

The African strode through the cabin doorway the next afternoon, and Psappa decided she had never understood the definition of a queen until then. Taller than most men, with cinnamon skin as richly hued and as lovely as the polished teak walls, the woman filled the cabin with her presence.

Psappa succumbed to an unexpected shyness. Suddenly sixteen did not seem so worldly after all. "If it pleases you, I would like to know your name," she said, her voice tremulous and inexplicably timid.

"I am called, Gongyla."

"I am Psappa." Awed by the magnificence of the woman before her, she left the aristocratic 'of Lesbos' off her introduction.

Gongyla's deep chuckle warmed her like sudden sunlight amid a blustery day.

"How came you here, oh Queen?" Psappa asked, wanting to hear the vibrant voice again.

Gongyla's elegant face saddened. "There was a war, little dove. My people fought bravely and I, myself, killed many enemies with my bow, but victory gained us nothing. My people were hungry. If not for Lord Kerkolos, my people would have sold themselves to the slavers. I could not let them be sent to the market beyond Tyre."

Psappa shuddered. She had heard of the market beyond Tyre. Rumor had it that no one returned from there: the men went to the mines, to die slowly; the women to brothels to live, though their souls were soon dead.

"Tell me of your country, oh Queen," she said, hoping to coax a smile.

"My land is far," Gongyla said, her head high on her long, arched neck. "A green land, past a white land, beyond the land of the Carthaginians; near the birthplace of the river Niger." There was love mixed with the pride in her resonant voice. "My people are as free as eagles in flight," she said, her tone rich with feeling. "The women are strong and fleet of foot and the men as gentle and watchful as the great cats with whom we share the hunt. There are birds in my country with plumage brighter than Egyptian brocade. And small animals like creeping children that fill the air with endless chatter like gynakeoni."

"Gynakeoni?" Psappa asked, her brow furrowed.

"You will see," Gongyla said, smiling softly.

Psappa answered the smile by touching Gongyla's long, tapered hand. "What of your gods? Are they gentle like the little animals or fierce like you?"

"We worship no gods, Ivory one. We worship only Cybele, whom you call Queen of Heaven."

"You know The Lady!" Psappa exclaimed joyfully.

"What lady?"

"Not lady, Oh Queen, The Lady, Cybele, Isis, Asharah, Astarte, The Lady of a Thousand Names, The Lady by whatever name. My mother was her priestess."

"I, too, am a priestess. A priestess of Cybele," Gongyla said. "And what of you? How came you here?"

Psappa shuddered, ashamed before such majesty. "I'm an exile," she whispered, head down.

"Oh?" the queen murmured, and her eyes narrowed. Psappa pictured the great cats so recently mentioned. She tried to imagine Gongyla striding through a jungle on the heels of a panther, no, not on its heels, beside it, almost a cat herself – dark, silent and dangerous in the undergrowth.

"I spoke truth when I should have stayed quiet," Psappa said. "I challenged a gutter-rat who became a king . . ."