

Men tried to erase her from history,

Yet she remains,

PSAPPHA



Chapter One

The half-forgotten storm tossed Psappa naked from her berth. Wrapped in a blanket, she rushed on deck. Rain and salt spray stung her eyes. The wind whipped the blanket against her legs. A wave broke over her head and took the blanket with it. She slipped on the wet deck and her stomach clenched. Just as she was certain Poseidon had claimed her, someone grabbed her ankle.

"Here," the captain shouted. "Put this on," he said, thrusting a soggy wad of cloth into her hand.

Psappa struggled to turn the length of dripping fabric into a serviceable kiton while the wind tried to rip it from her hands.

"Go back inside," the captain told her. "I don't have time to look after you. We're taking on water. I have to man the pump!"

"I can work the pump!" Psappa screamed above the thunder.

"Nonsense, milady, the pump's bigger than you. If you won't go inside, I'm tethering you to the mast."

"What about you and the others?" she asked as he secured the knots at her waist.

"We're used to it," he boomed.

No one could get used to this, she thought as she followed him as far as her tether would allow. The sway of the lumbering vessel wrenched her from side to side. Rain stung her body and blurred her sight. Waves scoured the deck, curling around her ankles like fingers trying to pull her from the ship.

Twenty oarsmen took up the yeoman's beat. A keening chant rose, more terrorizing to Psappa than the thunderbolts that split the sky. Psappa countered their lament with a prayer.

Oh, Lady without Peer, Mother of all gods, she prayed. Protect me on this journey and let me hurry safely home to thy blessed temple.

Thinking of the temple, a sob stuck in her throat. She blocked fear with memories of walking among sacred olive trees, composing songs as young leaves shimmered in the sunlight. "Like a thousand needles sewing up the sky," she whispered past cracked lips. Tears flooded her eyes. They burned. She should not have insulted the Tyrant, although her words were true.

'Truth is the most dangerous of weapons,' her betrothed told her before they boarded separate ships. 'We will return,' he had said.

Yes, Psappa decided, grateful for the taut rope that held her to the mast. I will live again in Mytilene, she vowed, someday, when they applaud my verses in palaces and every street beggar knows my songs.

A gigantic wave rushed toward the foundering ship. Psappa shrieked in terror and got a mouthful of salty water. The mast cracked and fell. Poseidon snatched Psappa from the pitching deck and hurled her and the mast far out to sea.

"Poseidon!" she screamed. "I can't die now. No one will remember my name!"

~~~~~

Psappa drowsed between sheets of dry linen and imagined herself at home in Mytilene. The bunk on which she lay rocked with the gentle roll of waves beneath the hull. Memory swamped her euphoria. She thought of the squat ship upon which she began her hated exile, but the soft linen told her she was no longer there. Terror and grief rushed at her in expanding waves.

Her eyes clenched against reality, Psappa pounded the bunk with raw, cracked fists and rage at offending gods. "Capricious charlatans. Why weren't you watching what you were doing?"

Her fingers rasped across sun-scorched flesh as she searched for broken bones. Realizing she was naked, her hands flew from her body, dislodging her covering. She grabbed at it and felt other hands tuck it around her. She blinked and thought she saw Pittakos, Tyrant of Lesbos, standing over her – sending her into exile all over again.

Psappa rolled toward the bulkhead, her eyes awash with terror. Where was she? Peeking cautiously through wet lashes, she saw polished teak walls instead of an unfinished bulkhead.

Through the open porthole, she glimpsed the shadow of towering mast and vast sails. The ship must be huge, she thought.

Someone spoke. Psappa rolled toward the sound ready to rise and flee. Her wide eyes met a smoky, indigo gaze. Ebony hair framed the man's sun-bronzed face. He had a straight hook-tipped nose and a thick, black beard. An arrow tail of crimped black hair splashed over his chest and shafted downward out of sight beneath a simple kilt.

When he spoke again, his words hovered just beyond her understanding.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Were there other survivors?"

He shrugged.

"Answer me, damn you!"

He smiled.

Father Poseidon to whom have you delivered me? She raged in silent exasperation. What vengeful brother is this?

"I am Psappa of Lesbos," she said, pointing to herself.

"You will answer me at once."

The dark man grinned and left.

She watched him go. His upper body was a small miracle of muscles but his legs were slender and bowed. An oarsman, she decided and she dismissed him from her mind.

Listening to the garbled conversations beyond her door, she gradually realized they spoke an odd and varied dialect of Hellenic Greek. Though different from her own Aeolian, she knew the language.

Nevertheless, when she used flawless Hellenic to ask the scruffy old seaman who brought her supper about survivors, he gave her a bewildered shrug. Tears of frustration scorched her salt scoured eyes. She fought to believe the kindly old captain was safe somewhere. "Lord Dionysus," she prayed, pouring a small libation from her dinner wine. "Don't fall asleep over your cups and allow a dear worshiper to get away."

~~~~~

They must have put poppy juice in the wine, Psappa thought when she awakened. Her limbs felt heavy, her head seemed light. It hurt to move. Nevertheless, she knew the longer she stayed still the stiffer she would get. It took several nauseating tries, but she managed to stand.

The massive mahogany furnishings provided support as she searched the cabin for some form of clothing. Finding nothing better, she settled for a sheet, which she knotted at one shoulder, using a bit of rope to hold it around her waist, and off the polished deck.

"Who are you?" she asked the russet-haired youth who bustled into her cabin without knocking. She thought him somewhat older than her own sixteen years, although his face was hairless as a babe. The emerald tunic that pretended to cover his lean body matched intelligent green eyes.

"My name is Lycos," he said in dulcet tones that should have soothed her.

"Were there other survivors?" she asked hopefully.

He arched copper brows.

"Survivors?"

"Yes, survivors, you simpering fool," she almost shouted from frustration. "From my ship. Was anyone else saved?"

"There was no ship, milady, only you and a log and a lot of seaweed. Kerkolos spotted you from the lookout, slid down the starboard shroud, and fished you out of the sea with a cargo net. You should have seen him. He hauled you aboard all by himself, broken mast and all." The boy's voice was soft and merry.

His grin infuriated her. "I don't see anything funny about the loss of an entire ship and everyone aboard."

"Not everyone," he corrected. "You're here. Maybe others are somewhere else."

"Almost everyone, then."

"I'm sorry."

Psappa was in no mood to accept his smile. "What are you grinning at, you rude boy?"

"I'm still picturing Kerkolos plucking you from the water like a sturgeon."

"Who is Kerkolos?"

Lycos gaped and gulped. "Kerkolos of Andros," he said, his bright eyes wide with astonishment. "The captain. Didn't he tell you?"

"I haven't seen him."

"Of course you have. He sent me here."

Psappa felt blood rush to her face. I thought he was an oarsman, she remembered, mortified by her unpardonable lack of manners. "Why didn't he identify himself? If I had known it was he who rescued me, I could have thanked him."

"That's probably why he didn't tell you."

"Are you the one who undressed me?" She had to know. She could not bear it if it had been the other one.

"Nothing to undress," he quipped. "Old Poseidon stripped you clean."

Psappa wanted to cry. She visualized a leering crew. No wonder the dark captain had smiled so much.

“Don’t worry,” Lycos said, as if privy to her thoughts. “The African whisked you out of the net and into Kerkolos’ cabin so fast nobody saw much.”

“The African?” Psappa frowned, picturing some heathen oarsman daring to touch her naked flesh.

“She wouldn’t let anyone get a good look at you,” Lycos said.

“She? There’s another woman aboard?”

“Not just another woman,” he said, beaming. “A queen.”

Psappa frowned. “Don’t lie to me, boy. Pharaoh would not allow his wife to sail on another man’s ship.”

“Oh, the African is no man’s wife,” he said, chuckling at the thought. “The African is a warrior.”

A warrior, Psappa thought, a savage. Yet, judging by the glow of respect in the young man’s eyes, he either liked savages, which was unlikely, given the delicacy of his appearance, or the African was something else, something far more interesting.

“I would meet this African,” she said.

“Oh, she’ll come by. If she chooses.”

(continued on page 13 of PSAPPHA ISBN: 0970127499)