



Through The Ages - chapter 9

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“You know I always get the best of you Nikos...!”

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Through the Ages - Chapter 9 Festival Time The weeks and months went by while we all became truly wonderful athletes. Duris would meet weekly with Andros and contemplate our progress. I came to understand that Andros was the overseer of the entire religious complex, and our schooling was but a small part of his responsibilities. Under the tutelage of Duris, our leaps and landings became smooth and effortless. He watched our progress daily nodding his head or giving advice before moving to his other duties. He was a good man and teacher, encouraging us when needed but at the same time, he never let us slack off. He made it known that we represented our people to the goddess. We never forgot that, as we practiced relentlessly, never giving up until we perfected every stage of our training. Oh there were times we became homesick, but it did help that we were a close group, some even said closer than family. I would think about my pottery making and wonder if I would ever be a potter again. But I had to admit to myself, this life was exciting, and I soon forgot about my pottery days. I think it was more or less like that for everyone. But we never forgot where we came from and were always proud of our heritage. Being together and young it was not surprising that some of the older boys and girls paired off. Kori and I being the first to do this. When it was noticed, we were given a lecture on relationships. Duris had us gather around him one day, we sat on the soft grass as he spoke, “I know that you're all young and full of life, this is good. I have also noted that some of you have been forming pair bonds, I want you to know that I don't discourage this at all. But, I do need you to know that you must have limits.” He glanced at the half dozen of us that had been seen to walk together in the early stages of a relationship. We knew who we were, and looked back at him with interest. He nodded his head as he continued, “These kinds of relationships can be a double-edged sword. Let me explain this, it can be a great asset, in that you get to know your partner at a deeper level, which could be critical when in the ring with a troublesome bull. You both can work off each other to keep safe. Or...and let me stress this, it can lead to your downfall.” He had our attention from the start, but now, our eyes widened as he paused to let this new information sink in before going on, “I am talking about making love.” He sighed, “I know for some of you, you're too young to be interested, but sooner or later you will be, so you may as well learn what I have to say now. I don't want you to think I am going to go into great details on the subject, I don't think that is needed at this time. It is the outcome that I want to discuss now, and that is the possibility of getting with child. The girl is at very great risk not only to herself but to whoever is her partner in the ring. A pregnant girl is slow to react, tired in body and mind, she won't be focusing as swiftly as she usually does. And let me tell you this starts to happen as soon as she quickens with a child, and doesn't show any outward signs. You could lose your life if your partner isn't one hundred percent there for you.” He paused again to let all this information settle in with everyone before asking, “Are there any questions so far?” With my face turning deep red I tentatively put my hand up to signal I had a question. He

looked at me and smiled. "Sir, I was just wondering is kissing OK or will that make a girl get with child?" Duris nodded his head replying, "That is a good question Nikos, the answer is kissing your girl is fine, holding hands is too. If anyone else wants more details, I suggest you see me separately. For now, this is really all you need to know. You're all very young, goddess willing will have many years ahead of you to learn all there is to know when it comes to love. OK, you may carry on with your day, class dismissed." We all started talking as we got up from our places on the grass. I looked down on Kori and smiled. It did seem like Duris was on my side. I cocked my head to the side and lifted one eyebrow, "Well, now I hope you will let me steal all the kisses I want from you!" She laughed shaking her head as she walked away. I quickly ran after her pleading my case.... Once I caught up with her, I nibbled on her neck making goosebumps come out on her skin. She laughed again turned around and neatly tripped me before running off shouting, "You know I always get the best of you Nikos...!" Oh, this was so on, I swiftly jumped back up and ran after her, scooped her up in my arms and ran off with her. She screamed alerting the other guys in our company to come to her rescue. They jumped on me knocking poor Kori to the side. She was able to roll and jump up smoothly thanks to our excellent training. Then she piled on top the guys that were piled up on me. I yelled for help, and they all soon enough got off. I was covered in grass and dirt, I even had some in my mouth. As I spit it out, Kori reached out laughing as she took some twigs out of my hair smugly adding, "Now I hope you have learned your lesson, Nikos, never ever try to get the better of me!" With that she laughed again turned, waiting for me to join her since we were going to be late for our next practice session if we didn't hurry. The other boys and girls were several hundred feet ahead of us. The rest of the day went, as usual, ending with everyone pretty tired and hungry for dinner. When I think back on it, I don't know if anyone went to Duris with any questions, I believe we were at a place where what he had told us was enough to keep us happy and careful. As the weeks went by, we started to get more excited about the celebrations for the upcoming religious ceremonies. It was to be seven days signifying seven years, with all kinds of activities, one held for each of the seven days. Each day was to feature a different aspect of the goddess. There was to be plenty of entertainment, with many exotic peoples and, of course, animals from far away places. I also heard that the food would be exceptional as well, with plenty to try out in the many small food stalls that were to be set up in the market place. As the week long festivities approached we hoped that we would be able to see some of the activities that we heard people in the complex talking about. If we were lucky, maybe we could steal an hour or two and see some of them ourselves. I secretly wanted to find some small gift for Kori. As the days of the spring celebrations grew nearer, we were measured for new kilts. This was so we would be easily recognized by the people, as we moved amongst them. They were to be made of fine linen, black with gold trim, signifying that we belonged to the bull with the sacred horns. The girls were given the same kilt but had gold tops to cover their breasts since they were not of the age to go about bare breasted yet. Sandals of black and gold finished our outfits. We even were given some gold jewelry too, some thin gold arm bands and gold disk earrings. Duris informed us that we would be wearing these outfits on the day of our debut which would be on the last day of the religious celebrations. Both Duris and Andros wanted the people to be able to recognize us easily so they

could cheer for us when we performed. But when actually working with the bulls, all we would be wearing would be the kilt. Even though we were clearly very busy with the bull leaping aspect of the ceremonies, we all grew up knowing that the most important deities were female, although there were some minor male deities as well. Our religion was matriarchal. The mother goddess being supreme was a fertility goddess. She had two main forms, Mistress of the animals and the Snake Goddess. There was plenty of household goddesses as well. As a society, we were matrilineal that is we traced our lineage through the female line unlike the patrilineal societies of later times. All priestesses were female, with men in attendance only. The main theme of our religion was to worship nature. Nature, fertility and the cycle of life. Animals such as bulls, fish, birds, monkeys as well as many, many others were an important part of the life cycle. Trees were worshipped as well, especially the olive tree, which lived for many years and gave forth fruit that the people counted on. The olive oil and the berry was an essential everyday part of our lives. When you thought about it nature gave us everything we needed to live, food, shelter, clothing, the list was endless. We had numerous places of worship, caves, mountain tops, springs, as well as religious centers like the one at Knossos. The people also worshipped at home. A small shrine could be found in most houses. That is where the figurines that I had been making back home came to be well sought after, especially if you were good at making the pieces realistic. Aside from figurines, two common symbols were the sacred horns and the double axe. You would find them in all the large cities where they could be seen larger than life size. Smaller versions of them, plus various kinds of figurines could be found in all smaller cities and villages. The female deity brought forth life, as in spring time, the male counterpart had only a temporary part since he didn't live long, as in the autumn time where leaves fell, and harvests were finished. There was plenty of figurines of the goddess in her many forms, from human to animals. Nature in all it's forms from trees to springs and waterfalls to even the sky held the goddess within. The people took part in various aspects of worship. One of the more popular forms for women was dance. Groups of them would congregate in the woods near springs. Springs were places that they could feel the goddess close to their hearts. The dance was an important part of becoming one with her, where the women would dance bare-breasted beneath trees raising their arms in supplication to the goddess to bring her back near them with the return of the spring. Both young and old were encouraged to join in this joyous ritual. Wine was brought and shared amongst the women. Men were never allowed to take part it was only for women, as a matter of fact they were not even allowed to watch from a distance. They did come in the morning to take their women home. The women would look exhausted, but happy. The men didn't want to risk angering the goddess, so they kept away. Aside from the dance, various forms of sacrifice were done all week long, whether it was spilling a liquid from a rhyton or vessel to placing some offering such as food at the base of the goddess's shrine. The main thing was to be mindful of the goddesses in all her different forms. As for the bull vaulting or leaping, it had plenty of religious significance but was also loved for it's great athletic showmanship. The horns on the beast would be the focal point of the vaulting. It was a very important feature at the end of the week long celebrations. One that was eagerly anticipated. After all, these occurred only once every seven years so we liked to make the most of it hoping if all went well we would have another seven

years of plentiful harvests. At the end of the week, one perfect bull was chosen for sacrifice. Only the best was given to the goddess. It was also a time when the people were given small portions of the meat to bring them closer to the deities. These were taken home to be cooked and eaten with respect and homage. The day before the festival week was to begin we put forth an extra strenuous day and were happily digging into our evening meal when Duris and Andros both paid us a visit. As soon as we saw them enter the doorway making their way over to our tables, we hurriedly wiped our mouths, hushing anyone that was not paying attention. They waited patiently until we quieted down and watched them cordially. Andros looking us over with a smile and a nod of his head started first; "I want to congratulate all of you for your hard work these past six months. I have watched each and every one of you grow into the splendid athletes that you are today. Not only in body but in your minds as well. Your abilities have become outstanding.... now don't get swelled heads over my words, you still have a lot to learn. But that being said you should be proud, and once in the arena, I am positive the people will love your performance. If all goes well and the goddess is pleased, we will have seven years of plentiful harvests from the land and sea." We smiled and looked at each other, knowing we had worked hard and felt ready to show the people and the goddess what we had accomplished. Andros paused regarding us fondly before continuing, "Well, I won't keep you, Duris has a few things to tell you which I am sure will please you all." He stepped aside to let Duris take center stage now looking us over, "Yes, I have to agree with Andros, you have made much progress in the time you have been with us. We are very proud of you all and, therefore, feel you deserve a reward for all your diligence these past months. It has not been easy, but I think we have come up with something you will enjoy. I hope you will agree....." He glanced around at all of us, as we sat on the edge of our seats waiting. "For the next seven days, you will have two and a half hours after the evening meals to see and experience all the celebrations in the market place located in the center of the city. Thirty minutes for traveling and two to do what you want. Now, I want you all back on time with one exception. That is the night of the dance where the women dance for the goddess. It wouldn't be right if our girls did not participate and pleased her. But remember one thing, no men or boys are allowed near the "Night of the Dance, so be warned. Except for the women's dance, please wear your performing outfits so the people will be able to recognize you." Both men smiled at the look of surprise on all our faces. Our excitement at this news knew no bounds, just as we were about to jump up, Duris put his hand up, "OK, I can see you all pleased with this news...just one more thing before we take our leave. Each night you will be given some coins which to spend as you please. I am counting on you all to behave with dignity since you are representing the priestesses and the religious order here at the palace. I will leave the coins with Nina, see her before you go. Enjoy yourselves." He turned to Andros, who nodded, and they both left the eating area. As soon as the door shut behind them we took the opportunity to jump up and down shouting our excitement. Nina, who was standing not far away, held her hands to her ears as she laughed. When we finally calmed down enough to catch our breath, we decided to go for a swim and think about what we wanted to do with our time off. Later on, we went to our separate sleeping areas but not before I had a few seconds to say good night to Kori. We smiled at each other knowing we had a wonderful week to look forward

to. I kissed her quickly and ran to catch up with the other boys. As I ran across the grass, I thought that one of the things I definitely was going to do was to buy my girl a gift. I smiled imagining giving her a pretty pendent to hang around her lovely neck. As I caught up with the boys, we all started to speak at once, what we were going to do ... taste all kinds of food, look at the wares in the stalls. Of course, we would leave some food at a shrine for the goddess. Once in our beds, I found myself thinking of the coming week. What would I see? The things I had heard earlier came to mind. After a while, I finally fell asleep only to dream of vaulting over the bulls.