control panel, I could see the vastness of space before me in the view-screen. The coordinates were set and we were travelling at warp speed. Like Kali, I could dance on the edge of time.

Existing now in a state of knowledge, I looked about me, wondering: have things changed? Or is it only me?

"We're approaching the target, Ambassador," murmured the young navigator at my side with gentle respect.

"Have I been asleep?" I asked.

"Well, you just nodded off for a short spell," he replied with a grin.

"Well, I'm fine now," I laugh. "No need to worry."

"The Captain's in her ready room now, if you'd like to join her."

Captain Drew Anders was at her communication console but she rose eagerly to greet me as I entered.

"Welcome to SS Santa Maria, Ambassador Reniti," she said graciously. "I hope everything's in order."

"Yes, we're on schedule," I replied, sitting opposite her.

"I'm eager to hear your briefing," she said as she poured me a cup of black coffee.

I experienced a new sensation – I saw that I had moved into a different role. Now I was the mentor, not the apprentice. Now I was the one to tell the story.

"Here's the problem," I begin. "As you know, we're approaching Civilia, the artificial half-world which serves as the administrative centre for the fourth quadrant."

"Yes," she chips in. "I've heard a lot about it but this is my first visit."

"Well, it was dreamed up by a priest and made into reality by a president: the idea of a new civilisation, constructed in the centre of the galaxy, to bring prosperity and peace to the worlds around it. It was a symbol of their determination and ability to become a great economic power - built in three years by poor peasants indentured from Draco working around the clock. At the beginning it was hailed as a miracle of planning – divided into sectors: administrative, commercial, residential, cultural, religious... Each division has an artificial name – Cristolandia, Candangolandia, Divinopolis, Marianopolis... Each planet has representation there in the federal government and the ministries provide direction for development on the home worlds. But inequality was built into Civilia from the outset – the wealthy administrators live in expensive high-rise apartment blocks and those who service them live far outside the centre in sprawling satellite slums."

Drew pursed her lips together. “Yes, I’ve heard something along those lines. Is that why you call it a half-world?” she asked, inviting me to continue.

“But wait,” I said, eagerly, “the problem goes way beyond that. Nobody really lives on Civilia at all, they only work there. At weekends the place is practically closed and everyone travels back to their own planets. But those are artificial too – not even half-worlds, since the binary principle has become so entrenched.” In describing how the problem had multiplied, the situation became clearer to me. Of course things hadn’t changed! They had just got worse! “Women have withdrawn to a separate world, where they are free to develop in their own way. And men live on Andros where they spend their time on so-called manly pursuits. Obeying similar principles, the poor crowd together on one world while the rich have settled on their own planet, where they can feel safe from vandalism and theft and violence. And to avoid other causes of conflict, white lives apart from black, language groups live separately and each religious group has its own world.”

“You don’t see this as a peaceful solution?” asked Drew.

“No, I don’t! Ultimately, it diminishes people’s power. And now we’re facing a major crisis as a group of warlords is banding together. They say they want to form their own colony and they’ve engineered representation in Congress. But the worry is that it’s more than that – that this is the first step in a move to take over the entire quadrant. The women are speaking out against it. Look, here’s a clip from the latest parliamentary debate...”

I held out my palm-top computer. On the screen we saw a plump middle-aged woman rise to her feet. She was dressed in the long, hooded robe of the Cassiopean women, who cover themselves in self-protection against their men.

“This is not democracy,” she was saying with angry authority. “This is a rubber stamp. Everything here has already been decided by those with power. These warlords are responsible for raping and killing our women. Yet they sit here side by side with us in the Council chamber.”

“That’s Faiza Jabal, the leader of their delegation,” I explained. “Ah, now here’s Rika, from Ophiuchus...”

“What a contrast!” exclaimed Drew involuntarily. “You’d hardly believe they belonged to the same race.”

Rika was dressed in a short tight dress of some transparent lacy material, you know the sort of thing they wear, showing the bikini underneath. Her buttocks and breasts had obviously been artificially enhanced while her torso and limbs were those of a pre-pubescent girl. She tottered up to the microphone on very high heels and spoke in a little-girl voice. But even she was protesting about inequity and injustice.

“Many other groups have followed the women’s lead,” I told Drew, turning down the volume. “We’re heading for a revolution, an all-out war.”

“And what’s the position of the Galactic Alliance on this?” she asked.

“Well, that’s another problem,” I continued. “This move to integrate the warlords appears to have been supported by the Allied special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi – working in collaboration with the ambassador from the Federal States. It’s against the rules that anyone involved in killing innocent people can be a delegate. Yet all thirty-two warlords now have a seat. And you see all those armed men in the aisles,” I gestured towards the small screen, “They’re security guards belonging to the warlords. Brahimi gave them permission to attend without the knowledge of the Allied monitors.”

“But what can be the reason for Allied intervention?” the captain wondered, frowning.

“The official argument is that it will be an achievement to integrate the warlords into policy-making rather than have them as a terrorist force outside the law.”

“That’s sounds reasonable,” said Drew.

“Well,” I responded, “a lot of observers have been very disappointed by the part the Alliance has played so far – they say it’s more than expediency, that the Allies have an ulterior motive, they want control of the natural resources in the quadrant... That’s why I’m here as an independent observer for the next round of talks.”

Drew pursed her lips again but kept silent.

As we approached Civilia, I pointed out the design of the place to the captain. “Look you can see it’s in the shape of a plane – or a bow and arrow. In the fuselage are all the government buildings and monuments. The plaza of three powers – the Palace of Planning, the Palace of Congress and the Palace of Justice - is the cockpit. Out on the wings are block after numbered block of apartment buildings (quadras or superquadras). The plane faces the great artificial lake – the Lake of Paranoia...”

“You’re joking!” laughed Drew.

“I couldn’t make it up,” I assured her, bringing up the reference files for the lonely planet. “It’s a world conceived and constructed by men. Look here, someone called it ‘a museum of architectural ideas’ while the designer himself explained: *‘I sought the sensual line, the curve in the hills, in the body of a loved one, in the clouds and in the ocean waves...’*”

“Well,” said Drew judiciously, “it looks like a mess to me!”

“You have no soul!” I murmured. She laughed again before turning to business.

“Anyway, we’d better contact the Civilian Congress Leader, let them know that you’re arriving.”

But when Dr Amin appeared on the communication screen, he seemed flustered and uncomfortable.

“We weren’t expecting the Ambassador until next week,” he said, apologetically. “Our other allies, I mean, advisors... are due to arrive at the weekend. And there are still some... arrangements to be made. It wouldn’t be ... appropriate ... for her to join us now. The talks have been postponed until Tuesday.”

"That's perfectly in order, Dr Amin," I responded smoothly. "As long as the Santa Maria has no pressing business elsewhere..."

"None at all," Drew cut in.

"... I can meditate for a few days in preparation."

"Many thanks for your... cooperation, Ambassador Reniti," the Council leader said awkwardly. "I'll be in touch again on Monday."

He broke off transmission and we looked at each other.

"That's all rather curious," remarked Drew thoughtfully.

"Yes, isn't it?" I replied and paused for a moment, developing a plan. "I think I'd like to go down to the surface," I continued. "Take a look around."

Drew frowned at me. "It's not protocol," she demurred.

"Neither is corruption and conspiracy," I pointed out reasonably.

"It's not advisable either," she returned swiftly. "If something were to happen to you..."

"Then I'll go incognita," I replied easily. "And you can send a crewmember with me."

"What kind of a disguise would you use?" she demanded.

"I'll just go as myself. Without a badge of office any middle-aged woman is practically invisible in most situations!"

Her lips twitched into a reluctant grin. "Then I'll go with you. The rest of my crew are too young and good-looking to pass unnoticed."

"It's not protocol," I objected quickly in turn, not wanting to be hampered by her.

"Don't carp," she said briskly. "You've got what you wanted."

She opened her communication channel: "Lieutenant Nureiba, please prepare two civilian identities for the Ambassador and myself. We're going down to reconnoître."

She turned towards the door, ushering me out, heading for the bridge. "I need to brief my second-in-command. We'll meet in Shuttle Bay One in an hour's time."

Commander Chiannou accompanied Drew to the shuttle bay.

"As your second-in-command I have to advise against this trip, Captain." He spoke stiffly but his eyes were alive with curiosity.

"Noted, Commander," she replied laconically.

As we settled ourselves into the flight seats, Drew looked across at me.

"So what's our reason for visiting when we ask for permission to land?"

"We're going shopping, of course!" I replied.

"Of course!" she echoed, beginning to laugh in surprise.

"And you certainly need to," I added. "Where on earth did you get that drab frock from?"

"I...!"

Drew laughed some more and then wiped her eyes.

"I must confess, you're a most refreshing personality," she finished with as the shuttle-bay doors opened and she manoeuvred the craft out into space.

2

We swooped down in one swift smooth movement to the planet. Hailed by Civilia space-dock control, Drew identified us:

"Mrs" (she gritted her teeth) "Viti Levu and Mrs" (she grinned meanly at me) "Ja Luit from the starship Santa Maria."

"Purpose of visit?"

"Tourism."

"Permission to land at docking bay 232, wing B. Your stay is restricted to 48 hours only."

Soon we were stepping out into Civilia itself.

"So what's the plan?" Drew asked me, ready for action.

"You're very impulsive," I observed. "First let's check into a lodge and then just take a look round."

We took the moving walkway to Space Lodge 15 (Quadrant SCH Number 4 Block B) and were allocated to adjoining rooms.

"Hmm the accommodation seems to have everything you might possibly need," murmured Drew, looking round. "Maybe this was a good idea after all!"

I brought up a map of the city on the complimentary console screen. For once, I knew exactly what I was doing. It was a great feeling.

"OK, let's go shopping," I suggested. "Just follow my lead."

"It's not a rôle I'm familiar with," she pointed out a little waspishly.

"You might find it's fun for a change," I grinned.

"Anything's possible, I suppose," she smiled reluctantly.

We stepped off the moving staircase into an enormous shopping mall and wandered into an expensive boutique.

"Madame is just visiting Civilia?" the assistant asked politely. I saw from her identity badge she was called Syglea.

"We're travelling on an Allied ship," I replied chattily. "We're only here for a few days. What do you suggest we do to entertain ourselves?"

"From the Alliance, eh?" came the reply. "You'll be attending the big event this evening, then?"

"Oh we hadn't heard about that," Drew chipped in with a hint of interest.

"I'm sure all Alliance members are invited," shrugged Syglea. Her eyes began to gleam. "You might be needing new frocks for that, perhaps?"

We allowed ourselves to be persuaded and spent some time in and out of the fitting room.

"That's really becoming," I said to Drew as she appeared in a long flowing wine-coloured gown.

She turned this way and that in front of the mirror, frowning and smiling at the same time.

"I'm not used to being out of unif..." she broke off suddenly and then picked up, "things to wear."

"Well, why not take this and the green one," I suggested. "I've fallen in love with the cream silk trouser suit."

As the assistant wrapped up our purchases, I said casually, "I've heard you can get some interesting ethnic clothes and jewelry here in Civilia at very good prices"

She pursed her lips. "Well, you'll have to go downtown for that kind of thing. But it's safe enough if you take a shuttle taxi and ask the driver to wait for you."

Drew raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

"We can get a taxi here in the mall?" I asked absently as I passed over my platinum credit card.

The assistant paused. "I have a cousin who's a taxi-driver," she says. "If you like, I can call him. It won't take long. I wouldn't like to think of you two ladies unprotected."

I looked over at Drew. "Well," I said languidly. "It may be interesting. What do you think?"

She acquiesced.

"Thank you, that would be very helpful," I said, turning back to Syglea. "We'll continue to browse. There's no rush."

"What about this gold chain to go with the suit?" asked Drew as we moved away from the counter.

"You have a very unusual method," she murmured while the assistant was busy on the intercom.

"Oh I just make it up as I go along," I replied airily. "I think I prefer the ear-rings." Drew snorted.

"This is my cousin Marcos," the assistant introduced us to a young man who appeared at the open door. "Marcos, why not take them to Matembe's shop in Quadrant BFS Block H42. She always has new things in. Make sure you bring them back safely, mind."

We thanked Syglea and climbed into the shuttle taxi.

As we traveled at speed down Westway we began to see how the environment changed. The tall elegant glass and steel buildings gave way to huge ugly squat concrete blocks. Futuristic murals give way to debris and graffiti.

Marcos stopped at the foot of one of these blocks. “You’ll need to take the elevator to the fifth floor,” he said. “I can’t leave the taxi – it might get stolen – but I’ll wait here for you. Here’s my number if you need to call for any reason.”

We found ourselves in a shopping mall constructed on the same design as the one we had just left. But this had broken window-panes, boarded-up shop fronts and a general air of decay and neglect. We found the elevator after several wrong turnings and rode up to the fifth floor. And got lost again. “What number did you say?” asked Drew in frustration as we retraced our steps to the elevator. “Perhaps it’s on the other side.”

People passed by quickly, eyes down, intent on their own business.

Eventually we located the shop – it was marked only by the number on the grey door. Yet inside it was cheerful, with Cassiopean music playing, bright with lamps and fragrant with the smell of incense.

“Welcome,” said a large black woman with a wide smile. “I’m Matembe. Was there anything specific you were looking for?”

“We were looking for jewelry,” I said, “but there are so many lovely things here. Can we just browse a little? Drew, just look at this material!”

“Have you had the shop long?” I asked the shopkeeper as we inspected the rolls of brightly dyed cotton.

“Oh for many years,” replied Matembe. “I came here when the city was new. Things’ve changed so much since then. You could walk out on the streets, even at night, there was no violence, no crime. Now we’ve got the youth gangs and the special police...”

“There was some news item about the warlords getting seats in Congress...” I murmured absently.

“Hah!... And the Alliance is supporting them. I’m sorry, I don’t wish to offend you ladies, but it’s the truth... the Alliance is meddling too much in our affairs, people are unhappy about it.”

“I’m quite surprised to hear that,” I replied, moving on to look at the scarves. “But one wonders what can possibly be their motive?”

“The mineral resources in the quadrant...” said Faiza immediately.

“... and control over the government,” added a young woman popping up from behind the counter. Matembe tutted at her. “My daughter gets very agitated about politics,” she explained apologetically.

“Well, I’d like to buy a couple of scarves and I’ll take that swatch of material as well,” Drew said, pointing to the blue and silver. “What about you er... Mrs Luit?”

“Mm, I think I’ll have one of those Cassiopeian robes,” I said, “they’re so... understated.”

As Drew transacted our purchases, my eye caught sight of a small poster advertising a cultural festival on Libra 3.

“You’re open at weekends too?” I asked as we prepared to leave.

Matembe looked across at her daughter.

“Weekends are difficult,” she replied slowly. “Usually people travel back home.”

“And your home is Libra 3?” I asked politely, opening the door.

“It is. If you had time to visit, I’m sure you’d find it interesting.”

“Thank you very much,” Drew smiled. “We’ll bear it in mind.”

Back in the gloomy corridor, we made our way quickly to the elevator.

“I begin to see the method in your method,” said Drew quietly, throwing me a glance. “But where’s the elevator?” she snapped impatiently. “I’m ready to get out of this place, it gives me the creeps!”

Outside Marcos was waiting by the shuttle taxi, chatting to a policeman. They both jumped to attention as we appeared and Marcos opened the door for us.

“Shall we go back to the Travel Lodge?” I said as we got in.

“Yes, please!” replied Drew. “I need a bath!”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” asked Marcos.

“A few interesting things,” I smiled. “Were you having some problem with the police?”

“No, no. He’s a cousin of mine,” replied Marcos. “There’s some trouble brewing, to do with the talks ... he was warning me to keep a watch out. You ladies had better be careful...”

“Oh, we’re only here for a day or so. We’ll be back on our ship tomorrow.”

“That’s the Allied ship?” asked Marcos curiously. “I heard there was an ambassador aboard – what good that will do, I’m not really sure...”

“You’re well informed,” murmured Drew. “The Civilia news service seems to be very comprehensive...”

“I don’t think I heard it on the news,” he replied easily. “It was a...”

“Cousin of yours?” supplied Drew with a smile. “You’re very well related too!”

“I always find taxi-drivers an excellent source of information,” I remarked casually. “All that traveling from place to place seems to give you a freedom of spirit...”

We arrived back at our overnight accommodation.

“So, if we’re going to gate-crash the party,” I said, “let’s get ready. We have new clothes to try out!”

“I’ve got to admit,” murmured Drew, “that I didn’t believe we would actually go shopping!”

“But it was fun, wasn’t it?” I replied.

"That's as maybe," she retorted, whisking herself into her room. "I'll see you in half an hour"

Before we left, Drew put through a call to the spaceship. Chiannou appeared on screen.

"Just reporting in, ... *dear*," said Drew through clenched teeth. "We're having a lovely time! How are things there?"

"Everything is fine. Nothing to report... *my angel!*" said Chiannou, obviously enjoying himself.

"We're about to go off to the Alliance party," said Drew, choking back a reprimand.

Chiannou's eyebrows rose speakingly. "So I see," came his reply. "May I say that you're looking very elegant ... *darling?*"

She flushed, smiled despite herself and said briskly, "I'll be in touch tomorrow morning. Over and out."

"Enjoy yourself... *sweetheart!*" was his last remark.

"I'm not sure I'll ever forgive you for this," said Drew darkly to me as we went out.

Marcos ferried us to the Diplomatic Sector. By the time we arrived, the venue was already busy with guests. We were ready to show our identity cards but were waved through without question.

"I never realised how easy it was to get about unofficially," whispered Drew.

"We're two wealthy widows looking for a little excitement," I explained. "Completely above suspicion!"

I hailed a passing waiter and took two glasses of Terran champagne from the enormous tray he was carrying.

"So," I said, sipping at my drink and looking idly around the room, "anyone you recognise?"

"Mm, for a start there's the Congress Leader Dr Amin with the Allied envoy Lakhdar over by the buffet."

"And there's Ambassador Nilandu from the Federal States in front of the potted ferns," I added. "I think he's talking to the warlords' representative from Orion 4."

Drew continued to look about her. At one point she started in surprise but recovered quickly. "I'm sure that's Admiral Bikow," she murmured, slightly nodding towards my left. "But what the *hell* is *he* doing here?"

I followed the direction of her gaze and then looked away again.

"And what on earth is a starship admiral doing hobnobbing with one of the Herculean warlords?" I muttered.

"In fact, if you think about it, there's a very strange mix of people at this do," observed Drew worriedly. "And why on earth didn't the Santa Maria get an invite?"

"Can you see a couple of lonely-looking middle-ranking officials anywhere?" I asked.

She shot me a glance. "Another part of your method?" she asked with a sudden grin.

"You're learning, girl," I replied, sweetly approving.

"Then let's move over to the bar," she suggested. "We may have some luck there. However you'll have to give me a few pointers - I'm not in the habit of picking up strange men!"

"There's nothing to it," I assured her. "You just smile a lot and hang on their every word."

"Mm, that's still not going to be easy," she observed.

Two Allied officers leaning against the counter sipping Astraean rum seemed to be happy enough to entertain us and ply us with drinks. One of them, Otto, was quietly informative as he shared a dish of civilian appetisers with me.

"This is the calm before the storm," he said. "Make sure you have firm travel plans."

Drew was evincing great interest in the other's technological knowledge.

"I've never understood the difference between laser and nuclear weapons," she simpered, fluttering her eyelashes. "But I'm sure *you* could explain it to me!" What an actress she was turning out to be!

Suddenly, we were all startled by a loud noise at the other end of the hall. We looked at each other. An explosion? A gunshot?

Their communication badges crackled into life and our companions received abrupt orders to attend.

"Sorry," said Otto with a grimace, "duty calls." Regretfully he kissed my hand and then looked up hopefully. "I'm not sure how long this will take. Maybe I could call round later. Where did you say you were staying?"

"I'm not sure that would be a good idea," I smiled gently. "But I hope we meet again."

They moved off quickly through the crowd and, although we strained our necks to see what was happening, the commotion seemed to have been quickly contained.

Drew looked around the vast hall with its bright lights, heavy drapes and the fountains playing coloured water. She shuddered suddenly and frowned.

"I'm not known to be a fanciful person," she began, carefully inspecting her manicure, "but I feel a very powerful sense of menace in this place. It's not like the downtown shopping mall – there was the threat of physical danger there - *that's* something I know how to deal with. But here, there's the threat of evil, it has no face, no name, no reason... I feel very strongly that something terrible is brewing."

She shook herself and laughs shortly.

"That was completely unlike me!"

"No, but you're right," I replied quickly, touching her arm. "I've had the same feeling but I hadn't put it into words."

A group of guests came up to the bar, discussing the incident.

"Some failure with the generator," said one. "That's what the steward told me. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm not sure there's much more that we can do here, in our present personae," I murmured after a pause.

"No," agreed Drew, "we should get back to the ship and start to check out some of these dignitaries..."

"Tomorrow," I said, putting out a restraining hand. "Remember, we're here to enjoy ourselves. Let's take our time."

Marcos was waiting for us outside.

"You're very attentive," observed Drew, as we got into the taxi.

"It's my pleasure," was the reply.

"We'll be returning to our ship tomorrow," I remarked conversationally. "There's not much more to do here."

"If you're interested in visiting Libra 3, my cousin's sent you details of the weekly shuttle. That's the recommended route," Marcos said, passing over his palm-book.

I quickly copied the coordinates into my own palm-book.

"And another trip which is *highly recommended*," he continued with emphasis, "is a sight-seeing flight around the Moon of Planetina. You really get a good view of the... situation from there."

"Well, I suppose we might have time to do that," I said doubtfully, looking across to see Drew's reaction.

"Here's the lodge." I handed over my credit card. "Please add on 15% for yourself, you've been very helpful."

Marcos handed back his palm-book along with the card. "Why not keep that?" he said casually.

"It's just a cheap tourist guide but it may come in useful."

We said goodnight to Marcos and took the moving stairway to our floor. Drew's eyes were darting here and there and I could feel her trembling with excitement.

"Let's have a nightcap on the balcony," I suggested, opening my room with the key card.

I checked the mini-bar and came up with several miniature bottles of Ophiuchan whiskey, a tray of ice and two frosted glasses. "I love the old-fashioned ways," I remarked.

Meanwhile Drew flicked the switch to unlock the balcony door and arranged chairs for us.

"Shall we have a quick look at the guidebook?" I asked idly "or shall we wait until tomorrow?"

"I think," said Drew nervily, struggling hard to keep her composure and to speak casually, "we should look at it now, just in case we miss something interesting by mistake."

With an unconscious gesture born of the habit of command, she held out her hand for the palm-book. "After you, I'm first," I drawled, passing it over to her.

She realised what she had done and was about to pass it back. Then curiosity overcame her and she pressed the Enter button.

Her eyes wide, quickly she scanned the contents, moving through the pages and going back once or twice, grunting occasionally. Then she gave a deep sigh, sat back in her chair, took a long drink and looked up at the stars. The palm-book lay on the table between us.

"Anything of interest?" I asked looking closely at her.

"Well, there are some rather exaggerated claims about the... sort of activities that ... visitors ... might get up to," she replied, choosing her words carefully.

I took a long drink before picking up the palm-book. But it didn't take long to recognise what it contained. There were details of a complex cosmic conspiracy, supported by copies of documents – and more information about a cultural festival on the women's home world.

"So that's settled, then," I said, passing the palm-book back to her. "As you're not so impressed, you go back to the ship tomorrow. There's plenty for you to ... check out there. But I think I'll take the opportunity to go to the cultural festival – the shuttle leaves at noon. It should be a bit of an adventure."

Drew was about to demur. Then stopped herself.

"I should be back by Monday evening," I said. "We can make other plans then."

She nodded agreement and we both rose.

"I thought your military beau was rather cute. You should have given him your number," I teased.

"Although," I add, "I'm not sure that Chiannou would approve..."

Drew flashed a look at me, not knowing whether to be mad or to laugh.

"Of course, if you're not interested in Chiannou, I might make a play for him myself!" I continued.

"You do realise you're absolutely ... incorrigible?" she snapped before entering her own room.

In the morning after breakfast I accompanied Drew to the Santa Maria shuttle.

"Can you just go over the flight plan for me?" she asked sweetly. So I got in with her.

She quickly checked that communication was safe.

"I'm not happy about you going off on your own," she hissed. "You know that."

"Yes, but I can't give up the chance to find out more about what's going on here," I said reasonably. "The festival must be a cover for another kind of meeting. The underground's pointed me in that direction."

"If the underground have somehow recognised us," said Drew, "it's not beyond the realms of reason to believe the authorities have done too."

"Ah, but the underground knew that I was coming," I pointed out.

She sucked her teeth.

"Then everything was planned after all?" she demanded. "What about all that *I make it up as I go along* baloney?"

I grinned at her. "Well, maybe I was just showing off a little..."

"Don't worry about me," I stressed, more seriously. "I'm sure I'll be protected. The authorities are still waiting to meet us on Tuesday. Why should they suspect anything?"

"The most important thing," I said urgently, "is that you don't take any action until I return."

"And if you don't return?" she demanded.

"I'll make sure someone will be in touch," I promised.

She looked uncertain and unhappy.

"Please take care," she said, clutching my shoulders and giving me a quick hug.

"We had fun, didn't we?" I reminded her cheekily as I jumped out of the shuttle.

3

So I found my way to the queue for the weekly shuttle to Libra 3. I was wearing the long black Cassiopean robe I had bought at Matembe's and carrying a battered holdall, so I could just blend in with the rest of the crowd. Most were women, but one or two men were also waiting in line. It took a long time to board. Our identity papers were assiduously inspected by the Special Police. The shuttle crew were waved through and it seemed they were all military personnel.

"Purpose of visit?" snapped the officer, peering at my photograph.

"Tourism," I replied easily. The soldier beside him lowered his rifle and let me pass.

It was then that I experienced the revelation. It was a strange and wonderful feeling. After a moment I realised what it was - that finally I existed entirely autonomously. No-one was following me, no-one was watching, judging, checking, holding me back. For once I knew exactly what I was doing. And I wasn't afraid, because I knew that I could do anything I wanted to do.

The old shuttle bus was battered and worn, it hardly looked as if it could leave the ground. It barely had any port-holes and I realised it must be a former military vessel, turned into civilian service for the working-class population. There couldn't be a greater contrast with the smart sleek private jets which were taking off for the weekend from the neighbouring bay.

As I walked down the aisle looking for my seat, I recognised Matembe and her daughter, Syglea the uptown shop assistant, Marcos and the police officer. But I was seated next to a stranger and after a brief greeting, I sat back, closed my eyes and tried to sleep. It was going to be a long uncomfortable journey and there was nothing profitable I could do until we arrived.

Yet it was difficult to relax. Round and round in my head went the details from the “tourist guide”. “It all needs to be verified,” I told myself over and over again. “I need to travel without prejudice... I need to keep my vision clear.”

Eventually I began to doze, every so often coming out of a dream with scenes from my past lives still clear in my mind. “How was it that I never saw their significance until now?” I asked myself and then fell asleep again.

Suddenly I was wide awake. The engine sound had changed and the shuttle was slowing down, ready to dock. My stomach turned over. I tingled with excitement. The adventure was about to move on.

“Could you direct me to the cultural festival?” I asked the security guard sweetly as I went through control procedures yet again.

In the space-dock, still officially under Civilian control, most of the military personnel were male. I was glad to emerge into the sunshine outside: Libra 3, the women’s home-world.

Marcos appeared at my side and took my elbow.

“Glad you could make it,” he said with a smile, looking me straight in the face for the first time. Without his taxi driver’s uniform and his tense watchfulness, he seemed taller and, I realised, a very attractive man.

“Let’s go,” said Matembe, coming up. “They’re waiting for us.”

She gestured to an old army jeep that drove up, already almost full with other members of the underground. “Why not sit up in front, Ambassador,” she suggested.

“Call me Kendra,” I murmured to her, as I clambered in next to the driver. He flashed me a grin.

“So, we meet again after all, Otto!” I laughed, recognising my Allied officer from the party, now in civilian clothes. “You have everything so well organised, Matembe,” I said admiringly.

“We *have* found some men that we can co-exist with, despite all the conflicts,” responded Matembe.

“Of course,” I thought, “we all bear the genetic memory of an integrated existence. This is what still makes it possible...”

We bounced along in the ancient vehicle and I looked about me in amazement. "I didn't expect it to be so beautiful here," I exclaimed. "How did you manage to grab this planet?"

Syglea shrugged. "It's not in a strategic position, it doesn't have great mineral wealth and it's only average size. So the men weren't interested in it. The fact that it has the greatest natural beauty in the quadrant - which could have been exploited for tourism - wasn't immediately recognised. They've tried to gain control since, of course. But the treaty is still in force, thank goodness – although that's not going to hold for much longer unless we can do something about this present situation."

We travelled outside the city into the hills. It wasn't long before we spotted a collection of white buildings in the distance.

"That's the university," said Matembe, "that's where the meeting is."

As we drove up, we were met with a wondrous sight. Beneath a huge striped awning, spread out over an extensive grassy area at the heart of the university complex, were gathered thousands and thousands of women of all shapes, sizes and colours.

"This is Freedom Square," Syglea told me.

"Of course it is!" I responded swiftly.

We left the jeep and approached the podium, which was decked out with a multitude of flowers. Matembe took the chair, welcomed everyone and the galactic meeting of women began. I haven't time to tell you everything that was discussed but the speeches were inspirational and the motivation behind them was all the same: how could women work together to prevent war and ensure peace in the quadrant?

Faiza Jabal was there, the Congress representative from Cassiopea. When she rose to speak, there was a gasp from the crowd as they saw she was wearing her military uniform and held her rifle in front of her. She was still all in black, in a bulky full-length army tunic, with a long scarf wrapped around her hair and face, leaving only her eyes free. In order to speak, she had to unwrap herself a little.

"I joined the army," she began, "when the Federal States first threatened to invade our people. My planet needed me – the FS wanted to control our economy, our children needed protection, our very way of life was in danger. I formed the first women's battalion and I rose to the rank of Commander. I fought in several campaigns – including the one against the Ophiuchans - and won military honours. And I'm proud of that... For a long time, we managed to keep the FS at bay. But eventually they infiltrated the government and defeated us... We fell into line. Then I began to see

that the evil isn't just out there somewhere," she gestured vaguely into the air, "it's at home, it's even inside ourselves. And that's why I'm glad to see sisters here from the Federal States – because we can't draw that line between good and evil and hope to live safe behind it, we have to go beyond. By working together we have to transcend it."

God, she was good! She knew what she was talking about. How was it - that it had taken me so long to come to the same conclusion?

Faiza took hold of her scarf again. "I've always worn the *hajib*," she continued, "as a mark of my faith, as a mark of my womanhood... And I've been proud of that. And yet... I've come to see it as a mark of oppression..." There was a cheer from the audience, and Faiza held up her hand. "But not only as a symbol of oppression of men over women," she continued, as she began to unwind the scarf, "this was how I've always colluded in oppressing myself!"

The audience went wild when Faiza threw away the *hajib* and it took some time before Matembe was able to get them back under control.

Rika, the digitally altered delegate from Ophiucus was asked to speak next.

"I'm not a soldier, like Commander Faiza," she said in her little-girl voice. "I see myself as a mother - I had four sons - they all died fighting in the campaign against Cassiopea." She looked across at Faiza and smiled warmly. "But I don't blame her. I understand her motives. I blamed my husband - he was a soldier - he encouraged them all into the military and I thought it was his fault. In fact, I divorced him. I hated war. It was the male way. That's why I went into politics. To try and change things. But I found I had to do the male thing. And the worst of it was, I found I was good at it! It was very confusing."

There was a ripple of laughter. To be frank, I was quite surprised that she was such an effective speaker.

"Once all existed in a state of androgyny," I imagined Kali saying. "Both men and women have lost out on that."

"That's why I particularly welcome the participation of men at this meeting," continued Rika, nodding at those sitting in the front row. "Because we have to learn to work together. I believe it's possible. And because, like Faiza, I've learned that we have to take part of the blame ourselves. "

As I listened, I began to see things clearly and when it came to my turn, I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

"We're all warriors, of one kind and another," I summarised, "and we're all mothers. Let's not make a distinction. We can all draw on our masculine and feminine powers. The discussion has given me an idea..."

And so the plan began to take shape.

4

I arrived back on the Santa Maria after the long journey, tired but elated.

“So, how did it go?” demanded Drew, meeting me in the shuttle bay.

“Good!” I returned briefly. “But I need to shower and change. Then we can talk. How are things here?”

“We’ve a lot to report,” she said. “But are you’re sure you don’t need to rest?”

“No, I can’t rest!” I replied grinning with excitement. “But I could do with something to eat. I’m starving!”

“I’ll get the kitchen to rustle you up a tasty snack,” she promised. “Will you come to the ready room? I’ll call the senior staff.”

It was a different kind of meeting. Everyone had their presentations neat and ordered.

“I’ve checked out the key players who were named in the report which the Captain obtained from the underground,” Nureiba, the security officer started. “It appears clear that the conspiracy claims are accurate and that high-level Galactic Alliance personnel are involved.”

Birgit, the blonde science officer rose to make her presentation. “I reconnoitred the Moon of Planeltina,” she said, “and identified a fleet of 94 warships waiting in its shadow.”

“We understand that the warlords have developed biological weapons and are using this as a bargaining chip,” added the medical officer.

“Do we have more information on that?” broke in Drew. “Can we develop an antidote? A vaccine?” The Doctor glanced huffily at the interruption but continued smoothly. “I’ve *already* started work on an antidote but it *will* take some time to perfect.”

“I managed to scan the warships located by Birgit,” said Razak, the chief engineer. “Their phaser power is superior to our own but I think it’s possible for me to modify our engines to give us greater manoeuvrability in an attack.”

“The talks themselves present an opportunity, a target,” offered Chiannou. “If we could gain access and neutralise the leaders themselves...”

“Seems to me, whatever we do, we’re on a suicide mission,” observed the young navigator, Obergen, apparently unperturbed.

“What concerns me most,” said Drew sternly, “is the conspiracy between some of the leaders of the Alliance and the warlords. Yet we’re still bound by Alliance protocols. Whatever plan we use, we need to seek permission from the Alliance.”

“As an independent observer, I don’t share the same faith in the Alliance as you all you,” I remarked mildly. “After all, who can you really trust?” There were various reactions around the table.

“All these are partial solutions,” I continued. “They may help, let’s hope they do – but they won’t attack the central problem, which is the fatal flaw in the status quo. Now the Women’s Conference came up with a novel solution...”

Drew was deeply troubled. “We’ll follow up on all these suggestions,” she said at last. “I want some concrete proposals within 24 hours. The talks begin first thing in the morning. We’ll meet again at 08 hundred hours. Dismissed. Ambassador,” she continued, as the others rose from the table, “please stay, I need to speak with you privately.”

She paced up and down in front of me.

“I can’t accept your criticism of the Alliance,” she began. “It goes against all I believe, all I’ve lived and worked for.”

“You’ve drawn too much on the masculine principle, Drew,” I said. “You have to start looking at things differently.”

She stopped before me, hands on hips.

“What on earth do you mean?” she asked with some irritation. “And anyway, what special qualifications do you have for saving the known cosmos?” she demanded quietly but ominously.

“Oh me? I’m a linguist,” I replied cheerfully. “I really do make it up as I go along. I speak with my own voice and I call things by the names that I myself have chosen.”

She put her head on one side and asked: “Isn’t that rather,” she paused for the right word, “anarchic?”

“Not necessarily. Only if you endow those names with a power they shouldn’t have – like the Alliance itself.”

“How else can language be used?” she demands.

“Women nurture language,” I tried to explain, “but it’s men who place value on it. We’ve allowed it to be turned into a weapon against us, against all living things, a weapon that destroys meaning - and truth itself.”

She raised her eyebrows at me.

“Look at this ship,” I continued. “Its whole social organisation is based on the masculine principle – strict hierarchy, uniforms that classify individuals into groups with different levels of power, with a system of nomenclature that mirrors that used in war games.”

“But there’s got to be order,” she argued. “Individuals need to be clear about their roles and relationships - and their specific responsibilities - especially in times of danger.”

“But doesn’t that restrict the way that you approach things?” I asked.

She frowned, thinking, trying hard to meet me halfway (and I respect her very much for that way she has).

“I’ve tried to make my crew into a family,” she said, “where each one is valued; we work together collectively, we share our ideas and our strengths. The whole basis of the Alliance is mutual respect and cooperation.”

“But you’re not always true to your principles, Drew,” I pointed out. “Look at your approach to solving external problems – you only have two methods: one is combat (superior strength) and the other is superior technology.”

“I *am* a scientist,” she conceded, “so I do follow those lines of thinking. But there was one episode when we were trapped in a vortex, when I managed to get the alien ships to collaborate so that we could all escape.” She paused and then added, “Yet I suppose that was a different situation – I was motivated by the need to protect my crew.”

“I know you love your crew like a mother,” I said gently. “But you’re making the same mistake that mothers have always tended to make – sticking to the belief that for some reason - and at all costs - we have to preserve the status quo.”

“But the alternative would be... alarming, to say the least,” she said, looking truly apprehensive.

“Let’s give it a try,” I suggested.

“Let me sleep on it,” she begged.

I finally reached my quarters, dropped onto the bed fully dressed and fell into a deep but disturbed sleep. Many rivers to cross... but the first and biggest challenge lay here on the Santa Maria.

In the morning, Drew found me in the canteen, taking my time over a traditional Callistan breakfast prepared by the cook for my special delectation. I looked a question at her, but she avoided answering.

“You’ll be pleased to hear your daughter was beamed safely aboard a few minutes ago, Ambassador,” was all she said.

So this is where you come in.

About time! Why wasn’t I in there before?

Well, this is where you came in to play your vital part. Now listen, because I’m still telling my story.

The canteen doors swished open and a young woman appeared, wearing a stunning black outfit. A great joy flooded through me at the recollection that motherhood is a part of my reality. She was Lucia, a simple, magical, surprise gift.

You greeted the Captain respectfully and turned to give me a big hug.

“Hi, mum,” you said. “I’ve come to cover the talks for the Galactic News Network.”

“That’s nice, dear,” I said, swelling with parental pride, “We need impartial observers.”

“I’m not impartial really,” you pointed out. “I don’t want the galaxy to go to war.”

“None of us here do,” I replied.

“I admire journalists very much,” said Drew conversationally, “but personally I’m not good at writing. I suppose I choose to be in the action.”

“Observation is also an action,” you responded quickly, “because you choose how you will observe and what you will record.”

Drew’s eyebrows shot up then with unexpected respect.

She rose from the table. “I’ll leave you two alone for a little while. I need to check on the bridge. We’re due to leave for the talks at 10 hundred hours, Ambassador,” she warned, “and we have our final briefing in my ready room at 08 hundred.”

I nodded. “I’ll be there,” I promised.

“Don’t forget all our information is classified,” she said, looking at me sternly.

I smiled sweetly at her.

As soon as she was gone, you and I put our heads together. “I’m looking for a creative solution,” I said, before urgently summarising what we have found out.

“So,” I concluded, “what do you think? I still haven’t quite finalised the plan.”

Lucia wrinkled her brow. “This whole situation here reminds me of something,” she responded slowly. “We studied it at the Faculty of Journalism on Rigel Prime. Twenty-first century reality shows. They used to imprison a motley assortment of people together in a peculiar situation and everyone would watch how they coped. Every day they had silly tasks or trials to perform – some were absolutely disgusting! And the viewers would vote off in turn the people they didn’t like.”

I wrinkled my brow in turn, trying to see the connection. “And what happened to the winner?” I asked.

“They became famous – for a little while.”

“And that’s why they took part?”

She nodded.

An idea slowly began to form in my head, still vague, more like an image than an idea.
“And if you suggested to the GNN that you cover the talks like a reality show?”
She shrugged. “They might go for it. It would be novel.”
“And everyone in the galaxy would be watching?”
“If they got hooked on it.”
“Well, listen, how about this for a trial?” I said, outlining one of my plans.
She grinned. “Could be fun. I’d have to work up the whole idea first though.”
“We have to move fast,” I told her. “The talks are just about to begin.”
“Let me get to a communication point,” she said, “I need to talk to my boss. They’re waiting for me back on the network ship.”

Lucia met me at 0800 on the bridge.
“I’ve got the go-ahead,” she said breathlessly. “My boss is going down there now to sell the idea. I’ll got to meet the news team on the planet surface.”
“Better come with me,” I said, taking her elbow and we entered the ready room together.

“Sorry, Captain,” I began, as the rest of the senior staff rose in consternation at the inclusion of an unauthorised person, “I had to tell her everything.”
Drew looked very angry - but not surprised.

Very briefly we explained the new plan. There was a second’s stunned silence.
“But that’s not logical,” Drew at once protested energetically.
“Logic, in this instance,” responded Birgit calmly, “is irrelevant. I’d say the plan is ingenious.”
“I *like* this woman!” Lucia murmured warmly.
“There is a ... metaphorical dimension to this,” said Chiannou slowly. “You might almost say it has a ... spiritual logic.”
“It could save a lot of bloodshed, “ said the Doctor. “If it works!”
“And what do I do?” demanded Razak belligerently.
“I’d say stand by the warp engines,” Obergen retorted. “I have a feeling we may need to get out of here pretty quickly!”

Razak looked across at him with in exasperation but he gave her a big grin. He clearly liked the plan.

Drew came to a sudden decision.

“Well, we have to do something,” she snapped. She looked around the table. “Ambassador, you’re with me,” she rapped out in her old style. “Birgit, you go with Lucia. You’re there to protect her.”
You were about to demur...

I know, then I stopped myself.

Drew continued (she's such an excellent leader): "Chiannou, you have the bridge. Obergen, Nureiba, you stand by – we may need you later. Everyone, keep in constant contact. Let's get on with it."

She swept out of the ready room and I followed meekly as I knew she was absolutely furious with me.

5

"You undermined my authority!" she hissed as we flew out through the shuttle bay doors. "You deliberately disobeyed my orders and you didn't even consult with me!"

I was genuinely contrite. "If there'd been more time..." I began.

"If there'd been more time," she continued, "I'd have thrown you and your daughter in the brig!"

"They may not go for it," I said tentatively. "In which case, your other options will come into play."

She maintained a stony silence until we approached the docking bay on Civilia.

"You'll do well to follow my lead when we enter the council chamber," she said frostily. "These people operate in the old style. You," she says, glancing at me severely, "could raise their suspicions."

"However you choose to play it," I replied humbly.

"And no more surprises!" she yelled at me, bringing the shuttle-craft into land.

"You have my word," I said.

She shook her head. "Against my better judgement, I trust you," she replied, more calmly. "But this had better work, because otherwise both our careers are on the line."

When we walked into the council chamber we saw a hive of activity – a small army of media workers busy with studio lights and microphones, rearranging furniture and pandering to the excitement of the key players.

Dr Amin bustled over self-importantly. "There's been a slight change of plan," he gushed. "The Galactic News Network is covering the talks and they've suggested a more... interactive format. So perhaps the Ambassador could play a more... advisory role – some discussion with the news team, maybe, or a small interview over the network?"

"I'm sure the Ambassador would be happy to do whatever is required," replied Drew in her most formal manner. "Where should she go?"

"Oh hello there, I'm Percy," said a very young man with spikey hair, rushing up. "Perhaps you could go into the production room. I can brief you there in a moment. Sir, Your Highness, I mean," he turned quickly away to one of the Herculean warlords, "I think the make-up girl is ready for you now."

After a hasty bow to us, Dr Amin bustled off again

"I suppose it was a foregone conclusion that the over-riding vanity of most power-brokers would make it impossible for them to refuse the opportunity to appear on network TV, wielding their power," murmured Drew as we followed Percy. She laughed shortly. "And of course they believe by doing this, they escape the influence of *your* presence!!"

Percy attracted our attention. "Look, Lucia's out on location," he told me.

On the view-screen we could see the small vessel carrying Lucia and Birgit swoop down in the light of the twin moons. They emerged from the shuttle mounted on high-powered space bikes, dressed all in black, travelled with a roar, braked, whirled round and dismounted, making like the goddess herself.

The camera panned back to show the wide silvery-white plain.

"So this is the Valley of the Moon, where the final activity will take place," announced Lucia to the universe over her microphone. "You can see it's surrounded by these huge rock formations. Once the armies are in place, it will be very difficult for anyone to escape. And now, back to the studio."

"Don't worry," Percy reassured me (fortunately he's a lot brighter than he appears). "She *is* coming back here. It's too dangerous for them to stay out there. But there's plenty of time – we have several trials before that one. Oh wait a minute, I'm up next, must dash!"

On another viewscreen, Percy's co-presenter, in the council chamber, was about to introduce the contestants.

"Welcome to the Power Game," he was telling the audience.

"They're looking a little uncomfortable," observed Drew as the contestants made their initial presentations. Dr Amin of Civilia, Admiral Bikow of the Galactic Allied Forces with Lakhdar, the special envoy, Ambassador Nilandu from the Federal States, all sat together and complimented each other with fulsome rhetoric. Then there were the warlords from Hercules, Sagittarius, Orion and Eridanus, with their striking robes and hairstyles, their poor communication skills and entrenched positions. And finally the Twa representative from the Dwarf Galaxy... Only the women looked cool and confident: Faiza of Cassiopea, Rika from Ophiucus (in another revealing outfit that the men couldn't help staring through), Esther the Astrean and Callista representing (of course) Callisto.

"Matembe's not there," objected Drew.

"No, she's leading her own army," I whispered.

You know all about the format, the banter of the presenters, the petty bickering of the contestants. The first trials were fairly easy and the voting a little slow. The Twa representative went out, and

then the Sagittarian warlord. The other men began to relax and become more expansive in their views, the women a little more acerbic.

It was time to step up the pressure. I leaned forward and spoke into the producer.

“Oh, just hang on a minute,” said Percy, listening to a message over his ear-piece, “something’s been happening. We’ve got some special film to show you. Here it is now! Yes!” he continued as the picture was projected onto the screen behind him, “We see that some people haven’t been playing fair! There seem to be – how many?” he made a pretence of checking the facts again, “yes - no less than ninety-four warships clustered on the dark side of the moon Planeltina! We’re transmitting live from there at this moment.” The camera zoomed in from a shot of the whole fleet to show the ensignia on one of the ships, then another and another. “Oh dear, oh dear,” Percy followed on, looking with mock severity at the contestants, “I’m afraid we’ve got some owning up to do!”

The men looked shiftily at each other and squirmed in their seats.

“Now, obviously, we’re going to have to ask those warships to move back *just* a little, as they *are* really threatening the outcome of the game,” said Percy, betraying a shade of anxiety in his cheery voice. “And I do believe,” he continued, “that this attracts a disqualification... No, wait,” he listened again as I relayed instructions to him myself. “There is a way to avoid disqualification! Yes, there is a way... But it means gambling on the final trial. So it’s decision time – what’s it going to be?”

He glanced nervously at his partner, who took up the patter. “There’s no rush,” he said. “You may confer! You have five minutes to decide!”

You arrived back at that point and we tried to concentrate on making final touches to the design.

“We should put the FS army here,” mused Lucia. “They wear navy.”

“You’re right,” I replied, looking at the map. “Much better colour scheme.”

Drew clicked her tongue in irritation.

“You’ve lived too much in uniform, Drew,” I said gently. “These sartorial nuances are significant.”

I could see she was still mad at me. But we were all in suspense.

“Chiannou to Captain Anders,” crackled her communication badge, making us all jump.

“Go ahead, Commander,” she answered urgently. “What’s the situation with the warships?”

“They’ve withdrawn to a safe distance.”

“From the planet?”

“And from each other.”

“How much time do we have if they go on the offensive?”

“Enough,” he replied, “er, we hope.”

“Stand by,” Drew said crisply. And she smiled at me for the first time.

Simultaneously, the film was transmitted to the network.

“Well, thank goodness for that!” said Percy, looking wide-eyed into the camera and mopping his brow with a make-believe hanky. “So... time to vote again, folks! Who'll it be this time? Here's that number that you need to call...”

The rest of the warlords were voted out and they left with a great deal of fuss and recrimination, as well as hasty whispered asides with the special envoy. The four main conspirators were still in the game.

Of course the women were also conspirators.

Yes, I suppose that's true...

“Now, then,” said Percy, “let's see what the next trial is going to be...”

The producer switched screens to the Valley of the Moon.

“Now, in order to help resolve the conflict, the women have volunteered to fight on behalf of the men...”

His co-presenter broke in, as there was an outburst at the table. “Would you like to explain that to us, Rika?” he invited.

“We feel so passionately about peace,” said Rika demurely, “we are prepared to die for it. And as our role should always be to support our male colleagues, we want to prove what we say.”

The men sat back, smirking.

“You've all agreed to place bets, right, gentlemen?” continued Percy. “Don't forget, the winner takes all. And here we see the warriors moving into position...”

The Cassiopean army streamed down from the north onto the great plain, dressed all in black, with their long black scarves leaving only their eyes free.

From the east came the battalions of Astrea in olive green, tight shirts tucked into tight combat trousers, their tiny waists cinched with a broad leather belt.

“At least they march freely,” murmured Drew.

Spilling in from the south, we saw the navy-clad special forces of the Federal States, with their shaved heads and hard eyes.

“You know, they undergo incredibly tough training to qualify for this regiment,” I remarked, “and pass out with better grades than men. Yet this is the first time they've ever been allowed to go into combat.”

And from the west gathered the women warriors of Ophiucus, in light-coloured uniforms, skimpy tops revealing the midriff, cut-off pants and high-heeled ankle boots.

“Very stylish,” murmured Lucia, suppressing a smile.

“I think they call that colour *écru*,” I added helpfully.

Drew covered her eyes with a hand. "But so *impractical*," she groaned.

I looked across at Lucia. Perhaps Drew was getting into the spirit of things at last.

"And here's the fifth and last contestant," the commentary continued. "This is an added extra, a bit of a surprise, the army from Libra 3, which as you may or may not know, is the women's planet... It doesn't change the rules of the game," added Percy hastily, "they just wanted to take part."

Soon the entire plain was covered by female soldiers - arranged in the form of a pentagon, each army in triangular formation, so that they actually touched the other four at the point and flanked two others on two sides. They waited, standing stiffly to attention, rifles held steady across their bodies, from right hip up to left shoulder, the barrels glinting in the polluted sunlight. It was an awesome sight.

"So, the armies are ready," announced Percy. "And very nice they look, too!" he enthused, "Isn't the pentagon the symbol for the Federal States armed forces? Maybe that's a good omen?" he faltered, looking at Ambassador Nilandu.

At that moment, Matembe gave the signal and the armies drew back a little, bending and extending the outer sides to form a star-shaped figure.

"The pentacle," I breathed, "the symbol of magic."

"Yes, well, as you all know, the trial requires an outright victory. So," Percy swallowed heroically, "a fight to the death. And I need to remind you that this is the *final trial*. So whoever wins this one will win the contest, that is, control over the whole of the quadrant. Can I just check with the contestants here in the studio. Do you all agree to go forward with the trial? Remember, any one of you can walk out *now*, you just need to say you want to withdraw and there's no blame attached. I'll give you a few minutes to decide."

The camera panned round the table but the remaining leaders were adamant, they all shook their heads. The bets were made.

"I suppose they've made a deal to share out the spoils afterwards," Lucia murmured.

"So, let me just clarify once again, that what happens now will determine the future power balance in the quadrant. Are you all agreed?"

The warmongers nodded abruptly and frowned.

"The contestants are getting impatient," observed Drew, clenching her own fists on the table.

"Come on, come on, let's get on with it!" breathed Lucia, jumping up and pacing the floor.

But at that moment I was suddenly filled with a great calm. I knew that everything was going to work out as we'd planned.

"So, let the trial begin," announced Percy, after spinning out the suspense for as long as he dared.

The order was transmitted onto the great plain over several hundred loudspeakers. "Let battle commence," they boomed.

There was a hush. We all held our breath. For an instant the warriors grasp their weapons even more tightly - and then it happened.

With one movement they all lay down their arms.

There was a horrified gasp in the studio. ...

There was another pause. None of us drew breath - it could go either way.

"Well, there's an unexpected development," Percy chattered nervously to fill the silence. "Let's just see what happens next..."

"The warships are still holding their position, Captain," reported Chiannou.

Then the five armies began to mingle together, and embrace each other, black, white, green, blue and the rainbow stripes of Matembe's army, until the plain looked like a moving mosaic of colour.

("You see, that beige came in useful after all," I murmured.

Drew smothered a smile.)

Now it would be impossible for anyone to bomb the plain without killing their own warriors. Of course, we all knew that could happen. But the contestants were stunned and the moment passed. The order was not given.

"Well," continued Dec chirpily, "this has certainly provided a novel end to the contest! Now, you remember you agreed that the outcome of this trial would determine the power balance in the quadrant? You all agreed. It looks to me as if that is now going to mean – *co-operation!*"

"It's a trick!" yelled Nilandu wildly, rising from his seat. "We've been tricked! It's not fair!" He lunged at Dr Amin. "You've betrayed us!" he screamed.

Admiral Bikow half-rose, taking out his pistol and pointing it across the table at the phalanx of four women

“Now don’t let’s forget that this programme is being watched by millions and *millions* of people all over the galaxy,” suggested Percy urgently but supportively. “We don’t to do or say anything that we might regret later, do we?” he asked a little edgily.

After a pause, the men backed down.

“I think it’s time now to take a final look at the viewers’ votes to see who is going to leave the show next,” said Percy’s co-presenter.

“Well, there’s been an extraordinary result in the voting,” continued Percy valiantly, but the strain was beginning to show on him. “I’ve got to say we’ve never had this kind of vote before! All the male contestants have received an equal number of votes and this means that they’re *out* of the game – and the women will take over control of the quadrant!”

In a great fit of pique, Nilandu turned over the table in front of him, while Lakhdar looked disgusted and Dr Amin sat stunned. The Admiral threw down his pistol and rapped out a command. He covered his face with both hands while we all waited.

“Report, Chiannou!” Drew hissed into her communication badge.

“We’re just seeing the last of the warships power down, Captain,” came the reply. “It seems to have worked!”

Drew suddenly relaxed and lay her head in her arms on the table in front of her.

“God, I never want to go through that again,” she sighed. “That was much, much more demanding than going into battle myself!” She raised her head and looked hard at me, then at Lucia. “I see that anarchy *can* work,” she conceded, “ but please *never* involve me in one of your mad schemes again.” She groaned comically, “The constant chatter of that inane young man was just too much to bear!”

We started to laugh hysterically with relief...

“Not anarchy, exactly,” I managed to point out. “More like – androgynous thinking.”

She merely smiled but I knew she knew what I meant.

6

Back in the ready room, Drew attempted a de-brief with her senior staff. But everyone was elated and not even Nureiba had anything sensible to say.

Lucia burst in with Birgit, both looking a little dishevelled.

“You ordered me to provide protection, Captain,” said Birgit, stiffly.

“ But it appears that... Lucia has a black belt in judo and is capable of cutting through whole bricks with her naked hand.”

A look passed between them and then they faced front again.

“Well, I’m sure that comes in very handy for a reporter,” replied Drew blandly.

“And your plans now, Ambassador?” asked Drew as we walked out onto the bridge.

“Oh... I’ll spend the evening working on my report. And then I’m hitching a ride on the Network Service ship with Lucia. I need to get back to my old man as soon as possible. I’ve been away from home for far too long.”

Chiannou came up. “Captain,” he began respectfully, “as Personnel Officer, I feel that a celebration would be in order tonight. And you, particularly, need to relax a little.”

“That’s a very good idea, Commander,” responded Drew, smiling, taking his arm somewhat coyly and at the same time giving me a piercing glance. “Why not take me to the canteen and I can tell you how terrible the ordeal really was!”

“We learnt a lot from each other, Captain,” I murmured, as we kissed goodbye.

“I won’t forget,” she said softly, “ that we have the power to transcend our perceived reality.”

EPILOGUE

And so here we are at the end of my journey.

“Well,” says Lucia thoughtfully, “that’s suitably impressive. Can we have dinner now?”

In my quarters I replicate all our favourite food: chips, cheeseburgers and, of course, chocolate.

“I may be seeing Birgit again,” says Lucia carefully, as she lays the table.

“Well, that’s no more than I expected,” I reply comfortably. “But you can write that story yourself.”

We sit down to eat and discuss my mysterious adventures through time and space. Lucia is able to proffer many profound interpretations.

“Are you sure?” she ponders, “that your journey’s really over? And that the real purpose of it was to avert war?”

“I was until you asked!” I reply with some asperity.

“Maybe there’s another episode still to come? Something in the future?”

I shake my head. “No, I feel I’ve achieved what I had to achieve and now, now I feel, if I had to die tomorrow, I would die a happy woman.”

“Ah! Maybe it was really a journey of self-discovery,” she continues relentlessly, “to get your priorities sorted out.”

“I suppose the process was also important,” I concede. It’s true. I have come home. And she is still the brightest star in my firmament.

“But what about Pandora’s box?” demands Lucia later, sipping Astrean rum cream on ice. “What happened to that?”

“Look,” I protest, “I just saved the known universe *and* cooked supper. Do you *still* expect me to know where *everything* is?”

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THE POWER OF NAMING

Name	Origin	Meaning
Artemis	Greek	Hunter
Branwen	Welsh	Warrior
Drew	Greek	Courageous
Eve	Hebrew	Life
Faiza	Arabic	Victorious
Iola	Greek	Dawn
Kali	Hindi	Goddess
Kendra	Norse	Knowledge
Lilith	Hebrew	Spirit of the Night
Lucia	Italian/Spanish	Light
Marie-Therese	French/Hebrew	Wished for - Unknown
Morgan	Celtic	Song of the Sea / Born of the Sea
Nadine	French	Hopeful
Reniti	Italian	Rebirth
Rika	Norse	Forever strong
Sandra	Greek	Defender of Mankind (sic)

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