

# ~ The Amazons' Boy ~

by

Day

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**Author's Notes:** : This story can be said to take place at the end of the fourth season, but have practically nothing to do with any events of that season and therefore stands on its own. I've shamelessly messed up Greek history and geography with my own imagination to use for my own personal benefit, but since the show does that constantly, I guess it's all right. I want to thank, MyWarrior, for all the time and patience she's invested in this project. Her encouragement and comments have been invaluable. This is my first attempt at fan fiction and I hope you'll enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it.

Comments/feedback are more than welcome at [dayze11@hotmail.com](mailto:dayze11@hotmail.com).

*This one's for Susan, who's always in my heart.*

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## Part 1

### CHAPTER I

"It is a lovely thing to live with courage, and die leaving an everlasting fame."

- Alexander the Great, 356-323 BC

The young man stood in the darkness of the night watching the funeral pyre. His handsome face was almost hidden in the shadows and only, when a particularly bright flame flickered and ate its way through another piece of wood, did it illuminate the

dark eyes staring straight into the fire without blinking. A hand rested absently on the hilt of a sword strapped to his waist while the other was by his side curled into a fist, clenching and unclenching without the conscious knowledge of its owner.

The wind shifted and, as his eyes began to water, he recognized the distinct smell of human flesh burning, in spite of all the herbs and dried flowers the Amazons had decorated the pyre with. Suddenly he felt dizzy and he grabbed onto the wall of the hut he was standing next to, the rough straws digging into his hand. A beautiful voice filled the night followed by a single flute and, for a moment, it was as if not only all the muffled cries of the shadows closer to the fire silenced, but the air itself seemed to halt and waver as if unsure how to react. The young man tried to breathe, but the air felt hot and sticky and he was choking. Suddenly he sensed a hand on his shoulder.

"Lykeas, are you all right?"

He swallowed slightly and nodded, feeling the air return to his lungs.

"Yeah...just got a bit dizzy. That's all."

He spoke in curt, abrupt sentences, a habit he had whenever he was unsure of something or lost in thought. The person next to him recognized it for what it was, and took a step closer, awkwardly putting her arm around his shoulder. She felt him stiffen just for a second before forcing himself to relax into the touch.

They stood together in silence, listening to the song, watching the pyre succumb to the flames. As the song finished the woman noticed a small figure leave the circle around the now dying fire and disappear into the forest that surrounded the village. Blue eyes locked onto black ones and the faintest hint of a smile showed on the man's face.

"You'd better go to her. She needs you."

"You'll be okay?"

The voice was hesitant, but the eyes had already left his face and were searching the forest, looking for a familiar figure.

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

The woman gave his shoulder one last squeeze before leaving him, crossing the clearing where the pyre had been in a few long strides and disappeared into the forest.

For a few heartbeats Lykeas watched the spot where the lean, graceful form of Xena had melted into the darkness, before he returned his gaze to the place where only an hour before the beautiful pyre of one Amazon Regent had been. Now there were only faint glowing embers left. One by one figures disappeared from the scene, some huddled close together, others lingering by themselves for just a moment before they, too walked away, leaving Lykeas alone. Having made certain there was no one left, he stepped closer till he stood directly above the embers, feeling the still surprisingly powerful heat against his skin. Small snakes of smoke dancing in a suddenly chill breeze made his already irritated eyes water again, and he had to blink a few times to focus. Then slowly, almost mechanically, he pulled out a small knife from his boot and began to cut off a few locks of his pitch black hair. When satisfied with the amount of hair in his hand, he returned the knife to the boot and looked back down at the embers. As he opened his hand and saw the hair floating for a second in the breeze

before falling down upon the embers, he spoke quietly, more releasing a breath than speaking actual words.

"I'm sorry, Ephiny."

Then without hesitating or lingering, he turned, walked out of the circle and was gone, leaving the fire to die in solitude.

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### THREE MONTHS EARLIER

Xena was happy to feel Greek soil under her feet once again. The trip to India had put a lot of strain on both her and Gabrielle in more ways than one, and just breathing the familiar scent of the Greek night made her feel considerably better than she had for weeks. She looked to her left and couldn't help smiling at the sight of Gabrielle walking next to her with an unmistakably sleepy expression in her eyes. They had been pushing themselves rather hard all day, but Xena had been very anxious to get back to more familiar territory and Gabrielle hadn't seemed to mind as long as she didn't have to ride. The landscape they had been travelling for most of the day had been rather open and hilly with only an occasional tree or bush to offer shadow or protection. Xena would've liked to find a more protected and secluded place to camp, but another glance at the bard told her they'd better stop now.

She reached out and gently touched the bard's shoulder.

"Let's stop and settle for the night. You look like you're about to drop."

"That sounds great," Gabrielle replied with a smile.

"I think I've been more or less sleepwalking for the last couple of miles."

"No kidding."

Xena chuckled and led the bard over to a small gathering of bushes. It wouldn't offer any kind of real protection, but at least she wouldn't feel compelled to check her back every other second. It didn't take long before they had a small fire going and the bedrolls put out next to each other on the ground. Gabrielle lay down on her stomach, hands under her chin, watching the fire. Xena came over from where she had been grooming Argo and sat down next to the bard with an audible sigh of contentment. Gabrielle turned her head slightly and looked at her.

"You're real happy to be back aren't you?"

Xena nodded and reached out to caress the bard's hair.

"It's been an eventful trip."

"You could say that again," Gabrielle said quietly and looked back to the fire.

"For both of us."

Xena started to say something, but changed her mind and instead reached down to pull Gabrielle up into her arms. With a small sigh Gabrielle nestled comfortably in Xena's embrace and rested her head against the warrior's shoulder. Xena knew she should go out hunting for dinner or at least get some dried meat from one of the saddlebags for them to eat, but right now moving was the last thing she felt like doing.

A few moments later the bard was asleep in Xena's arms and the last lingering thoughts about getting up disappeared from her mind.

*Too tired to even eat. That's gotta be some kind of record.*

She felt a bit guilty about pushing the bard so hard, but pushed the thought away.

*I'll make it up to her in the morning.*

Startled, Xena looked out into the night. She must have fallen asleep holding Gabrielle. And now for some reason she was awake again.

*Yeah, some reason,* she thought as her keen hearing picked up the faintest noise of somebody moving carefully through the bushes higher up the slope.

*I gotta be more careful. I should know better than to fall asleep like this.*

She carefully eased herself away from Gabrielle and gently lowered her down onto the bedroll. She considered for a second if she should wake her up, but decided against it. Judging from the noise there was only one person moving, and Gabrielle needed all the rest she could get. Besides, if she couldn't take care of one person anymore without help, she had some serious soul searching to do.

*Yeah right, like that would ever happen.*

She moved quietly out to the left, away from the camp. Although there were hardly any embers left of the fire it wouldn't escape the stranger's notice, unless he was both stupid and blind. And since Xena didn't really feel like a gambling woman when it came to Gabrielle's safety, she decided to be the one who made the first move. The stranger was moving quietly, if a bit carelessly, and Xena couldn't help but grin. This was going to be easy. Suddenly all noise disappeared and only the sounds of the night were heard. Xena felt a sudden urge to kill all the cicadas of the world as she strained to hear anything that would give away the stranger's location. It annoyed and confused her that she couldn't hear him until she realized what was happening. The stranger was listening as well. He had somehow heard her coming, although, she couldn't quite believe how that could be possible, and now he was waiting for her to make a sound and reveal herself. For the next few minutes the silence of the night was only broken by the occasional sound of an animal sneaking through bushes and the damned cicadas that simply didn't know when to shut up.

*This is ridiculous. I'm not standing here the entire night listening until one of us drops from exhaustion.*

A part of her was rather impressed by the stranger's skill, but another part, and a much bigger one for that, just wanted to grab him and throw him down the slope. Hard! Just as she had decided to make her move a quiet voice broke the silence.

"Xena... Is that you?"

The voice froze Xena to the spot for just a second.

"Lykeas?"

Gabrielle slowly opened her eyes and then immediately closed them again. It was only dawn and there was really no reason she could think of why she should get up before it was absolutely necessary. Besides, Xena loved those early hours and the peace and solitude it gave her, so she might as well sleep a little more. She subconsciously began to listen for the small sounds of Xena's morning rituals. How she would remain on the bedroll for a few seconds, with her eyes still closed before she would get up noiselessly and stretch her body, releasing a quiet sigh. Then she would get into her leathers and walk carefully, so not to wake her, to where Argo was and...

*Wait a minute!*

Gabrielle suddenly realized that she wasn't hearing anything of the sort and sat up quickly looking around the camp. There was no sign of Xena, nor any indication that she had slept there at all. Gabrielle distinctly remembered falling asleep in Xena's arms and fought to ignore the small sting of fear she felt in her stomach.

*Calm down, calm down. It isn't as if it's the first time she hasn't gone to sleep or wandered off somewhere. She probably was too exhausted to sleep, and besides she knows how to take care of herself. She probably just went for a walk or something.*

In spite of her own reasoning, Gabrielle couldn't help worrying as she got to her feet and noticed that the fire was out and had been for hours.

*That's not like Xena, she's always so concerned whether I'm too cold. Not that that was a likely scenario to ever happen.* Gabrielle smiled, in spite of herself.

She noticed Argo a few feet away nibbling on a bit of grass she had found underneath a bush.

*Well, at least she can't be too far away.*

Just as she had decided in which direction to go searching for the warrior, she heard her voice coming from the other side, and she turned around to face her. A perfect look of reproach and mock annoyance on her face.

"Xena, why do you always have to..."

She stopped dead in her tracks as she realized that the warrior wasn't alone. Standing next to her was a young man, perhaps only a few years younger than Xena. He was dressed in black leathers and armour with a deadly looking sword strapped to his waist. In his right hand he was holding an unstrung longbow and a quiver full with arrows could just be seen behind his right shoulder. Gabrielle let her eyes fall to his boots which were made out of soft leather and continued her gaze up his bare legs till the knees where his leather tunic began. She didn't stop there, but continued upwards the lean, muscular body till her eyes met the stranger's and she found herself looking into the blackest pair of eyes she had ever seen. It was difficult to make out where the pupils stopped and the irises began. His bronze face was framed by tossed black hair and in spite of a long thin scar running from just below the chin down the throat,

Gabrielle couldn't help but think.

*Gods, this man is beautiful! I wonder if I'm still dreaming.*

"Gabrielle," Xena's voice interrupted the bard's musings.

"I want you to meet an old friend of mine, this is Lykeas. Lykeas, this is Gabrielle."

"My pleasure," the stranger said in a low, melodic voice as he reached out and took her hand.

"So, you're the one who's responsible for all the great tales involving Xena."

Gabrielle could only nod at first, but then she found her voice again.

"Oh, it's so nice to meet you. I don't get to meet many of Xena's past friends. Usually people from her past are more interested in trying to kill her than walking down memory lane."

The last comment resulted in two dangerously high raised eyebrows and a small chuckle from Lykeas. "Yeah, I could imagine."

Xena, finding the line of conversation rather unnecessary, began gently but firmly to push her two friends towards the camp.

"Let's get another fire started and breakfast ready before we go down any kind of lane if you don't mind." "Good idea," Gabrielle said as if she suddenly remembered something.

"I'm starving!"

Xena went for the saddlebags and Gabrielle began to make the fire, but felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Let me do that."

Without really knowing why Gabrielle complied and took a few steps away and faster than she had ever thought possible the fire was burning brightly again.

"You're good at that," she said with admiration in her voice. "How do you do it so fast?"

"Well," Lykeas said smiling, "I guess I just don't like being cold."

Xena came back with some dried meat and fruit and sat down next to Gabrielle, who had gotten herself as comfortably close to the fire as she could get without getting burned. Lykeas sat opposite them at a slightly more bearable distance to the fire.

"I'm sorry that I can't contribute with anything for breakfast," Lykeas began, looking at Xena. "But Rarjan disappeared from me yesterday with all my belongings."

To Gabrielle's surprised Xena laughed out loud.

"Do you still have that beast of a horse!? I was sure he would've gotten you killed long ago."

"Well," Lykeas smiled a bit sheepishly. "He's not the same horse that you knew. This

one is the son of the old one. I've had him for a couple of years now."

Xena shook her head in disbelief.

"I'll never understand why you kept the old one in the first place. He was more trouble than he was worth. I can't recall all the times he ran off or tried to throw you."

"Yeah well," Lykeas said. "He had a lot of good qualities too. He was the fastest and most durable horse I'd ever seen. And his son has those qualities in equal measure.

Unfortunately," he paused and caught Gabrielle's eye, "he also got all the bad ones and they seem to have tripled in him."

Gabrielle couldn't help but laugh at the image of a big, bad horse throwing off the dark warrior in front of her.

"I hope I get to meet him soon. Perhaps I can teach him some manners."

"That's probably too late by now," Lykeas replied dryly. "I'm quite sure he's a lost cause."

"Don't be too sure about that," Gabrielle said, giving Xena a look.

"I'm very good at reforming old, stubborn, war-crazy...uhh... horses."

Xena leaned over slightly, giving Gabrielle her best stare.

"So I'm a horse now am I?"

"Oh no...no. That's not what I meant," Gabrielle exclaimed, pretending to be worried by Xena's menacing glare.

"All I meant was that when it comes to certain things I have a real good touch."

"That you do for sure."

Xena leaned closer and looked Gabrielle straight in the eye. Gabrielle could feel a blush appear on her cheeks and was for once speechless. Lykeas watched the playful banter in front of him with a slightly amused, if not puzzled smile. Remembering they weren't alone Gabrielle pushed Xena away and turned her attention back to Lykeas.

"So how did the two of you meet?"

Lykeas glanced quickly at Xena, who was suddenly fully engaged in a piece of dried meat.

"I used to ride with her."

"Ride?"

For a second Gabrielle didn't comprehend, then realization hit her.

"You mean you..." She trailed off.

"Yeah, I was in her army." Lykeas' eyes locked on Xena.

"I used to ride under the banners of the Warrior Princess."

For a moment the air was heavy with silence. Then Xena cleared her throat.

"But that's a long time ago. He left my army even before I did."

Gabrielle's gaze went from Lykeas to Xena and back again.

"Hey, it's okay. It's not a problem," she began.

"I'd sort of guessed it already. I mean...it's not like you look like a fisherman or anything."

"Nah," Lykeas replied. "That's more Xena's department."

The tension that had been forming between them disappeared again by this last remark and the trio ate their breakfast in silence, one caught up in thoughts and the two others in memories. When they had finished their meal, Gabrielle began to gather their belongings and put them back into the saddlebags before fastening them to Argo's back. Lykeas slowly rose to his feet and started dusting himself off. Suddenly he felt a familiar stare at his back and he turned around to see Xena watching him with a speculative look in her eyes.

"So... Where were you heading before we ran into each other last night?"

Lykeas just shrugged.

"Nowhere really... I'd thought about perhaps visiting Pella, but nothing definite...Why?"

"Nothing, just curious."

They stood a moment in silence in front of each other.

"And you... Where are you heading?"

"We've been thinking about either going to visit our families or..." Xena faltered, "or the Amazons."

Lykeas nodded to himself.

"That's right. I'd heard that they had gotten a new Queen.... It's quite a travelling companion you have there," he continued and looked at Gabrielle, busy with feeding Argo an apple.

"Bard, queen and tamer of horses all in one."

"Yeah, she's quite something."

Xena's smile lit up her face and Lykeas couldn't help but return it.

"What's so funny?"

Gabrielle had turned towards them and was looking at the two warriors with questioning eyes.

"Did I miss something?"

They shook their heads simultaneously.

"No, just walking down memory lane. And speaking of walking," Xena looked back to Lykeas. "When do you think that monster of yours that you call a horse intends to return?"

"Oh, well," Lykeas scratched his cheek. "Probably sometime tonight. He usually doesn't stay away too long."

"Uhum," Xena replied, raising an eyebrow. "If you say so. Though, I seem to recall a certain day when-."

"That's was his father!" Lykeas interrupted, "And he just got lost... It happens."

"Yeah, sure," Xena went over to Argo and nuzzled the horse between her ears.

"You wouldn't do something like that, would ya girl?"

Gabrielle had watched the entire exchange with quiet amusement. It was nice to see Xena relax and make fun again, and she realized with a rueful smile that it'd been quite a while since she last experienced this playful side of the warrior. Lykeas, feigning hurt, looked resigned towards the sky.

"Rarjan loves me very much. Really he does...He just has a lot of...of personality."

"That goes without saying."

Xena gave Argo one last caress before she put one foot into the stirrup and swung herself up. She shifted in the saddle and looked down at him.

"You wanna join us for a while? Just till Rarjan shows up?"

Lykeas found himself the target of both the expectant gazes of Xena and Gabrielle, and after a few seconds he relented.

"Sure, why not? Guess it's not gonna hurt anyone."

He looked at Gabrielle.

"Need a hand to get up?"

"Oh no, I'd much rather walk, and frankly it'll be nice to have someone to talk to, who isn't either three miles ahead of me or three miles behind me. Or three miles above me," she added with a playful smile at Xena.

"Gabrielle gets dizzy stepping over a bump in the road," Xena retorted.

"It's her luck she isn't any taller than she is, or else she'd be constantly staggering around, falling over whatever came in her way."

Lykeas stared at the two women till they both returned their attention to him and a smile flickered across his face.

"As much as I'm enjoying this little war of...words. Do you think we could get going

now? After all, I have a horse to find."

## CHAPTER II

It was midday and the scorching heat from the sun was slowly but surely draining all energy from the three travellers. They had tried to take it slow and remain in shadow as much as possible, but it'd still be awhile before the landscape changed into actual forest, and there was no protection along the dusty road. Xena looked up at the blue sky, not a cloud in sight. Her leathers clung to her hot and sweaty body, and not for the first time that day she wondered why it was she loved wearing them so much. She had removed most of her armour an hour ago, realizing that she wouldn't be much good in a fight anyway if she passed out from heat stroke first. Her main concern, however, was their lack of water. They only had one water skin left and it was less than half full. It would hardly have been enough for just her and Gabrielle, and even with Lykeas drinking just enough to prevent from dropping, they would run out soon. The only spring which location she knew for certain was at least 20 miles further ahead. It would take too long.

She turned in the saddle and her heart cringed at the sight of Gabrielle stumbling only to be caught in the last second by Lykeas. She desperately let her eyes search their surroundings for any sight of shadow. Her eyes came to rest on a rock hovering slightly over the road further ahead. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"Lykeas," she turned to look at her friend

"You and Gabrielle are going to stay here by that rock," her head indicating the direction and Lykeas eyes followed slowly, squinting against the sun.

"I'm gonna ride ahead to the spring and refill the skins. It shouldn't take too long."

*It'd better not*, she added to herself, looking at Gabrielle.

"It wont provide much shadow," Lykeas managed, his voice hardly more than a hoarse whisper.

"Not for now," Xena agreed. "But when the sun begins to descend it'll get better and if you move around the rock following its shadow, it should be okay."

Lykeas only nodded, there wasn't really anything he could say. Xena dismounted and without a word swept the bard into her arms, and carried her the last of the way to the rock. Carefully she put the bard down against the hard rock, its shadow barely covering half of her face. Gabrielle smiled weakly at her.

"Gods, I'm thirsty. I think I'd even settle for that horrible port of yours."

Xena leaned downward and let her lips brush the bard's forehead. The skin felt hot and moist and she could taste the salt on her lips.

"I'm afraid you'll have to make do with water for now," she said, feigning a cheerfulness she didn't feel. "I doubt that any spring in this area provide anything else than that, but I'll have a look around."

"Come back soon, will you?"

Xena felt the silent plea go straight to her heart.

"Of course," she leaned forward and kissed the bard again, "nothing could keep me away."

"Good," Gabrielle smiled and leaned back against the rock, closing her eyes.

Walking back to Argo where Lykeas had been standing holding the reins, she took the last skin and handed it to him.

"Make sure she drinks."

Then she mounted and looked down at her friend.

"I don't know how long it'll be before I get back, but it won't be before dark."

"Xena," Lykeas' voice was quiet. "You don't actually think I'm gonna let you ride non stop for hours in this heat without any water. You wouldn't last a mile."

"Lykeas..." Xena's voice did nothing to hide the aggravation she was feeling. "I don't have much of a choice do I? Look at her!"

They both turned their gaze to the reclining bard.

"She needs it more than I do."

The words were spoken softly and Lykeas looked at her with understanding in his eyes. He reached up and touched her leg just beneath the knee.

"You know very well that Gabrielle and I will last much longer without water than you will. We won't be moving and we have a decent bit of shadow that'll only improve in time."

He patted her leg.

"Don't make me get rough on you."

Xena opened her mouth to give an angry retort, but slowly closed it again. She knew he was right. She didn't have to like it, and she most certainly didn't, but he was right. Grudgingly, she accepted the skin he handed up and returned it to its place in the saddlebag. For a moment she held his gaze and then, nothing more than a whisper.

"Take care of her."

"I will."

With one last look at the bard, Xena dug her heels into Argo's side, the horse jumped forward and they soon disappeared in the dust of the road.

Lykeas watched the last clouds of dust settle and dissolve before he turned and walked back to the rock. He removed the quiver from his back, and took off his armour before he sat down next to the bard. Gabrielle was pale, her face covered in sweat and she hadn't opened her eyes or in any other way indicated that she was aware of his presence.

"Hey, Gabrielle?"

She opened her eyes and turned her head towards him. She blinked a few times and then gave him a weak smile.

"Thanks."

"What for?"

"Insisting that she take the water. She can be so stubborn sometimes."

Lykeas let a hand run through his damp hair and turned his gaze to where Xena had disappeared down the road.

"I know."

They sat in silence, their breaths subconsciously falling in to the same laboured rhythm. A wave of nausea suddenly washed through Lykeas' body and he had to control himself so as not to throw up. A hand touched his shoulder.

"I bet you feel just as bad as you look right now."

She was rewarded with a small smile.

"Yeah well, green doesn't really go with my eyes."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, but perhaps a less sickly looking colour would be better."

"I'll remember that the next time."

The nausea finally passed and Lykeas leaned back against the rock, relief evident on his face. Gabrielle was feeling both tired and thirsty. She didn't remember ever being so thirsty before in her life. Her throat was feeling like a piece of parchment, and she didn't even have any saliva left to moisten her tongue. Her head was heavy and her eyes burning, but most of all she wished that the world would stop spinning. It was making her rather dizzy. She closed her eyes.

"Hey, I'm not sure you should sleep right now."

Lykeas' voice brought her back to reality.

"You're right...it's just... I'm so tired."

"You could tell me a story. That would keep us both awake."

Gabrielle tried to gather her thoughts and come up with a suitable story, but her mind was in turmoil and she couldn't concentrate.

"I'm afraid I'm not really capable of telling a story right now," she paused and looked at Lykeas. "But what about you?"

"Oh, I'm not really a storyteller. I have no imagination, I'm much more of a listener myself."

"It doesn't have to be a story. Tell me something about yourself. Tell me...tell me

how you and Xena met, we didn't get to finish the topic last time."

Gabrielle could feel Lykeas' eyes search her face, and again she had to marvel at their blackness. It was almost uncanny. Whether he found what he was looking for or not she couldn't tell, but after a while he turned his gaze to his right boot, and picked out a small knife. He played with it for another few seconds before looking back at Gabrielle.

"I met her shortly after the attack on Amphipolis. She was on her way to Athens with some of the kids who had decided to follow her and I just tagged along."

Gabrielle looked at him with amusement..

"You were right. You're not much of a storyteller."

He shrugged.

"Told you so."

Gabrielle decided she wasn't going to pass down an opportunity to learn more about Xena's past, particularly when her source of information was an old friend, and not an old mortal enemy which was the way it usually worked.

"Come on. You can do better than that. What were you doing before you followed her? What about your family? They just let you leave? You can't have been very old at the time?"

"I was fourteen."

Gabrielle digested the new information for just a second, her curiosity soaring to new heights.

"That's even younger than when I left home. Did your parents really allow you to go? I mean... Mine were less than happy when I told them. And why did you want to go in the first place? Although, I can kinda understand that," she trailed off, a distant expression in her eyes.

"Well, I didn't really have a family at the time and I had nowhere else to go so..."

He was playing with the knife again.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Gabrielle reached out and put her hand on his. She was about to speak when she noticed him staring at the small bracelet she had on her right wrist.

"That's Artemis' Bracelet isn't it? The one that only the Queen is allowed to wear. The one that signifies you as her chosen."

Gabrielle removed her hand in surprise.

"Yes, that's right. How did you know? I mean, not a lot of outsiders know about that and, no offence, but least of all men."

Silence, then.

"My mother was an Amazon."

"Really?"

Gabrielle didn't know what to think about this last revelation. Usually when an Amazon gave birth to a boy, he was given away to a farmer and his wife to raise as their own. They usually didn't tell them about their origins, and they were certainly not taught any Amazon customs or traditions. Something wasn't right. As if sensing her confusion Lykeas continued, his eyes never leaving the knife.

"I wasn't given away or raised by the Centaurs...but that's a long story... And it's a long time ago."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Gabrielle's voice was soft and soothing, and Lykeas found himself slowly raising his head to look at her.

"There isn't much to tell."

"Tell me." The voice was a plea, a whisper and a command, and Lykeas couldn't help but comply.

*So that's what Xena sees in her... She's so much stronger than she appears.*

He tried to hold her gaze, but soon his eyes flickered back to the knife in his hand.

"My mother was an Amazon. From your village, actually. I guess it's true when they say it's a small world."

"Go on."

"Well, apparently, and this is something I've been told so I don't know what's true and what's not, but apparently, my mother and her lover became involved with another woman. This other woman was in love with Naiari, that was the name of my mother's lover, and Naiari wasn't quite oblivious to the woman's attentions."

Gabrielle closed her eyes for a second. Lovers' quarrels between Amazons wasn't news to her and usually everything worked out in the end, but sometimes... Well...sometimes things got ugly.

She opened her eyes again.

"Were they joined? Your mother and this Naiari?"

Lykeas nodded.

"Yeah. So I've been told."

"What happened?" The question was barely audible, Gabrielle feeling she wasn't going to like the answer.

"It came to a fight. My mother almost killed the other woman and she was banned from Amazon lands for life. Naiari wanted to follow her, but my mother wouldn't let her, besides she had a young daughter to think of so..."

For a moment his hand stilled, then he began playing with the knife again, this time digging it into the ground.

"My mother loved the Amazons and she was heartbroken that she could no longer live among them, so she did the only thing she could think of. She went to Lemea."

"Lemea?" Gabrielle wiped a drop of sweat from her left temple.

"What's that? A city?"

"Well, it was more of a small village. It was founded by a group of exiles from the Nation, who couldn't bear to live their lives as anything but Amazons. And through the years it grew, more exiles came and a small community was created."

"I've never heard about that village before."

"You wouldn't have. It doesn't exist anymore... Besides is not really a subject that comes up around Amazon campfires very often."

"What happened then?"

For the time being all thoughts about being thirsty had disappeared from Gabrielle's mind.

"On her way to Lemea, my mother ran into a troop of soldiers on their way back to Athens. They just passed, but later that night one came back and...and raped her... That man was later to become my father."

Gabrielle felt her heart ache for the dark warrior next to her and she reached out to touch his shoulder. He looked up, confusion in his eyes. She thought he was going to move, but instead he just dropped his eyes back to the knife.

"Anyway, after he was...done, he told her never to forget his name, never to forget how it was to be with a real man and not some unnatural harlot."

Gabrielle could feel him tense at the last words, and she gave his shoulder gentle squeeze. She felt she should say something, offer comfort, but she couldn't find the words.

Lykeas continued, his voice even and void of any emotion.

"When she came to Lemea she was allowed to settle down and make herself a home. They never turned anyone away... Perhaps they should have."

He looked up at the sun.

"We should move?"

"W...what?"

Gabrielle's mind had been far away and hadn't quite returned to reality.

"The sun has moved and so have the shadows. If we move around the rock to the right there'll be more shadow."

"Of course...of course, you're right."

They got up and moved themselves and their belongings a few feet to the right. When they were settled, Gabrielle reached out again and took the knife from Lykeas' motionless fingers. She put it down on the dry grass in front of them, then turned her gaze to him, trying to make eye contact.

"Are you going to tell me the rest?"

He didn't look up.

"Are you sure you wanna hear the rest? I mean...it isn't really that interesting...and as I said before it's a long time ago."

"Tell me."

"Okay...if you really want to... "

His hand went out to pick up the knife again, and Gabrielle didn't try to stop him.

"In spite of Lemea being founded by Amazons it wasn't like the villages you know. You have to remember that most of the exiles were there for a reason, and not just because they wanted to live somewhere else. They honoured the Amazon traditions and regulations, but mostly in name only and I think they all felt more or less abandoned by Artemis. Although, I guess it should be the other way around."

His throat was burning and he desperately wished he had something to drink.

"Lisisis, the self-appointed leader of the village, took a liking to my mother and decided she should live with her. At that time my mother was only a few weeks away from giving birth and didn't have the strength to go hunting for herself, and since nobody else was going to do so, she agreed and moved in with her. Lisisis was not a...a kind woman, but to give her credit, I think she really loved my mother in her own way. At least that's the only reason I can think of for her to..." He trailed off for a moment, then continued.

"The night my mother gave birth, something went... something went wrong. I tore something inside her on my way out and they couldn't stop the bleeding. She died a few hours later."

"What was her name?"

Gabrielle suddenly felt compelled to know the name of the woman, who'd experienced so much pain in such a short time.

Lykeas looked up into her eyes.

"Lykeia." A small smile flickered across his face, then disappeared.

"They named me after her."

### CHAPTER III

For a few moments they were both silent as Gabrielle tried to absorb all she had heard. She knew that even though she was the Queen of the Amazons there were still

a lot of things she didn't know much about, Amazon history being one of them. She couldn't help but wonder why nobody had ever mentioned Lemea before, why it had never come up in one of the many conversations about customs, traditions and simply living your life as an Amazon she had had with Ephiny.

"Tell me the rest."

Lykeas, who had been chewing on a nail, looked at her with weariness in his eyes.

"I'm usually not this talkative."

She just looked at him and he gave in with a small shrug.

"My mother's death changed Lisisis. She had been cold before, but now she turned outright...well... unpleasant. I've been told that first she wanted to kill me right after the birth, but for some reason she spared my life, and because of the rather unusual circumstances regarding Lemea, I was permitted to stay. Not that I think anybody gave a damn anyway, but still."

He paused and was silent for several minutes, and Gabrielle knew by instinct that she shouldn't push it. After all, living side by side with an ex-warlord for four years had given her quite some insight into the human mind. Still, she was surprised when he spoke again.

"I spent the next fourteen years of my life in Lemea. I soon learned to fight for myself, and I guess that's something I'll always be grateful to Lisisis for. She taught me a lot about...about life. She taught me that if you don't control your life somebody else will, and if you're strong enough you can treat anybody the way it pleases you. She was very good at proving...proving a point."

He leaned back and tried to become more comfortable against the rock.

"When I was about twelve things had started to change in Lemea. The village was slowly being divided into two factions. One wanted to live more like they had before. They wanted to live by the laws and regulations followed in the Nation, and they said they wanted to be the children of Artemis once again. The other half, however, wasn't interested in changing things and that group was led by Lisisis. Small confrontations kept erupting, but nobody was really able to get the upper hand. Things sort of stayed like that for two years, and probably would've for a lot longer if something hadn't happened."

He raised his head and blacked locked onto green.

"I was on my way home from hunting. I don't recall what I'd shot,... guess it doesn't matter anyway. When I reached the village centre Lisisis jumped me. I don't know why, she was drunk, but she usually didn't...bother me in public. But that day she did. When she wasn't having fun anymore, she stopped and walked towards the tavern. I remember a small crowd had gathered; crowds gathered easily in Lemea."

Lykeas' voice had dropped an octave or two.

"I don't know what went through my head in that moment. What exactly made me get up and follow her. It wasn't the first time something like that happened... Perhaps it was because everybody saw it.... One thing is being humiliated in private, it's quite

another thing to be so in public."

His brow furrowed as if contemplating an interesting dilemma.

"Anyway, I jumped her from behind and broke her neck. She was dead before she hit the ground."

His voice was so matter-of-fact that Gabrielle at first didn't think she had heard him right.

"You mean...you killed her?"

"Uh huh. I thought that they would've had me executed on the spot for killing an Amazon, but apparently Lisisis' death was all it took for the other fraction to gain control of the village, and I was allowed to speak for myself at the first public hearing Lemea had ever witnessed. I didn't really have much to say, but a few others spoke out on my behalf, and since nobody had had any love for Lisisis, I was permitted to leave the village with my belongings under the condition that I never put a foot on Lemean ground again. As if I wanted to... Well, I travelled on my own for a week or two, before I eventually ran into Xena, and that's how we met."

Gabrielle averted her eyes for a moment, she couldn't look at Lykeas right now. Her mind was trying to come to terms with all she had learned, and another part of her simply didn't want to believe that any Amazon would deliberately hurt an innocent just for the fun of it. The name Velasca suddenly popped into her head and she forced the thought away.

She looked up at him again and was surprised to see him smile at her. He reached out and gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

"It's a long time ago, Gabrielle."

She opened her mouth to speak, but Lykeas raised his hand to silence her.

"Shh, do you hear that?"

"Hear, hear what?"

Gabrielle could only hear the wind in the bushes and the few birds the sun hadn't chased away.

"It's a horse and it's coming this way."

Gabrielle suddenly heard the faintest noise of hooves coming from what sounded to be the direction they had been travelling earlier that day.

"That's not Xena. Is it?"

"Nope." A smile lit up Lykeas' face.

"That's Rarjan."

The red sun was slowly setting to the West as rider and horse hurried down the dusty road. The red light was making the landscape shimmer in a supernatural glow, battling with the shadows for domination, but the warrior had no interest in admiring the sight.

Even the singing of the cicadas which had increased in volume steadily for the last hour, failed to get her attention. The cool air of the night was slowly, but efficiently driving the heat of the day away, and an occasional shiver would run through the warrior's body as it adjusted to the new temperatures. Her damp hair and leathers felt uncomfortable against her skin, but as she recognized a certain sharp curve of the road ahead, all thoughts of discomfort left her mind. She was almost there. When she finally arrived at the rock, the sun had lost its battle with the shadows and gone into hiding for the night. Almost before Argo had stopped moving, she jumped out of the saddle and ran toward the small flicker of a fire. The sight that greeted her made her pause and stare for a few seconds. Gabrielle was lying curled up on her side with her face towards the fire. A grey wool blanket covered her body and Xena could just make out the shape of a bedroll underneath her. She was sleeping peacefully, eyelids moving ever so slightly as if dreaming. Shadows danced across her face, and golden highlights played in her hair making it seem like a small fire of its own. It was the most beautiful sight Xena had ever seen. She stepped closer, careful not to wake her and sat down next to the sleeping form on the ground.

"I've taken care of Argo."

Xena looked up, and as he stepped closer, the fire revealed the dark silhouette of Lykeas.

"She and Rarjan are just getting to know each other."

"Thanks."

She took the saddlebags he handed to her.

"So Rarjan finally showed up?"

"Yep," he smiled, revealing a row of white teeth. "Couldn't be without me any longer."

"What about the water?"

Lykeas pointed towards a water skin almost hidden behind Gabrielle.

"I had one in Rarjan's saddlebag and there was just enough left, so..."

He paused.

"But I sure am glad that you're back with some more."

She handed him one of the water skins and he took a few deep draughts before he returned it.

"Gabrielle, she's all right?"

Lykeas nodded and leaned back against Rarjan's saddle.

"Yeah, just pretty exhausted."

Silence as the fire crackled in symphony with the cicadas.

"She means a lot to you, doesn't she?"

"She dictates the beats of my heart."

Lykeas looked up in surprise, an indefinable expression on his face.

Xena just shrugged and smiled a bit sheepishly.

"She does that to me."

Then to avoid his gaze, she got out their bedrolls and tossed one together with a blanket to him, before she put out the other behind Gabrielle and covered them both with a blanket. With a small sigh she put her arms around the bard and pulled her close. Gabrielle turned in her sleep and buried her head in Xena's hair.

"Goodnight;" Xena whispered, feeling the familiar joy of just being close to the bard.

"Goodnight," Lykeas answered, rolling out the bedroll and then returning to his comfortable position against the saddle. Soon the quiet breathing told him that Xena had fallen asleep, but it wasn't till the black eyes had watched the last of the fire disappear and die that he himself found some rest.

They had travelled a good time past noon when they were attacked. The day had begun peacefully enough with breakfast and pleasant conversation, and when they had been ready to leave, as in an unspoken agreement, Lykeas had joined them. Xena had been riding a few feet ahead of Gabrielle and Lykeas walking next to each other, the latter holding Rarjan's reins in a firm grip. Nothing significant had happened during the first early hours, and they had all been pleased to see the landscape turn more vigorous and rich for each mile they travelled. But now they suddenly found themselves more or less surrounded by six men.

Xena knew she hadn't been paying attention. For the last mile or so, she had felt an all too familiar uneasiness, but she had been reluctant to allow her instincts to take over and spoil her good mood. However, now she wasn't left much of a choice. As the men began to circle them, a ferocious smile crossed her lips and she threw a glance backwards to see her smile mirrored by Lykeas.

"Don't get any closer boys. I'm not in the mood for a fight today."

The men didn't even halt their approach and a huge, savage looking man holding a battleaxe in his left hand, turned his head and gave his comrades a toothless grin.

"Too bad that we are, eh boys? Or perhaps you two ladies could get in the mood for something else, while we get rid of your little friend thereuugh..."

He didn't get to finish the sentence and stared in disbelief at the still vibrating arrow sticking out of his throat before he fell heavily to the ground.

"Nice shoot," Xena commented as she released her chakram and took out the man to her right.

"Likewise," Lykeas replied as he threw his bow to the ground and drew his sword.

"To your left!"

Xena's foot connected squarely with the jaw of a third bandit, who had been intent on

stabbing her from behind, and he dropped with a groan.

"Thanks, but I'd have gotten him anyway."

"I know," Lykeas grinned. "Just speeding things up a bit."

All while the fighting had been going on, Gabrielle had slowly been backing away till she suddenly felt her back come up against a hard, smelly surface. She turned and saw a thin, lanky man reach out for her with a triumphant grin on his face.

"I got ya now, missy."

She dodged his hands and took a few steps away from him.

"I don't want to fight you."

"That just makes it easier for me, missy."

Behind her, Gabrielle heard the sound of another body hitting the ground, closely followed by a second.

The man pointed his sword at her and took a step closer.

"Now come here, little girl, why not make it easier for us all. I'm not gonna hurt ya...much"

"I told you, I don't want to-," a body flew through the air and landed heavily on the man's chest, bringing them both to the ground, "-fight you."

Xena brought her elbow down against the man's head and he went out cold. She got back on her feet and dusted a bit of sand from her hands and clothing.

"You okay?"

Gabrielle nodded, though she was experiencing an unpleasant sensation run through her body. She couldn't quite find the exact word to describe it, but it was something in the range of...uselessness."

"Thanks for your help."

Xena gave her a little smile.

"Hey, that's what I'm here for."

Then she turned serious, her eyes searching the bard's face.

"But it would be nice if you'd..."

She interrupted herself before she said something she might regret.

"Nevermind," she reached out and patted Gabrielle's shoulder. "I'm just glad you weren't hurt."

Then she turned and walked back to Lykeas, who was busy cleaning his sword.

"How many dead?"

"Four," he answered. "And the rest won't wake up for a while."

"Good," she said and got back into the saddle.

"Let's move on."

She looked back at Gabrielle, who hadn't moved from the spot.

"Gabrielle? Are you coming?"

The bard looked up, a strange expression in her eyes.

"Oh, sorry, just lost myself for a while there."

"Uh huh."

In a matter of seconds they were back on the road.

#### CHAPTER IV

By the time they reached the outskirts of the first forest they had seen for days, it was decided without much discussion to stop and make camp. Although it was still early evening, everybody felt like they deserved to relax and enjoy themselves for a while. As Xena took care of the horses and Gabrielle prepared camp, Lykeas went out in search for water. They still had plenty of water to drink, but all of them felt in great need of a bath. They were covered by dust and sweat and their clothes clung to their bodies, making them all feel uncomfortable and dirty. Lykeas left his sword and armour with the others, but brought his bow along with him in case he should come across some game, since he was getting increasingly tired of dried meat. Ten minutes later and a mile further into the forest, three rabbits hung from his shoulder and the hunter was feeling rather pleased with himself. That had been easy. He wondered if he should shoot another since Gabrielle seemed to be capable of eating quite a lot, but decided against it. He was too exhausted and unless it jumped right into his arms, he didn't want to bother with catching another.

Suddenly he noticed the ground under his feet become softer and less dense. The almost invisible path he had been following broadened and he found himself at the bank of a small lake. It was surrounded by tall trees all the way round, and only a few rays of light penetrated the moist, green darkness. Lykeas dropped his bow and quiver, removed several knives and daggers from various places on his body, put the rabbits on the ground, took a deep breath and jumped into the lake fully clothed. The water was cool and felt wonderful against his skin. Unfortunately, it was also full of water lilies and duckweed so it wouldn't do for them to drink, but for the horses it would be just fine. He swam around for a few minutes, avoiding duckweed whenever possible and not until he had thoroughly removed the last traces of dust and sweat did he return to the camp dripping wet. Xena heard him approach and looked up.

"Looks like you found some water."

"Yep, too dirty to drink, but very nice for a swim."

He sat down next to the fire in his still wet clothes and placed the three rabbits next to him on the ground.

"It's only about a mile south from here, you can't miss it."

"Sounds wonderful!" Gabrielle exclaimed grabbing a towel. "I've wanted a bath for the last week!"

"And needed it too," Xena smirked, finding a towel for herself.

Gabrielle just rolled her eyes and disappeared into the forest. Xena waited for a second then looked at Lykeas.

"We may be a while."

Lykeas looked up from the rabbit he had started to clean.

"Sure, just take your time. I'll start dinner while the two of you...get cleaned."

He smiled innocently at Xena, who couldn't help but blush just a little.

Then she returned his smile with one of her own and headed in the direction of the lake.

It didn't take her long to find the small lake and see that Gabrielle had already taken residence in it. For a second she considered whether she should follow the same procedure as Lykeas and jump in with her clothes on, but the sight of Gabrielle's clothes lying discarded on the ground quickly drove the thought from her mind. In no time she was out of her leathers and made a perfect header into the lake. Diving under the water, she didn't surface till she was right next to the bard, who looked at her with mild amusement.

"Show off."

Xena wrapped her arms around the bard, pleased that she could reach the bottom with her feet so she didn't have to tread water.

"Do you mind?" She leaned forward and took an earlobe into her mouth, biting slightly.

"Uh huh, not really," Gabrielle said, feeling quite distracted by the warm lips, now slowly travelling down her jaw. "But what if Lykeas shows up?"

"He wont," Xena said, continuing her journey to the other tasty earlobe. "Besides, you can hide behind me if he does."

"How noble," Gabrielle smiled, putting her arms around Xena's neck. "But what about you?"

"Oh," Xena replied, feeling a rapid beating pulse against her lips. "He's already seen me naked."

"He what...?" Gabrielle began, but her words were cut off by a hot mouth and then tongue demanding entry. As her mouth complied and Xena's skilled tongue and hands drove her last coherent thoughts away, she made a mental note of returning to that particular topic in a not so distant future.

"This is good!"

Lykeas looked at the bard, "Thanks, but it really isn't that hard to make."

"No, but really," she continued, her eyes looking appreciatively at the stew in her bowl. "This really *is* good! Until now I thought it was against the laws of nature for a warrior to be able to cook."

Xena arched an eyebrow, but decided not to begin fighting a losing battle.

"She's right, Lykeas. It tastes great."

He put his own bowl down on the ground and tried to appear indifferent, but couldn't hide the pleased expression showing on his face for just a second.

"Well, I guess I just don't like to go hungry, and dried meat does tend to get to me after a while so..." he trailed off, hoping they would change the subject.

Xena, recognizing his mood, decided a change of conversation was in order and began searching her mind for something to say, when she was beaten to it by Gabrielle.

"So, I hear you've seen Xena naked?"

Xena felt the water she'd been drinking go down the wrong pipe and began coughing violently. Gabrielle just looked innocently at her.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Lykeas looked down for a moment, grinning to himself.

"You sure know how to become the centre of attention," he then said, and turned his eyes to Xena, who was still coughing.

"Well, I am a bard after all... So? Have you?"

Xena finally calming down enough to speak, looked at the bard with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Oh yeah, all the time. We used to be all over each other, tearing each other's clothes off with our teeth. People used to call us the busy bongo bunnies."

This caused Lykeas to laugh out loud and Xena had a very hard time not cracking up, seeing the bard's rather stunned expression.

Lykeas had to dry his eyes and clear his throat a few times before he could look at Xena again, and even then the corners of his mouth kept curling up.

"Yeah right! No don't worry, Gabrielle. It's nothing of the sort. I just used to take care of Xena's wounds whenever necessary and she took care of mine. After a while you don't even notice it anymore."

He looked at Xena and they exchanged a quiet smile, making Gabrielle feel a bit left out.

"I've pulled more arrows out of that body, and sewn more gashes than I care to remember."

"Yeah, me too," Xena replied and they looked at each other again, sharing another enigmatic smile.

They were all silent for a moment. Then Gabrielle decided to change the subject once again.

"So, back then, you were a regular member of Xena's army?"

"Naah," Lykeas chased away a mosquito. "Not really. I would ride with them for a couple of months, and then I would leave for a couple of months, and then, I would come back again for a couple months. It was sort of an on and off thing."

"Why didn't you stay?"

"I'm not much of a...a people's person. I tend to get restless after a while, particularly if I'm constantly surrounded by tons of people. It just gets...it gets too...too crowded."

Xena looked at Lykeas with interest, she remembered well when this particular restlessness took hold of him and the consequences of it. Even then, when he had tried to explain to her why he had to leave...again, she hadn't quite understood. But she had always let him go, knowing that he would eventually return, and that she couldn't stop him even if she wanted to. It had been one of the few things she had actually looked forward to back in those days, Lykeas returning from wherever he had been.

As if suddenly feeling uncomfortable, Lykeas got to his feet.

"I'll go check on the horses."

Gabrielle looked at Xena with confusion in her eyes.

"I didn't offend him did I?"

"No," Xena got to her feet as well. "It's just, he usually doesn't talk this much. Or at least he didn't."

She smiled at the bard.

"It does take a bit of getting used to."

She started to walk in the direction of the horses, then looked back at Gabrielle.

"I think I'll check on the horses as well, shouldn't take long."

Gabrielle nodded, wondering if she had missed something important.

Lykeas was slowly grooming Rarjan when Xena arrived, and for a while they stood in complete silence, bestowing each horse with gentle affection. Xena was the first to break the silence.

"Gabrielle and I have decided to pay a visit to the Amazons."

The only indication that he had heard the words was a slight pause of the hand ruffling Rarjan's mane.

"It should take us about a month to get there if everything goes well."

Still no response.

"I've heard that the area before Amazon lands has been quite harried by robbers and troublemakers lately."

Lykeas nodded, he'd heard that too.

"It'd be nice in case of a fight that there'd be two to fight them instead of one."

"What about Gabrielle?" The voice was even, betraying no emotion. "Doesn't she know how to fight?"

Xena sighed, "She did... I mean, she still does, but she doesn't want to use a weapon anymore. Not even in self defence."

This caused Lykeas to turn his head and look at her.

"You're kidding?"

"No, but sometimes I'd wish I were."

Xena absently ran a hand through her hair, then looked straight at her friend.

"If something happens on the way, if we're suddenly surrounded... I can take care of myself, but I can't also look out for Gabrielle at the same time, especially when she doesn't want to defend herself," she paused, breaking eye contact.

"If something were to happen to her..."

The words hung in the air and Lykeas studied his feet for what felt like an eternity, before returning his gaze to Xena.

"I'll accompany you as far as the border, but that's it."

Xena nodded to herself, "I understand that."

"Do you?"

Their eyes locked, each searching the other's face for something that neither found.

"Goodnight, Xena."

Xena watched in silence as Lykeas made his way back to the camp.

The huge dark grey stallion began nervously to shake his head and roll his eyes. His hind legs moved uncertainly a few steps to one side, then the other before trying once more to back out of the stable. Lykeas reached out again to recapture the reins which had been pulled out of his hands by the last panicked movement by the horse.

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay, Rarjan. Nothing's gonna hurt you. It's just me, calm down, it's just me."

He continued to speak quiet, reassuring nonsense to Rarjan while stroking the horse's mane gently, and slowly the horse stopped shivering and pushed his muzzle against

Lykeas' neck.

"That's right, boy. No reason to be afraid."

Carefully he led the horse to the end of the stable and into a stall. The terrified stable boy, who had run for cover when the grey stallion suddenly went crazy, anxiously peeked through the stable door.

"You shouldn't have touched him," Lykeas said, without turning around. "He's nervous around strangers."

"Won't happen again!" The boy exclaimed and tentatively stepped a bit closer.

"You got that right."

Lykeas removed saddle and bridle and then turned to look at the boy.

"I'll take care of him later, so there's no need for you to get near him again."

The boy was visibly relieved by those words and the colour began to return to his freckled face.

"Okay, that's probably for the best," he paused and let his eyes admiringly run over Rarjan.

"He's a beauty though, too bad he's so jumpy. He must be real hard to keep in check?"

Lykeas looked up, "Nope, we're one of a kind," and with that he gave Rarjan one last pat and walked out of the stable. The boy eyed the horse nervously and then returned his attention to the other horse that had been stabled, and which, to his great relief, behaved much more amiably.

"What took you so long?"

Lykeas eased himself down onto the bench next to Xena.

"Rarjan had one of his moods, I had to calm him down again."

"Argo's all right?"

"Oh yeah, just fine, behaved like an angel."

Lykeas looked around him and slowly took in the surroundings. They were in a tavern that looked and smelled like any other tavern he'd ever been in. Tables and chairs scattered around the room, dark wooden floor and walls, and more or less inebriated patrons talking and shouting while finishing one ale after the other. Gabrielle returned to their table in the back of the room and pulled a chair close to Xena.

"The food's on its way."

"What did the owner said about you telling a few stories tonight?"

"Well," Gabrielle shrugged. "He said that personally he would love it, but that some of the people tonight tended to be very...uh unruly and he'd better not risk it."

"We'd protect you," Lykeas interposed and scrutinised the crowd once again.

"Shouldn't be a problem."

Gabrielle smiled at him, "That's all right, Lykeas. I think, I'm too tired to tell stories tonight anyway, besides, it kinda ruins my concentration having to duck chairs and mugs all the time."

"That only happened once!" Xena emphasized. "And I got them to behave didn't I?"

"That you did."

They smiled at each other and Gabrielle moved her chair a bit closer.

The food arrived together with three mugs of ale, and they ate quickly and in silence, all being too hungry to talk.

When they were finished, Lykeas and Xena quietly discussed which route to take to the Amazons, while Gabrielle let her thoughts wander.

She couldn't really say that she'd been surprised when Xena had announced that Lykeas would join them for the rest of the way, but she wasn't quite sure what to think of it. She liked the dark, reticent warrior with the captivating eyes and didn't mind him accompanying them. It was Xena's motives she was questioning. She knew that ever since she had decided not to fight anymore, it had put more strain on Xena's skills than she would like to admit. The feeling of uselessness she'd experienced the other day hadn't disappeared and together with that came a feeling of guilt. Was it fair towards Xena? Gabrielle sighed and shook her head, she'd been down that path of thoughts before and knew it wouldn't supply her with any answers.

"Everything okay?"

Xena looked at her with questioning eyes.

"Yeah, just tired."

"Well, it is getting late, we might as well turn in for the night. It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

Xena rose to her feet and held out a hand to Gabrielle, who also got up.

They looked at Lykeas and he smiled.

"I told you, I'll be fine. There's no reason for us to spend the money for two rooms, when I can just as well sleep in the stable... Actually, I think, I might prefer that."

He shoved them toward the stairs.

"Go ahead, get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

They said their goodnights and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Lykeas alone in the tavern.

He began to make his way towards the bar, when a woman stepped out in front of him. She was not quite young, but still beautiful with dark blond hair and grey eyes appraising him from head to toe without showing the least bit of embarrassment.

"Hey stranger, looking for some company?"

A smile curled at the edge of his mouth and he was just about to speak when he noticed the grey eyes looking invitingly at him. A feeling he'd thought long forgotten hit him with full force and he couldn't suppress a shiver.

"No, I'd rather not."

He stepped around her and hurried towards the door, leaving the woman to stare at his retreating back in confusion.

## CHAPTER V

Xena stretched her long frame out on the bed and sighed. Usually she would prefer to sleep outdoors under the stars, but she had to admit that it did hold a certain attraction to sleep in a nice, warm bed once in a while.

*Must be getting old.*

She turned to look at the bard busy brushing her hair.

"Let me do that."

Gabrielle smiled in reply and sat down on the bed with her back to Xena. Xena got up into a sitting position herself, leaning against the headboard. She reached out and pulled Gabrielle closer till their thighs were touching and took the brush offered. For long moments they were silent, both enjoying the feeling of closeness and the gentle ministrations of the brush.

Gabrielle sighed in contentment and let her fingers draw idle patterns on Xena's leg.

"I could get used to this."

"Me too."

They fell silent again and Gabrielle let her eyes wander out of the window towards the dark sky, sprinkled with shining, white stars.

"It's beautiful outside tonight."

Xena looked up and followed the direction of the bard's gaze.

"Yeah, I guess it is."

Gabrielle smiled at the usual prosaic response from the warrior, some things never changed.

"Do you think Lykeas is all right? I feel a bit guilty about him sleeping in the stable."

"Well, if that's the case, why don't you get out there and get him. I'm sure he won't mind taking your place in the bed with me."

Xena's voice was low and teasing and Gabrielle gave the warrior's thigh an affectionate slap.

"Better watch your mouth or I might just do that."

Xena chuckled quietly and continued to brush the bard's hair. It didn't really need brushing anymore, but neither woman felt the need to break the spell of the moment, it had been too long since they last were able to relax like this.

"It must be strange....," Gabrielle trailed off, lost in thoughts.

"What?"

"To be all alone in the world like that, not having any family at all. To be the only one."

It took Xena a second before she realized Gabrielle was talking about Lykeas, and before she could stop herself she blurted out.

"But he does have some family left."

Gabrielle shifted and turned to look at the warrior, who had gotten a strange, almost guilty expression on her face.

"What do you mean? I thought he....," once again she stopped herself, a thoughtful look in her eyes.

"His father?" She asked hesitantly.

Xena shook her head, her expression darkening.

"No, he's dead."

When she didn't elaborate, Gabrielle began to go over in her head all the things she knew about Lykeas and his past life. Then it hit her.

"Naiari's daughter! Lykeas' mother and Naiari were joined and that would...according to Amazon law...that would make that girl Lykeas' sister!"

Xena looked at Gabrielle in surprise. She hadn't thought that Gabrielle knew anything about Lykeas' background.

*Or at least not that part.*

*He must have told her, but he usually doesn't talk much and especially not about his past...but then again...Gabrielle can be very persuasive when she wants to.*

She nodded, mentally kicking herself for starting this conversation in the first place.

"Yeah, Lykeas has a sister."

"Who is it?! Anybody I know?!"

Gabrielle's eyes looked eagerly at her and Xena could already imagine the ideas going through the bard's head. Ideas of a happy family reunion, tears and laughter, happiness and joy. Unfortunately, Xena knew better. She wondered if there was any way out of this. If she could somehow avoid answering the question, but one look at the bard's determined face shattered that hope. She looked into the green eyes.

"Yes, you do know her... It's Ephiny. Ephiny is Lykeas' sister."

For minutes the bard just looked at her. Her stunned expression would have amused the warrior if the circumstances had been different, but they weren't and Xena didn't really feel like laughing in that particular moment.

"Does he...does she...I mean, do they know?"

At this, Xena couldn't help but let out a joyless laugh.

"Oh, yeah. They do."

"How come... Why hasn't Ephiny ever mentioned this? Or Lykeas for that matter? He must know that Ephiny is a friend of mine."

Xena shrugged, not really knowing how to phrase her next sentence.

"Well, they don't really have much to say to each other so..."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The bard looked incredulously at her.

"And how come *you've* never mentioned this before? You seem to know so much about it!"

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come up."

Xena's voice was flat and even and Gabrielle instantly recognised the warning signs, but couldn't let it go that easily.

"Gee, Xena," the unforeseen turn of events and the warrior's reluctance to elaborate further was slowly getting to her, and she didn't bother to hide the exasperation in her voice.

"It's not like is something that would just pop up in a conversation is it? Particularly, when you consider that I at most times have to pull every single word out of you, and even then, that hardly qualifies as a conversation!"

She saw the warrior cringe at her words and instantly softened. She reached out and took Xena's hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"You could have told me, you know. Perhaps we could have done something to bring them together, perhaps when we get to the Amazons we could..."

Her words were cut off by Xena, putting a finger gently to her lips.

"Listen to me, Gabrielle. I know you just want to help and I love you for it, but some things are better left alone. Whatever relationship there exists between Lykeas and Ephiny, it's how they have decided it should be... And is not up to either of us to change that."

She removed her finger and instead began playing with the bard's hair, enjoying the feel of it between her fingers.

"I know you just want the best for both of them and under other circumstances I might agree, but Lykeas...Lykeas, well... he can be... he can be difficult. He's had a rough life and tends to act accordingly."

Xena paused, not knowing how she could make Gabrielle understand without saying more than she wanted to.

"But..."

"Shhh," Xena silenced the bard once again and looked into her eyes, the blues irises shining in intensity.

"I want you to promise me that you won't mention this to Lykeas, and when we get to the Amazons, I want you to promise me not to push him. Can you do that?"

"But Xena, I-."

"Please, Gabrielle, can you promise me that? Promise me that you won't push him?"

*Please...*

It was more Xena's tone of voice than the actual words that told the bard this wasn't a point to be argued, and she leaned forward and gave the warrior a kiss on the forehead.

"I promise."

Their earlier good spirits had disappeared and they got ready for bed in silence, Xena battling with her conscience and Gabrielle with her increasingly insistent curiosity that wouldn't let the matter go. As they lay in the bed, they didn't talk, but just held each other till sleep came and claimed them both.

The man leaned against the wall in the alley and did his best not to lose his dinner. After a few deep breaths the dizziness and nausea disappeared, and he began to feel more like himself again. A certain edginess he knew all too well entered his body, and he wondered if there was any chance he'd find release that night. As he searched his pockets for money, he noticed a graceful shape hurrying down the alley towards him. He moved closer to the wall, trying to melt into the shadows. When the figure reached his part of the alley, it stopped and looked hesitantly around, the moonlight revealing the face of a dark blond woman.

*Oh yeah, most definitely a woman!*

She looked nervously around again, before suddenly hurrying, almost running, down the alley once more. Without thinking, the man stepped out from the shadows, pulled a knife and after a few running steps caught up with her. He hooked his arm roughly around the woman's neck and with the other, pressed his knife to her throat.

"Not a word, lady or it'll be your last."

The woman let out a small shriek, but quickly silenced when she felt the knife press harder against her skin. The man looked around, but couldn't find a more suitable spot, so he took a quick decision and pushed the woman against the wall. He'd just have to hurry then. The woman looked at him in silence, tears running down her

cheeks, her breaths coming fast and shallow. The look in her eyes excited the man beyond anything he'd felt before, and he cursed having to use one hand only to open his trousers, the other holding the knife firmly against the woman. Finally his belt relented and the trousers fell to the ground around his ankles. With his free hand, he began to lift the woman's skirt, ripping the cloth in his eagerness to feel her skin.

If he'd paid attention, he would have noticed the woman's eyes widening and her sharp intake of breath, but he was too caught up, having finally reached her undergarments. Suddenly he felt a hand around his neck, the touch was soft, almost caressing and in his arousal and confusion he didn't respond instantly. Then the grip changed and he felt how his windpipe was in the immediate danger of being crushed. A warm breath in his ear, a soft voice speaking quietly.

"Let's drop the knife, shall we?"

The lack of oxygen to his head was beginning to make his vision fade, and the excruciating pain in his back from what he first now realized must be a dagger drawing blood, made it impossible for him to gather his thoughts, and the knife fell from his numb fingers. He felt himself being pulled away from the woman, dagger and hand never easing their pressure. The woman began to slide to the ground, but the soft voice spoke again.

"Don't! Get out of here, now!"

She obeyed immediately and took a few steps away, before she stopped and turned to look at her rescuer.

"I..I.. Thank you, if you hadn't...I..."

"Just get out of here!"

She shrank back from the force in his voice, then she turned and ran blindly down the alley.

"Well, what are we going to do about you?"

The voice had returned to its soft, caressing tone.

"I..uugh!"

"Did I tell you to speak? Nah, I didn't think so."

Suddenly the man found himself with his back against the wall, his eyes for the first time taking in the sight of the voice's owner. Dark eyes met his own frightened gaze, and he felt another wave of fear wash over him, when he saw them narrow and an eerie smile form upon the man's lips, and he knew with an ice cold certainty that he wouldn't live to see the sun again. The dagger was now pressed against his throat, while the man's other hand was absently tucking a lock of black hair behind an ear.

"You now, I don't like rape. I actually think it's one of the most monstrous thing you can do to another person...To take control of somebody like that...To bend their wills...To take away their independence, to force them into submission... It just can't be forgiven."

The dark eyes staring at him seemed if possibly even darker by those last words, and the man swallowed, feeling his Adam's apple move against the dagger. The last thought to ever enter his mind, before he felt the dagger break skin and slice his throat, was that the man had never raised his voice and somehow he found that amusing

Lykeas looked down at the man collapsed at his feet, then he bent down and cleaned his dagger in the man's shirt. When satisfied with the result, he returned it to his belt and walked quietly out of the alley.

## CHAPTER VI

The first three quarters of their journey to the Amazons went peacefully with nothing out of the extraordinary happening. Every once in a while, they came across a small group of thugs foolish enough to attack them, but Xena and Lykeas never had any problems disposing them, and all in all it was a quiet and relaxing trip. It was not until they were within 70-80 miles of Amazon lands, they began to come across tracks belonging to considerably larger bands. When they came across a particularly heavily trampled down area, Lykeas and Xena simultaneously dismounted their horses, leaving Gabrielle to peek down at them from Argo's back. They knelt together on the grass and studied the tracks.

"At least 200 men have been here, but only a few with horses."

Xena nodded and looked around. They were still out in the open country, surrounded by grassy hills and small gatherings of trees. They wouldn't reach forest for the next couple of hours.

"They are headed toward Amazon lands."

"Yeah, " Xena nodded again. "I was afraid of that."

"Perhaps they're just passing," Lykeas offered, not really believing it himself.

Xena gave him a weak smile.

"That would probably be too much to hope for."

"Probably."

They sat in silence, each running different scenarios through their minds.

"Are we in trouble?"

They both rose and turned to look at Gabrielle, who'd climbed down from Argo and was now looking at them with worry in her eyes.

"We're not, at least not for the time being, but the Amazons may be," Lykeas answered, rolling his head from left to right, trying to loosen up his neck. "Have your Amazons done anything to piss anybody off lately?"

"That's usually not the way it works, Lykeas," Gabrielle replied angrily.

"It's the Amazons, who can't be left alone. All they want is to live in peace,

undisturbed by intruders."

"If you say so."

"Okay, quit it," Xena interrupted. "That's not helping and we need to decide what to do now."

"Xena," Gabrielle stepped closer and put her hand on the warrior's arm. "If the Amazons are in danger I have to be there. I have to help them."

"Oh yeah, and what exactly would you do? Tell the soldiers to kindly go away because you don't want to fight them? I'm sure they'll all have a good laugh before cutting you down."

*"Cut it, Lykeas!"*

Xena's voice held a very clear warning and for a moment the eyes of the two warriors met, neither willing to back down or look away. The tension between them was almost perceptible and Gabrielle subconsciously backed off a few steps. Lykeas' eyes narrowed, then he looked away.

"I'm sorry, Gabrielle."

"It's okay," Gabrielle hurried to say. "I guess we're all a bit tense."

She turned to look at Xena and could see the warrior forcing herself to relax..

For a while the three of them just stood there, neither saying a word and Lykeas avoiding eye contact with both of them.

Gabrielle cleared her throat.

"I know, I probably won't make much of a difference, but if the Amazons are in danger I want to be there with them. It's my duty to be there."

Her words were meant for both of the warriors, but her eyes never left Xena's face as she desperately tried to read her mind. Xena's face was a mask and not a single movement betrayed the turmoil she was feeling inside. One part of her perfectly understood Gabrielle's decision and wouldn't have expected anything less from her, but another part just wanted to grab the bard and get the Hades out of there, before anything could happen. Gabrielle gave Lykeas an imploring look and he looked away again.

"I'll help you get there if you want me to," then he walked back to the horses, leaving the two women alone.

"Xena?" The bard reached out again, but somehow didn't dare to touch the warrior.

"Gabrielle,...I..."

She looked down at the grass, scorched by the sun.

"I don't know if..."

She finally raised her head and met the bard's inquiring gaze.

"You sure about this?"

"I am sure, Xena, and you know that."

This time she didn't hesitate, but reached up to cup the warrior's face in her hands.

"Trust me."

Xena looked into her eyes for only a second, before she gently, but swiftly moved away from the bard's touch.

"Okay, let's go then."

As the bard watched the warrior's retreating back, she felt a small tingle of fear, but this time it wasn't for the Amazons.

They rode quickly now, the horses thundering through the landscape, the wind playing with their hair and clothes. Xena was in the lead with Gabrielle hanging on for dear life. Lykeas was right behind them, Rarjan never more than a few yards away. Only when the last rays of the sun had disappeared and the first bright stars become visible on the sky, they slowed and then finally stopped completely, both horses shaking with exhaustion and steam coming out of their mouths. Xena slid down from the saddle and reached up a hand to help Gabrielle down. Lykeas had already dismounted and was checking Rarjan's hooves.

"We'll camp here tonight, it should be safe, but no fire."

Gabrielle nodded and began to remove the saddlebags from Argo. When finished, Xena took Argo's reins and led the horse over to Lykeas.

They were in a small clearing of something that hardly had enough trees to be called a forest, but it was the last cover they would have before reaching the Amazon border, so Xena didn't complain. Everything was better than being out in the open. It was bad enough they would have to travel open country for an hour or so tomorrow with all the soldiers running around. She hadn't lost track of the soldiers till the very end of the ride, when they apparently had decided to take a slightly different route.

As if reading her mind Lykeas said, "they've gone more to the east."

"I noticed."

They led their horses to the outskirts of the clearing and began to brush them down.

"It's easier for an army to travel the eastern route. It's more open, not so many trees."

"I know," Xena looked at him. "I guess there's no doubt now, where they're heading."

"No, guess not... What are your plans for tomorrow?"

Xena took a deep breath and shook her head slightly.

"I don't know yet, it depends on what that army decides to do."

"Any idea who they are?"

"No, at first I thought it was just some warlord out for new territories, but from what I can tell from the tracks they leave behind it's not. This is so much more organized. This is a real army, disciplined and efficient."

"Yeah, I thought so, too... I wonder why it's so small though, 200 soldiers and a handful of horses are not a lot."

"Perhaps they think, they don't need more."

They both stopped brushing and looked at each other, Xena's face blank and Lykeas' expression unreadable.

"Is it a threat to the Amazons?"

Xena didn't answer right away, going over what she remembered from her visits there in her mind.

"Yes and no," she finally said. "It's not a threat to the entire Nation, but it's most certainly a threat, and a serious one for that, to a single village."

"Too bad, the villages are so far apart."

"Yeah, too bad."

They fell silent for a few minutes, caught up in their own thoughts while continuing to care for the horses.

"I guess that means they have their eyes on one particular village and not the entire Nation,...at least not for now."

"That sounds likely."

"So... What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll find out when I get there," and with that the discussion was closed and they didn't bring up the subject again for the rest of the evening, in spite of Gabrielle's many questions.

The next morning the warriors' moods hadn't changed and Gabrielle was feeling more and more frustrated for each shrug and vague reply she was subjected to. From what she could put together of the sparse information she did receive, she realized that at least one village would be in a very serious situation if attacked, and from the worried glances exchanged, she also knew which village they thought it likely to be. It also became clear to her that neither Xena nor Lykeas had any idea what to do about it, a fact that either warrior would rather die than to admit.

They rode in silence and soon headed out into open country. Their pace was swift, but controlled, eyes constantly searching the land for any sign of movement. Around midday they reached the foot of the last grassy hill before the border, and they dismounted, beginning a slow climb to the top, leading the horses behind them. Just before they reached the top, Xena halted and let go of Argo's reins.

"We better stay down from here. Lykeas, will Rarjan be able to wait here with Argo?"

Lykeas looked at his horse and nodded.

"Yes, I think so. He's been quite relaxed for a while."

"Good."

They more crawled than walked the last way to the top, the dry grass and thistles scratching bare skin. Xena lay down on her stomach and separated the high grass in front of her to look down at the plain below them. The plain was alive with movement. Men were moving around, talking, sparring, eating and cleaning weapons. Tents had been put up in two parallel lines and a small paddock for about 20 horses had been built. Xena sighed to herself. She hadn't had any doubts before, but seeing it with her own eyes made it unpleasantly real. These men were preparing for battle. She looked past the plain to the other side, to the dark, almost threatening looking forest that marked the beginning of Amazon territory. Just a few miles in, an hour's walk tops, lay Gabrielle's village. She turned her head to look at the woman next to her, and could tell from the pale face that Gabrielle had realized that as well. Her gaze went from the bard to Lykeas, who managed to shrug even lying down.

"It's up to you now."

Gabrielle gave him an angry look.

"How can you say that? It's my people that are in danger. They need all the help they can get."

"I'm not sure they would accept my help even if I were to offer it," he replied dryly.

Gabrielle stared at him in disbelief.

"I don't get you. Don't you care at all? Your sister's is in danger for Zeus' sake! Doesn't that mean anything to you!"

Instantly the warrior next to her froze and his eyes narrowed dangerously. Xena immediately reached out and put a protective hand on the bard's shoulder.

Lykeas' own hand went up to angrily smooth out an eyebrow, repeating the motion over and over, his eyes never leaving Gabrielle's face.

"What means something to me...and what doesn't...is none of your business."

His voice was low and restrained and Gabrielle felt a shiver run down her back.

"I told you, I'd follow you as far as the border, and I've done that. I've done my part."

Gabrielle began to speak again, but Xena grabbed her arm and started to pull her back down toward the horses. Gabrielle could feel the tension radiate from the warrior's body and her arm was held in an iron grip. She almost stumbled over a tussock from being pulled so fast after Xena, and she felt her own temper beginning to flare. Reaching the horses, she pulled her arm abruptly from Xena's grip, her green eyes darkening.

"What in Tartarus do you think you're doing?"

"No! What do *you* think you're doing! I told you never to bring that up!"

The anger in Xena's voice silenced Gabrielle instantly, but only for a second.

"I know what I promised and I don't care! It's my people, my friends, we're talking about. They need our help and we need to be there with them. We can't do anything for them by just watching from afar. Lykeas knows that and so do you!"

"I know that, but what do you want me to do! Tell the soldiers to move so we can come through and assist their enemy. Or, as Lykeas so accurately put it, ask them to kindly go away!"

"You don't have to patronize me."

Gabrielle's voice was low, the frustration and hurt in it clear to them both.

"I know we can't do that, I'm not stupid. But I also know that we need to get to the village and warn them."

Xena took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down, but she could still feel the anger running through her veins and her voiced sounded strained and dry.

"They probably know already. It's hard to sneak up on an Amazon, particularly a whole village full of them."

That earned her a pale smile from Gabrielle.

"There's no use in fighting about this either that won't help anybody."

Suddenly Xena spun around, and a few yards away was Lykeas, staring at them with unreadable black eyes. His gaze went past Gabrielle to lock onto Xena, who returned it without blinking. The two warriors stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity, before Xena looked away. Almost immediately, Lykeas turned and began to walk towards Rarjan, who was dancing nervously having sensed the tension.

"Lykeas, wait!"

Xena's voice sounded strange to Gabrielle's ears, almost pleading.

"We need your help...I need your help."

He paused in his step, but didn't turn around.

"Please."

Gabrielle watched in bewilderment as Xena closed the distance between them, and hesitantly put a hand on his shoulder.

"Please," this time her voice was so low that only Lykeas heard the word.

"I need your help."

"Don't say that."

"Lykeas..." Xena could almost feel the conflicting emotions running through his

body.

"After this is over I'll never ask anything from you again. You'll never have to see me again, if you don't want to. I'll leave you alone."

"You know that's not what I want."

He turned to look at her.

"You know what I want."

Xena met his eyes which were shining with a fire she knew all too well, and to her surprise she suddenly felt the same fire engulf her body. She shook her head to clear her mind and to avoid looking into those burning eyes.

"You know I can't do that. I won't do that, not anymore."

"I know." His voice held a sadness and frustration that made Xena look at him again.

"Will you help us?"

His hand began to reach up to his eyebrow again, before he stopped himself.

"Okay... I'll help you get to the village, but I can't..."

He paused, looking towards the hill as if his eyes could see through it and behold the forest on the other side.

"But I can't guarantee what will happen once we get there."

Side by side, but never within reach, they walked back to Gabrielle.

"That's insane! You're insane! There's no way that's going to work."

"Got a better suggestion?"

"No, but-."

"Well, that's settled then."

Xena gave Lykeas a triumphant smirk and after shaking his head to himself several times, he gave her a small grin in return."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Xena got up from her comfortable spot in the grass, a wicked grin on her face.

"Where's your sense of adventure, Lykeas? This is nothing compared to some of the things we did in the old days."

"Yeah, well, but somehow that seemed a little less serious if you know what I mean?"

"I know," Xena replied, her face suddenly severe again. "But this is going to work, it has to."

Gabrielle rose slowly from the grass and stood next to Xena, keeping a little distance

between her and Lykeas.

"Let me see if I have understood this correctly. You want us to wait till dark, then *climb* down the hill *with* the horses, then *sneak* through the camp, *across* the plain till we reach the forest *without* getting caught?"

"Uh huh," Xena replied, a smug grin on her face. "Of course we'll have to create a little diversion first, but eotherwise you got it right."

Gabrielle shook her head, but like Lykeas before couldn't stop herself from smiling at the warrior's confidence.

"He's right, you *are* crazy."

Xena arched an eyebrow. "

It'll work."

Then she looked up at the sky

"It'll be dark enough in two hours time, so make sure you're ready by then."

She turned and left them alone. Lykeas started to follow, but Gabrielle held out an hand to stop him, letting it linger in the air an inch away from actually touching him.

"Lykeas, about Ephiny...", the bard trailed off, hoping for some kind of response from the man next to her. When she didn't receive any she continued, "I'm sorry about the things I said, I was out of line. It's just, I'm so worried about them."

Lykeas' gaze slipped pass Gabrielle to rest on Xena methodically going through Argo's saddlebags.

"She shouldn't have told you."

"I know and she really didn't mean to." The bard switched her weight from one foot to the other.

"It's my fault, I sort of coaxed it out of her. We usually don't keep any secrets from each other."

"Is that so?"

He looked at her and, for a second, she thought she saw a derisive glint in the black eyes, but before she could say for sure it was gone, and replaced with the by now so familiar unreadable and contemplating gaze.

## **Part 2**

### CHAPTER VI

*It worked! I don't believe it. This shit actually worked!*

The words kept running through Lykeas' head again and again as he moved quietly through the thick, black forest, avoiding branches and shielding Rarjan from thorns.

*But then again, it always works with her.*

He let the entire events of the last three hours run through his mind again, his eyes never leaving the shadows moving noiselessly ahead of him.

Xena's plan had been far fetched, to say the least, but apparently just crazy enough to work. When night had arrived and with it darkness, Xena had left their small makeshift camp and, with the use of one of her countless skills, sneaked into the camp without being detected. Then she had picked out four of the largest tents furthest to the East and away from the hill and paid each of them a visit. As she had expected, the tents were all used for storing equipment and were all abandoned, except for one unfortunate resident, who learned the last lesson of his life; never to turn your back on a warrior princess at work. In each tent, she prepared a small fire next to the canvas. Close enough so that it would eventually catch fire, but with enough distance to delay the fire from eating its way through the canvas before she was ready. Then she had soaked the rough cloth with the contents of a skin she had taken from yet another unfortunate soul on her way to the first tent, the smell of alcohol so strong that Xena was glad she didn't have to drink the stuff. Satisfied with her work, she had brought a small flame to life in each tent, and as she slipped away through the darkness, she had prayed, more for the Hades of it than actually asking for help, that her timing had been correct.

*It had been. Like always*

By the time she returned to their camp, everything had been prepared and they had waited in tense silence at the top of the hill, watching the plain below them with nervous anticipation. First it was only a small flicker of a flame, a faint light barely visible to the three pairs of eyes staring intensely in its direction. Then in the exact moment as Xena motioned them to follow, bright, roaring flames began to swallow up the tents whole. As they began to move forward toward the western side of the camp, people coming from all kinds of directions made their way to the East. The four burning tents lit up the sky and sparks flew through the air, endangering the work for the men, who tried to subdue it. For the shortest of moments, they had stopped, captivated by the sight of the dark silhouettes moving aimlessly around in front of the orange wall of fire. Then, almost simultaneously, they had broken the spell and mounted the quiet, but edgy horses. First they had moved slowly, constantly prepared to flight at the slightest hint of detection, but as they finally reached the outskirts of the camp, they had put the horses into a gallop, the cloth tied around the hooves efficiently reducing the thuds on the dry grass. A few minutes later they had been embraced by the forest, hearts hammering and muscles aching.

That was almost an hour ago and ever since then, Xena had let them in a merciless tempo along the fastest path to the Amazons.

*I can feel them.*

*They're watching... They know we're coming.*

*Does she know I'm coming?*

Xena halted abruptly in front of him and raised her hands in an old, familiar greeting and Lykeas felt his throat constrict.

*They are here.*

Three Amazons stepped out from the darkness so soundlessly that even Xena was impressed. She had been aware of their presence for quite a while, but had decided to let the Amazons take the initiative and reveal themselves when it suited them. The leader of the three, a slender looking woman let her eyes run over Xena and Lykeas before they came to a halt upon Gabrielle. She knelt in the grass with the two other Amazons behind her following suit.

"My Queen."

She looked up and removed her mask, revealing smiling blue eyes and long blond hair held in place with a woven band.

"My name is Callias, and this is Phila and Areia." She gestured towards the two other Amazons, who were still wearing their masks, bending their heads.

"As representatives of the Royal Guard we were granted the honour by our Regent to escort you to the village."

"Thank you," Gabrielle smiled at the Amazon. "So Ephiny knows we're coming?"

"Yes, my Queen. We became aware of your presence the moment you put your foot upon our lands. We have been watching you to make sure you weren't followed."

Xena snorted audibly and received a warning glance from Gabrielle. If they had indeed been followed, she would have been the first to notice. Callias ignored the looks exchanged between her Queen and the warrior and slowly rose to her feet.

"My Queen, we should get going. I know our Regent is waiting impatiently to see you again, and..." She paused, looking first at Gabrielle then Xena.

"There are serious matters to discuss."

"We know," Xena remarked. "We just spent the last hours trying to avoid those matters."

Callias nodded. "Yes, and when you have the time, you must tell me how you managed to get pass the soldiers, but first..."

Her eyes turned to the figure, half hidden in the shadows.

"First we need to decide what to do about him."

"He's coming with us," Xena said evenly, her tone clearly indicating that this wasn't something up for discussion, and after receiving an affirmative look from her Queen, Callias nodded again.

"Very well, but he must be removed all of his weapons and blindfolded."

When she caught the expression in Xena's eyes, she quickly added. "It's by the Regent's orders. No man is to enter an Amazon village unless blindfolded and unarmed."

Xena took a step closer to the Amazon.

"Does...Ephiny know he's coming?"

Callias looked at her with confusion.

"Well, of course. As I said, we knew of your presence the moment you entered the forest."

"No," Xena's low voice replied. "That's not what I meant. Does Ephiny know, *who* the man is, who have been travelling with your Queen?"

Callias' brow furrowed, "I don't know what you mean. She hasn't mentioned anything if that's what you're asking."

Xena eyed the woman in front of her, a thoughtful expression on her face. Then she tilted her head to look at the man in question.

"Lykeas?"

"You can blindfold me if you want to, but I'm not handing over my weapons.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared stubbornly at first Callias then Xena.

"I earned the right to carry arms on Amazon territory a long time ago."

"What!" Callias began and took a step towards him, but was abruptly halted by Xena's hand on her arm.

"I'll handle this."

She walked over to Lykeas and together they moved a few feet away from the four pairs of eyes looking questioningly at them. Gabrielle watched the two warriors stand face to face, their heads almost level, Lykeas being only a few inches taller than Xena. They spoke quietly, and even Phila, who was known for her excellent hearing, couldn't make out what they were saying. The body language, however, was clear enough, both warriors using more and more urgent gestures in their attempts to persuade the other. Finally Lykeas' hands dropped to his side and he gave Xena a small relenting nod. She, in return, patted him gently on the shoulder and whispered something more. He nodded again and began to remove his sword and then bow. He handed the weapons to Xena, who fastened them to Rarjan's back before she returned to retrieve his daggers and knives. She looked at the blades in her hands, then raised her head to look into his eyes.

*One is missing.*

He returned her gaze defiantly at first, but then his expression changed and Xena felt her body stir with conflicting emotions. Her mind suddenly filling with the memories of a young, black-haired man walking towards her smiling... A hand reaching down to pull her up... Laughing eyes looking at her over a campfire.

She forcefully shook the memories away and stared into his eyes, trying to see inside of him, trying to read him and understand him like she had once before, so many years ago.

*Don't make me regret this.*

"We're ready."

Callias came over and gave Xena a piece of cloth, which she gently band around his head, covering his eyes and abandoning him to a different kind of darkness than the night surrounding them.

With Callias in the lead, followed by Phila and Gabrielle, then Xena next to Lykeas, her hand on his arm guiding him forward and finally Areia leading the horses, they made their way toward the village. Rarjan had begun to panic when the brown-haired Amazon reached for the reins, and it had taken Lykeas several minutes of soft spoken words and affectionate caresses to calm the horse down enough to enable Areia to grab hold of the reins. Every once in a while she threw a suspicious glance back at the horse behind her, fully expecting to feel his teeth in the back of her neck any second, but nothing happened and they arrived at the village without further incidents.

In spite of the worry she was feeling, Gabrielle felt her heart fill with a quiet sense of peacefulness. A peacefulness she always associated with the Amazons, with her home.

*Yes, this truly is my home now.*

Her face lit up into a brilliant smile when she saw Ephiny standing in the centre of the village, a huge grin plastered all over her face. The Royal Guards stepped forward, gently, but firmly clearing a way through the crowd for the Queen. Ephiny closed the distance between them, enveloping Gabrielle into a warm, loving embrace, the crowd around them cheering enthusiastically.

"Welcome home, Gabrielle."

"It's good to be back, Ephiny."

They let go of each other, clasping their hands together instead.

"A warm welcome to you, too, Xena." Ephiny spoke, smiling at the warrior. "It's always good to see you."

Xena gave her a warm smile in return.

"It's nice to see you, too, Ephiny. It's been a while."

"It most certainly has. Much too long in my opinion," she replied, gently nudging Gabrielle in the ribs before turning to the Captain of the Royal Guard.

"Callias, I trust there were no difficulties?"

Callias stepped forward. "No, Your Highness, no trouble at all. Her Majesty hadn't been followed and the man agreed to your terms and came along peacefully."

"Ah yes, the man." Ephiny smiled wickedly.

"Since when does the Warrior Princess and the Amazon Queen need a man to help them win their battles."

She turned and the playful smile froze upon her lip, as her disbelieving eyes took in the sight of the man standing next to Phila.

"Remove the blindfold! *Now!* "

Phila hurried to fulfil her Regent's command and brown eyes widened in shock as she saw black eyes blink a few times, before focusing and staring directly at her.

For a moment time stood still, an uncomfortable silence filling the square, before eagerly whispering voices in the crowd, brought Ephiny back to reality.

"Lykeas," she spoke quietly.

"Ephiny."

The Regent had to force her eyes away and look at Gabrielle, painful confusion evident in her eyes.

"Gabrielle, what is this... I don't understand."

Gabrielle had been shocked and dismayed by the scene unfolding in front of her, and, although she didn't know the reasons behind it, she was pained by the distressed expression on her friend's face. Xena began to step forward, but the bard shook her head, halting the warrior in mid-stride.

"I'm sorry, Ephiny. I didn't know..."

She glanced at Lykeas, her gaze almost hostile.

"Let's talk about this in your hut."

She began to lead the dazed Amazon away, giving Xena a meaningful look on the way. Xena saw them disappear into the Regent's hut, before speaking out loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Okay folks, the show's over. It's the middle of the night, go to bed."

Even the most dense Amazon, understood that disagreeing with the warrior could most seriously endanger their health, and one by one they slipped away until only Xena, Lykeas and Callias were left. The blond Amazon's eyes darting from one face to another, her posture communicating both confusion and a thinly veiled threat.

"Is there something I should know?"

Xena returned her gaze without blinking.

"My friend needs a place to sleep. Is there a hut he can use?"

Callias opened her mouth then closed it again, suddenly remembering her responsibilities. She straightened up and indicated a direction with her head.

"The guess hut next to the smithy is available. I'll make sure it's prepared for you."

She gave Xena a small nod, sent an angry stare at Lykeas and walked away.

"Lykeas..." Xena began.

He shook his head slowly.

"Where are the stables?"

She pointed out the direction.

"Do you want me to stable Argo for you?"

"That'd be nice, thank you."

"Okay," he said, taking the reins from both Argo and Rarjan. "I'll see you in the morning."

And then he was gone.

Gabrielle opened her eyes and smiled at the feel of the strong arms around her, a warm body pressed up against her own. Closing her eyes again, she heard the sounds of the village slowly coming to life as people began moving around outside, voices speaking quietly, occasionally interrupted by laughter and shouted greetings. It all felt so familiar and she was filled with such a longing it surprised her. She was so happy here, surrounded by people, who loved and respected her, and whom she loved and respected in return. She felt Xena shift slightly behind her, drawing her closer and for a moment the bard felt guilty, wondering if Xena had somehow read her mind. She always tried not to think too much about the future, having decided long ago there was no reason to drive herself crazy and was content to live just one day at a time.

*But sometimes...*

To avoid thinking more about it, her thoughts turned to the conversation she had had with Ephiny last night. Or perhaps she couldn't quite call it a conversation, but more her asking a lot of questions and Ephiny answering hardly any. She had of course, due to her talk with Xena and Lykeas' reaction when she mentioned the Amazon, understood that things between the warrior and the Regent were far from idyllic, but still she had been surprised at the strong reaction from Ephiny. Not that Ephiny had wanted to talk about it, she had just vaguely replied that she and Lykeas didn't get along very well, that they never had and that they practically hadn't seen each other for years. At Gabrielle's question whether she had known Lykeas was an old friend of Xena's, she had told that, yes, she did indeed know that, but hadn't thought they still had anything to do with each other. When Gabrielle had asked her why, Ephiny had dismissed the question with a small shrug and instead asked why they were travelling with him. Gabrielle had briefly begun to tell the Regent about everything that had happened the last month and a half, but had been interrupted by a disbelieving Ephiny.

*"What's that supposed to mean?"*

*"Like I said, I don't fight anymore."*

*"But...but that's crazy! You're an Amazon...and Queen for that matter! You can't just... I mean, the Amazons are warriors for Artemis' sake! We fight when we have to, we may not like it, but we do it nonetheless, because protecting the Nation in whatever way possible is every Amazon's top priority. It's her duty!"*

*"I'll just have to protect the Nation in my own way, Ephiny."*

*"It's a Queen's duty to lead her warriors into battle, Gabrielle. And, although, it's an old law and not called upon if we can avoid it, it's still there and will be practised if*

*necessary. To every Amazon and that includes the Queen, the Nation comes first, then her fellow Amazons and not until then, herself.*

*"I have to do what my conscience tells me."*

*"I'm sorry to hear that."*

That had put an abrupt end to the discussion and after saying goodnight, Gabrielle had returned to the Royal hut only to find it empty. Their things had been there and Gabrielle could see that Xena had been there to change out of her armour, but now there was no sight of the warrior. Totally exhausted, physically and emotionally, she had gone to bed, but sleep had abandoned her and instead an overwhelming sense of restlessness had taken hold of her. Her mind had been filled with fragments of conversations and images, almost driving her out of bed. All the things she had avoided thinking about for so many weeks, came to her now, mercilessly probing and nagging, demanding answers. She'd had none.

After almost two hours of tossing and turning, she had finally fallen asleep. At what time Xena had arrived and joined her, she had no idea.

"Morning." A warm breath caressed her ear.

"Morning," Gabrielle answered smiling, before turning and slightly pulling away so she could look at the warrior.

"When did you get to bed last night?"

"Oh, way too late," Xena answered closing her eyes and stretching lazily. "And I wouldn't mind sleeping a bit more."

"So why don't you?" Gabrielle leaned down and kissed the soft lips below her, then returned to her former position on her elbow.

"Or do you have a better suggestion?"

Blues eyes opened slowly, a feral smile forming on the lips. The next second Gabrielle found herself pinned on her back with a very awake warrior on top. Dark hair caressed her face as the warrior bent down to capture her lips. The kiss was wild and passionate with an almost desperate urgency that took both their breaths away, before Xena slowly pulled away, reluctantly letting go of the bard's lower lip.

"Unfortunately, we have to meet the council in 20 minutes."

"What?" The bard's voice was raw with desire and she reached out to pull the warrior's head down again.

Xena resisted temptation and managed to get out of bed and begin dressing in spite of Gabrielle's protests.

"You gotta be kidding."

The dark-haired woman had to smile at the sight of her frustrated lover and her almost pouting expression.

"I wish, but I'm afraid it's true. I spoke to Ephiny last night and it was decided to have

a meeting early this morning."

Her expression grew serious and the playfulness disappeared from her voice.

"There is a lot to discuss."

Gabrielle tried to read Xena's face, but couldn't.

"Did Ephiny...?"

"Yeah, she mentioned it."

"Do you think she-."

"Let's not talk about this now, Gabrielle," the warrior interrupted, her voice tired and distant.

"There are more serious matters to discuss. Like what to do about that little army threatening your people for instance."

She finished dressing in silence, feeling Gabrielle's eyes at her back. She turned and looked at the bard.

"Are you coming?"

"Tell, Ephiny, I'll be right there."

"Okay, I'll see you then."

Xena walked out of the door and Gabrielle heard her exchange a few words with the guards outside before she continued and walked in the direction of the council. Without exactly knowing why she grabbed the nearest pillow and threw it forcefully against the wall.

It took Gabrielle slightly longer to reach the council's hut than expected, due to all the Amazons wanting to greet their Queen and express their joy of having her in their village again. But Gabrielle loved every minute of it and pleased several Amazons by calling them by their names, which earned her some even warmer smiles in return. When she finally arrived at the hut, she paused to look at the village now buzzing with life, and she felt her heart swell with pride.

*I won't let them down.*

"My Queen?"

Gabrielle turned to see Callias, who had quietly come to stand next to her, a question on her face.

Gabrielle gave her a warm smile and for a second the Head of the Royal Guard looked startled, but then returned the smile.

"They are waiting."

"I know... I just wanted to-." She stopped herself, not sure of what she was trying to say.

The soldier nodded solemnly.

"I know what you mean, my Queen. I feel that, too, sometimes."

Gabrielle exchanged another smile with the blond Amazon and was about to enter the hut, when a movement caught her eye. She turned and felt Callias tense slightly next to her. Lykeas was walking towards them, unarmed and escorted by a soldier in the Royal Guard. She recognized the graceful, brown-haired Amazon as Areia, one of the warriors, who had met them in the forest the day before. All over the village heads turned to watch the dark man walking casually towards their Queen, the younger Amazons staring with good-natured curiosity, while some of the elder followed Lykeas with obvious hostility. They came to a halt in front of the hut and Areia gave Gabrielle a small bow before turning to her Captain.

"I brought the man as requested, sir."

"Where there any problems?" Callias asked her soldier, her tone of voice almost expectant.

"No, sir. He came along peacefully."

"Good. I want you to station two guards outside the hut as long as the Queen and Regent are inside."

The soldier nodded and left.

All during the exchange, Gabrielle had felt Lykeas' eyes staring at her, but not until Areia had disappeared in the crowd did she meet his gaze. To her great surprise he smiled at her.

"Good morning, Gabrielle. I hope you slept well."

"It's Her Majesty to you!" The Captain growled before Gabrielle could speak and she reached out to reassuringly touch the soldier's arm.

"No, it's okay, Callias."

"But-." The Amazon began, but was stopped by her Queen.

"It's okay. I prefer people to call me Gabrielle anyway, and I hope you'll do the same."

The Captain was quiet for a moment, an almost invisible blush grazing the beautiful face.

"Oh, I don't know, Your Majesty... I think I'll rather use your title if that's all right with you."

Gabrielle nodded, then smiled at the woman. "As you wish."

Then she entered the hut, closely followed by Lykeas, who had a very determined Amazon Captain on his heels.

They were met by several pairs of impatient eyes and Gabrielle hurried to take her place at the end of the oval table across from Ephiny, whom she noticed didn't look

like she had closed an eye last night. To Gabrielle's right was Xena and then Lykeas, who was politely, but coldly led to his seat by Callias, before the Captain herself went around the table to take the seat between the Queen and Erinya, the village's weapons master. Lykeas turned to look at the brown-haired woman sitting between him and Ephiny, and couldn't help but wonder if she hadn't been seated there on purpose. The woman noticed his gaze and pale brown eyes stared directly into his.

"My name is Zelei, I'm the Captain of the regular army."

Her entire manner radiated pride and arrogance and out of the corner of his eye, Lykeas saw Callias' jaw clench slightly. He stored the information away for later use and turned his attention to Ephiny, who had just cleared her throat and with a quick glance at Lykeas begun to speak.

"Well, we better get started. We have a lot to discuss."

"Before we begin, I'd like to know, who this man is and what business he has at a council meeting."

Zelei crossed her arms and looked directly at the Regent.

"Actually, I'd like to know what he's doing in our village in the first place."

"His name is Lykeas," Ephiny began, her tone calm and controlled. "And he's here because together with Xena, he helped the Queen get here unharmed."

"But-."

"I don't have to remind you that we have an army practically lurking in our backyard, do I, Zelei? We don't have time for this!"

"I still don't see, why he has to be here. He's done his duty and we're all grateful, but that doesn't mean he has to stay here," Zelei continued stubbornly. "We don't need him."

"You need all the help you can get."

Xena's voice was low, but held a dangerous edge.

"I've seen the army. Hades, I practically took a stroll through it and these men are not only well-trained, but also extremely well-equipped."

"Well, you managed to fool them, didn't you?" Zelei looked defiantly at the warrior.

"Well, you're not me are you?"

The two warriors stared at each other, before Xena dismissed the soldier with a small shrug and turned her attention to the Regent.

"The point is that if the army attacked now it would be able to do considerable damage to the village, but probably not defeat it completely."

"Which means?"

"Which means that unless they intend to camp out there endlessly doing nothing, there

is a reason why they haven't attacked you yet."

"And what reason would that be?" Zelei asked, hostility oozing from every pore.

"Reinforcements." Callias cut in before Xena could answer. "They are waiting for the reinforcements to arrive."

"So are we just going to sit and wait till it suits them to attack us?" The disbelief in the Captain's voice clear.

Xena sighed and closed her eyes briefly. They had been discussing this for the last couple of hours, and frankly she'd had enough.

"No, Callias, that's not what I said. What I said was that we have to wait and see what happens, and not rush out doing something that'll only get us all killed."

"But if we wait any longer their reinforcements will have arrived and then what? Then we'll be *really* in trouble."

Xena ignored the exasperated soldier and turned to look at Ephiny.

"I believe we have sent out for reinforcements of our own?"

The Regent nodded, her face tired and pale.

"Yes, an envoy has been sent to the nearest village to request for assistance. If all goes well, we should have their reply within the next three days."

"They wouldn't refuse, would they?" Gabrielle worriedly looked first at Xena then Ephiny. "I mean, the safety of the village is at stake."

"No, they won't refuse." Ephiny ran a hand through her blond hair and it became apparent to everyone in the room just how exhausted the Regent was.

"But they'll only be able to part with a certain amount of warriors. There has to be enough left in their village to put up a decent defence in case..." She trailed off before continuing, looking straight at her Queen. "One village is important, yes, but the survival of the entire Nation more so and if necessary an Amazon will rather retreat than fight a losing battle."

Both Captains simultaneously snorted and Ephiny gave them both a sharp glance.

"If sacrificing one village will preserve the rest, it's a sacrifice that every Amazon must be willing to make. It may not be very heroic and it may not appeal to you, but that's the only thing that prevented the Nation from being totally exterminated in the past, and it's the only thing that's going to prevent it from being it in the future. What do you think would have happened if the conflict with the Centaurs had spread to include more than a few villages? What would have happened if we had mobilized all our troops and the Centaurs done the same?"

"We would have destroyed them!" Zelei proudly exclaimed..

"Or they would have destroyed us," came the quiet reply from Ephiny. "It's a risk I'm not willing to take."

"What's going to prevent the soldiers from trying to conquer the next village if they manage to grab hold on the first?" Callais' voice had lost its frustrated edge and now sounded more resigned than anything else.

"Nothing, that's why we have to make sure they don't succeed the first time, no matter what it takes."

The sorrowful reply lingered in the air for several heartbeats.

"Perhaps if you could trick them into entering the forest before the reinforcements arrive?"

All eyes came to rest upon Lykeas.

"You probably won't be able to get the entire army moving, but if you can get a couple of units lured onto Amazon territory, you shouldn't have a problem with disposing them. After all..." He paused, smiling to no one in particular. "It's no secret that Amazons are deadlier in forest than any other force."

"That means the soldiers are probably aware of that as well." The sarcasm in Zelei's voice was unmistakable.

"True, but soldiers are soldiers and...well, we all know what soldiers are like after weeks of inactivity, away from their homes and no uh...diversions in sight."

"It'll only work once," Xena said, an interested glint in her eyes.

"Yes, but if we do it properly..."

"It could be enough."

"If we attack them again before they recover..."

"The reinforcements will be too late."

"They'll definitely think twice before attacking."

"Their confidence will have been broken"

"Their morals low."

"And every dead soldier from their army..."

"Will be an extra one in ours."

"Exactly."

The two warriors exchanged a smile that made the other occupants of the room feel like they had just witnessed two wolves circling in on their prey.

"Do you got a plan?" Ephiny's voice broke the silence and it was clear she didn't know whether to direct the question at Xena or Lykeas.

Xena looked at Lykeas, who shrugged and the blue eyes went back to the Regent.

"Yes. Yes, I think we do."

## CHAPTER VIII

Although, the celebration that night was a very quiet affair compared to normal Amazon standards, nothing, not even a serious threat hanging over their heads, was going to prevent the Amazons from welcoming their Queen home in a proper manner. The centre of the village was filled with people, but Gabrielle noticed a considerable lack of regular soldiers, and a surprisingly high amount of warriors dressed in the blue colours of the Royal Guard. The guards at the outskirts of the village had been doubled, and the warriors patrolling the forest tripled. Callias had practically not left her side since the ending of the meeting, insisting that she should have an escort. Gabrielle had barely managed to talk her out of the four soldiers she had shown up with, and only grudgingly had the Captain accepted to number the escort down to one. A task she personally had decided to take upon herself. Gabrielle knew Xena would have found the entire scene amusing, that is, if the warrior had been there to witness it. But Xena had disappeared together with Lykeas shortly after the meeting, only stopping long enough to grab a bite to eat. That had been hours ago and there was still no sign of the warriors. She suspected they had gone into the forest to inspect the guards there, and probably check out the enemy camp as well.

Ephiny came to stand next to her, dismissing her own escort, also on the Captain's insistence, with a small gesture and together they watched the dancing. Callias stepped away from them, but remained close by, her eyes never leaving the Queen. Gabrielle found herself tapping her foot, following the rhythm of the drums and Ephiny smiled at her.

"It's infectious isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

For a while they just let the music flow through their bodies and chase away all worries from their minds.

"Ephiny, we have to talk."

The Regent sighed, "I know."

She put her hand on Gabrielle's arm and began to lead her away from the celebration.

"Your Highness?"

Ephiny glanced back at Callias, who wasn't looking too happy at the turn of events.

"It's okay, Callias. I think, Gabrielle and I can go for a walk without being attacked."

The Captain looked as if she was about to argue, but then capitulated.

"Promise me, you won't leave the village, and call for assistance if you see anything unusual."

"We promise, mother," the Queen giggled in a very un-regal manner.

The Captain turned crimson and Gabrielle suddenly felt bad. She reached out and took the soldier's hand.

"I'm sorry, Callias. That was uncalled for, I promise you we'll be careful."

The crimson didn't disappear and Gabrielle could tell the Captain was feeling very embarrassed, but why she should feel that way, she didn't understand.

She squeezed the blond Amazon's hand.

"You take high pride in your responsibility and so you should. You do an excellent job."

"It's my duty," Callias said, dismissing the praise, but Gabrielle could see she was pleased by the words.

"If we're not back in an hour, you come and get us, okay?"

That earned her a smile from the Captain, who nodded and then returned to watch the dancing.

They began to stroll through the village, both enjoying the warm night and the peaceful atmosphere lingering in the air. They arrived at a quiet corner, as far away from the celebration they could get and Ephiny gestured towards a bit of grass between two huts.

"Let's sit there."

"You don't want to go to your hut?"

"No, it's been so long since I last sat in the grass that I hardly remember how it feels."

They settled down and Ephiny took off her boots, relishing the feel of the grass against her bare feet. After a look, Gabrielle did the same.

"Are you happy, Ephiny?"

The Regent looked up startled. This wasn't the question she had expected.

"Well, of course, why wouldn't I be?"

"It's just, you looked so sad there for a moment, and you had the same expression on your face back when we were discussing the army."

"Well, it's not exactly an ideal situation, is it?" She gave Gabrielle a pale smile that didn't quite reach the brown eyes. "I have a lot of things to think about, that's all."

They sat in silence for a long time, the faint sound of drums filling the night.

Gabrielle searched her mind for something to say. She wanted to explain to her friend why she wouldn't pick up a weapon anymore. She wanted to tell her that she loved the Amazons and would do anything within her powers to prevent them from being hurt. She wanted Ephiny to understand that she wasn't alone with all the serious decisions, that she could lean on her for support, and that nobody would think anything less of their Regent if she didn't have all the answers. When the blond Amazon finally spoke, her question caught Gabrielle by surprise.

"What do you think of Lykeas?"

"What?" Was all the bard managed to say.

"I mean, what do you think about him? Do you like him?"

Gabrielle tried to gather her thoughts and come up with an answer, but couldn't think of any that would properly express her feelings.

"Well, it's hard to say," she paused, her brow furrowing. "He's...sometimes he just...I used to think..."

Oh, he can be so frustrating sometimes."

"I know," Ephiny smiled sadly.

"He's hard to figure out," the bard elaborated, searching for the right words. "He can be so nice and considerate and...well, almost funny when the mood strikes him, but at other times he just looks at you with that uncanny expression in the eyes and you can't help but wonder if he's considering whether to cut your head off or not."

Ephiny chuckled quietly. "Yeah, I remember."

Gabrielle turned her head to look into the brown eyes.

"He means a lot to Xena, though, and that's why I'm willing to put up with his moods and his attitudes.

I don't know why she never mentioned him before, and I don't know why they went their separate ways all those years ago, but I do know that she was very happy to see him again. And, truth be told, right now that's all that matters to me."

"They had a disagreement."

"What?" Gabrielle stared at Ephiny.

"I don't know what about," the Regent hurried to say. "I just know they had a major fight over something and when they couldn't agree, Lykeas left."

"How do you know?"

The answer was barely more than a whisper.

"Xena, told me."

"She told you?"

"Well, sort of... The subject came up once and she mentioned it...but that's all I know."

"Well, it's more than she ever told me." Gabrielle said in annoyance. "She practically hasn't mentioned anything, and refuses to answer whenever I question her."

Ephiny pushed herself backwards, to lean against the hut.

"She..." The Regent began hesitantly, "she probably has her reasons."

Gabrielle sighed. "Xena *always* has her reasons."

That brought out a grin on the Amazon's face and Gabrielle could feel the corners of her mouth curl up. She was still feeling frustrated with the warrior, but had resigned herself to the fact that eventually Xena would come around and tell her what she wanted to know.

*At least, she always has before. Why should this be any different?*

"Why have you never told me about Lemea?"

"It's not something the Amazons like to be reminded of."

Gabrielle tried to catch Ephiny's eye, but the Regent avoided her look, staring down at the grass instead.

"Why?"

Ephiny took a deep breath and finally looked up.

"A lot of shameful things happened in that village. It was a disgrace to Artemis and every living Amazon."

"I thought it changed for the better. Lykeas, said-."

"It did," the Regent interrupted. "For a while."

"What happened?" The bard could tell her friend was very uncomfortable by the line of conversation, but she desperately wanted answers.

"They returned to their old ways and ended up destroying themselves. There was a fire... We never heard of any survivors."

"I see."

A sudden outburst of laughter caused them both to look up startled, and they saw two closely intertwined Amazons walking past them a couple of yards away. Ephiny smiled.

"If I'm not quite mistaken that was Phila and Areia."

"They're together?"

"Usually, that is, when they are not at each other's throats."

"They make a cute couple."

"Yes, yes they do."

They sat in their own thoughts for a while, a comfortable silence resting between.

"How about you, Ephiny? Do you have anybody?"

The Regent shook her head. "No, I've been so busy lately and it's hard...being the Regent and all. I have to be sure that... And there's always so much to do, so many things to decide."

"It's okay to be happy, Ephiny, even for a Regent."

"Yeah, but let's first get all this over with and then maybe... I must admit there is a certain black-haired scout, who's rather cute."

They smiled at each other, and Gabrielle felt a bit of the worry she had felt for her friend fade away.

"Did...Lykeas, ever mention his mother?"

Again Gabrielle was surprised by the sudden change of subject.

"Oh, only briefly. Why?"

"She was my mother, too." The voice filled with sadness.

"I know. She and your mother were joined."

Ephiny nodded. "You know, it's funny, but Lykeas is the spitting image of her. The same black hair, the same black eyes."

"You remember her?"

A pained expression briefly showed on the Amazon's face.

"Images, voices. I remember her laughter. She always made me laugh. Every time I had gotten into trouble and my mother would scold me, Lykeia would show up and make us both laugh and forget everything."

"She sounds like a wonderful woman."

"She was," Ephiny sighed. "I loved her very much...and so did my mother. She was never the same after the banishment."

"Did Lykeas ever meet your mother?"

"Once."

Gabrielle waited for further elaboration, but noticed a warning glance in the Regents eyes and decided to let it go.

In a cheerful voice she said, "Well, speaking of Lykeas. I wonder when it pleases him to return my warrior to me. I haven't seen her for hours."

"They spend a lot of time together, don't they?"

"Yes, they do. Xena is quite good at handling him whenever he gets into one of his moods. Most be some kind of warrior thing."

"Perhaps you shouldn't... Perhaps it would be better..." Ephiny began, not certain if she should speak her mind. Then reaching a decision, she continued, "I'm not sure he's good for her."

"What...what do you mean?"

Seeing the worry in the green eyes made her reach out and take the bard's hand into hers.

"Nothing, don't worry. I'm talking nonsense, it's been a long day."

She began to get to her feet, pulling Gabrielle up with her.

"We better get back to the celebration before Callias comes and personally drags us back by the ears."

"But-."

"Please, Gabrielle, can we just go now?"

The bard nodded reluctantly, wondering why it was she never seemed to be able to finish a conversation anymore.

They had returned to the celebration and spent a few hours there just relaxing and enjoying the festivities. Several Amazons, some more shyly than others, had come to ask their Queen to dance, but each time Gabrielle had tactfully declined, her heart still waiting for the warrior to show up. But, when a black-haired, slender Amazon named Terisa had managed to lure the Regent into joining her, Gabrielle had found herself feeling surprisingly lonely, and had turned to ask a very startled Amazon Captain for a dance.

*"Uh, I don't know, Your Majesty. I'm not sure if that-."*

*"Oh, nonsense, Callias. Don't you want to dance with me?"*

*"Well, yes. Of course, but-."*

*"Well, then, what's stopping you? You don't want to disobey your Queen now, do you?"*

Grinning, Gabrielle had pulled the soldier after her and together they had joined the dancing.

The blond Amazon had been a very rhythmic and graceful dancer, once she recovered from her embarrassment, and Gabrielle had found herself following the Captain's every move without hesitation. They had made a very beautiful sight and several pairs of eyes had followed them throughout the dance. It wasn't till the musicians grew tired, and people slowly began to leave and head home that they stopped, both with flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

*"You're a wonderful dancer, Callias. It was a pleasure dancing with you."*

*"I think it takes two, my Queen, and you're very skilled yourself."*

*"Thank you, that's nice of you to say."*

*"I mean it."*

*"Thank you."*

They had looked at each other in silence.

*"Do you want me to escort you to your hut?"*

*"No, thanks, Callias. I'll be fine."*

*"Okay, my Queen, then I'll bid you a goodnight."*

*"Goodnight, Callias, I'll see you in the morning."*

Walking the short distance back to the Royal Hut, Gabrielle had been lost in thoughts and barely managed to suppress a small scream when a figure suddenly emerged from the darkness to walk beside her.

*"Lykeas! You startled me."*

*"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."*

*"Is Xena back as well?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Well, where is she?"*

*"I don't know. I left her a while ago to check on Rarjan."*

They had arrived at the hut and for some indefinable reason, they had both stopped outside, neither showing any intention of leaving.

*"Why are you still here, Lykeas?"*

*"Why not?"*

*"If you'd wanted to you could have left."*

*"Maybe I don't want to."*

*"Why not?"*

He'd just given her his trademark look, followed by a small shrug. Gabrielle had felt an enormous wave of frustration wash over her, and had to resist a sudden urge to reach out and strangle him. Reading her face, Lykeas had only smiled.

*"Are we friends, Lykeas?"*

*"Do you want us to be?"*

*"Yes... yes, I would."*

*"Because of Xena?"*

*"Yes, partly, but also because... Not always, but most times, I like you."*

Brows had furrowed.

*"You... like me?"*

*"Yes, I like you."*

*"Oh."*

*"So...friends?"*

*"When I make a friend it's forever. You sure you're up for that?"*

*"I wouldn't have it any other way."*

Although he tried to hide it, the most truly felt smile she had ever witnessed from him briefly graced the dark features.

*"Friends it is then."*

For a while they had just stood there, looking at each other. Then Gabrielle had leaned forward to plant a light kiss on his cheek, and to her great delight he hadn't flinched, well...only a little. Then she had turned and walked to stand in front of the door leading into the hut, before looking at him again.

*"Can I ask you something?"*

The answer had come hesitantly.

*"Sure."*

*"When you think back at your time with Xena...back when you rode together, the things that you did..."*

*"Yes?"*

*"How does that make you feel?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I mean, what do you feel when... Do you feel..."*

*"Guilty?"*

Silence then.

*"Yes. Do you feel guilty? Do you feel the same pain that Xena has to live with every day?"*

*"No."*

Gabrielle had stared at him, a mixture of emotions showing on her face.

*"No?"*

*"No... I've never felt guilt in my life. I've never regretted anything I've done."*

*"I don't believe you."*

His eyes had become cold at the statement.

*"I'm not Xena, Gabrielle. I'm not looking for forgiveness or searching for redemption."*

*"Are you trying to frighten me?"*

"No."

His eyes had lost their cold, and for a second, she thought he would say something, but then he began to walk away.

"Lykeas?"

He had turned to look at her, a question on his face.

*"What is it you want to know, Gabrielle? What is it that fascinates you so much? What is it you want me to say?"*

He had stared at her, waiting for an answer. She'd had none.

*"Goodnight, Gabrielle. Get some sleep."*

Then he had disappeared into the darkness once again.

The next two days passed in a blur. Xena was busy with preparations for battle and Gabrielle hardly saw the warrior. She went to bed alone and when she woke up in the morning, Xena had already left to meet with the Captains and Lykeas. Gabrielle, herself, was tied up with work from early morning to late evening, and she had reluctantly acknowledged that being Queen wasn't only about partying and issuing orders to have work done for you. She was filled with a noticeable, but satisfying exhaustion and it pleased her no ends to be able to relieve Ephiny of some of her burdens. They hadn't experienced any trouble with the waiting army, no soldiers had entered the forest, and the third day, the reinforcements from the other village arrived.

25 strong, fully armed warriors had quickly been stationed to various parts of the forest and village. There had been quite a rowdy disagreement between, Callias and Zelei, about who was to be in command of the new warriors, until Xena had cut through and said, she would take charge of them. Zelei had been fuming, but Callias had accepted without protests. A nervous anxiety filled the air and took hold of every person in the village. The attack was to take place the next day, and everywhere warriors were cleaning and sharpening their weapons, while the healer together with her helpers were busy making preparations for the inevitable aftermath of battle. The plan was to lure as many of the soldiers onto Amazon land early the next evening, and then quickly take care of them with hopefully no casualties on their side. If they were successful that attack was to be immediately followed up with another, later that night, and if all went well, the sun would rise to shine on an empty plain, bereft of any enemy soldiers.

*At least, no living enemy soldiers.* Xena had quietly added in her mind, when she, in one of their rare moments together, had gone over the plan with Gabrielle.

Secrets are hard to keep in any village and it didn't take long before everyone there was aware of who Lykeas was and of his connection to their Regent. Most of the younger Amazons treated him with a casual indifference or innocent curiosity, while those who were old enough to remember his mother and the scandal that had taken place all those years ago, either gave him the cold shoulder or sympathetic looks, neither of which Lykeas paid any attention. He spent most of his time with Xena, planning and preparing the attack or trying to convince Callias to return his weapons. Even when Xena had tried to reason with the Captain and later Ephiny, it hadn't

worked. The Regent had curtly said, he would be allowed to carry arms when the attack was to take place and only then. Xena had delivered the reply to him, but he had only given her a dismissive grin and said that he probably should consider himself lucky they would allow him to carry arms into battle at all. Initially Xena had felt rather guilty about dragging Lykeas to the village, and had decided to make it up to him by never leaving him alone for long, always aiming to keep him entertained, always judging his mood, trying to make him smile. That way, she quietly admitted to herself, she could also keep an eye on him and prevent anything from happening. She was prepared to step in if any situation should arise, well aware of some of the less than friendly eyes following him around. Lykeas behaved himself admirably, but she could tell by the occasional tightening of his jaw and half veiled gaze that even the smallest provocation was all it would take. She soon found that she enjoyed spending all this time with him. They rarely spoke about the past, both knowing it inevitably would lead to subjects neither were ready to discuss, but she realized that just being with him, talking about the upcoming fight, discussing weapons, tactics, horses or what ever came up, provided her with a quiet sense of joy she hadn't felt for a long time. She knew, she should find more time to be with Gabrielle, but kept pushing the thoughts away, always taking refuge in the excuse that she couldn't leave Lykeas alone.

Besides, she promised herself, *We'll have plenty of time to be together after this is over.*

So Gabrielle spent most of her hours with the Regent going over a never ending flow of documents, while Xena spent hers never leaving Lykeas out of sight. As far as the warrior knew, Lykeas and Ephiny hadn't spoken since the night of their arrival, and she had come to the conclusion that probably was the best solution for all people involved.

As she arrived at the practice field, she noticed Lykeas sitting on the fence surrounding the field, watching the training. She let out a breath she hadn't been aware she was holding. It had been an hour since she last saw him, and she had begun to feel slightly worried.

*I'm acting like a broody hen. It's not like he can't take care of himself.*

Her eyes caught the sight of two staves lying carelessly on the ground, and with a controlled tilt of her foot, she caught one, than another in her hands.

*This is gonna be fun.*

She lifted the staff in her right hand and delivered a swift blow against his head.

A hand shot backwards, a body turned and the staff was caught in an iron grip inches before his face.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Xena?" He gave her a self-satisfied smirk.

She arched an eyebrow in return before giving him a grin of her own.

"Wanna spar?"

"Sure."

He jumped down from the fence and watched as Xena in one graceful movement flew over the fence.

"Show off."

She just grinned and tossed him a staff, "I think I've heard that one before."

They made their way toward a deserted corner of the field, the staffs rotating lazily in their hands. They stopped, moved a few stances away from each other and were about to begin when a voice interrupted.

"Can we join you?"

They turned to see Callias stand next to a short, but surprisingly well-muscled woman. The woman's hair was a fiery red and her green eye looked at them with an expectant, but friendly gaze. Xena recognized the woman as Erinya, the village's weapons master, who also conducted the training of the younger Amazons.

"Well?"

Xena looked at Lykeas, who shrugged, "Sure, why not?" He looked at them, studying their physique and their hold on the staffs.

"All against all? Or do you wanna pair up?"

"I think," Erinya began in a beautiful contralto, "I think it should be me and Callias against the two of you."

The two warriors nodded, not really caring either way. Xena led Lykeas a few feet away, till they had their backs to the Amazons.

"I should take Erinya and you Callias."

Lykeas just looked at her, a teasing smile on his lips.

"Oh, and why's that?"

"Callias is a very good soldier, but there's no doubt that Erinya is better skilled with the staff."

Lykeas tilted his head, a bigger grin spreading on his face.

"And, *who* exactly is the more skilled with the staff when it comes to us?"

Xena frowned, but returned his grin.

"We're *not* getting into that old argument now:"

Lykeas let the staff spin faster and faster between his fingers, his arm never moving.

"Xena... I thought we settled this years ago. You're better with the sword, and unless I'm having a very good day I won't defeat you. Just like you won't beat me at archery, and then again, I have no chance in Tartarus to even figure out how that shiny ring of yours works, but when it comes to the staff..."

He let the sentence hang in the air, increasing the speed of the staff till it was nothing

more than a blur.

"When it comes to the staff, I'm your superior. After all, I've practically been fighting with a staff since before I could walk."

Xena opened her mouth to argue, then closed it again, shaking her head in good-natured exasperation.

"Whatever you say, Lykeas. Whatever you say."

Lykeas bit his lip, trying to suppress a smile, "Besides, I think Callias wants to fight you."

"Oh?" Xena looked past him at the Captain, who was talking quietly to Erinya. "Why do you think that?"

Lykeas looked at her in surprise, but when he noticed Xena's genuine confusion, his face became expressionless again.

"Well," he said, dismissing the question. "Don't they all want to fight the Warrior Princess?"

When Gabrielle and Ephiny finally decided to take a break, they didn't waste any time getting out of the crowded and stuffy hut, where they had spent most of the afternoon. Walking through the village, they couldn't fail to notice that something was going on down at the practice field. Pushing herself through the crowd, Gabrielle paused in front of the fence surrounding the field. Ephiny soon joined her and the loudly cheering crowd closed behind them. The sight that greeted her was breathtaking. Four warriors were fighting in the centre of the field. Their moves were swift and precise, hard and merciless. They circled and countered, retreating only enough to block, before delivering another furious blow against whatever exposed limb that was within reach. Their skin was glistening with sweat, clothes clung to their bodies and damp hair swirled in their faces. And there was absolutely no doubt in Gabrielle's mind that they were all having a blast. Especially Xena. The smile never left her face as she jumped to avoid a blow aimed at her legs, regained her balance and forced her staff down hard against the Amazon Captain's right shoulder. Callias cried out in pain, but never loosened her grip around the staff and with an impossibly quick motion, managed to bring it back up and block the next blow. Xena couldn't help but feel just the slightest hint of admiration for the blond Amazon, and was about to say so, when she noticed the determined look in the blue eyes staring directly into hers. She frowned, not sure if she had read the look correctly and that distraction was all Callias needed to deliver a direct hit into Xena's abdomen. Xena felt all air leave her lungs and she staggered a few steps backward. The Captain felt victory within reach and moved forward to deliver the final blow. She raised her staff, but suddenly felt her legs disappear from underneath her and she landed flat on her back with a triumphant Warrior Princess staring down at her.

"I think that's enough for today. We all need our strength for the battle tomorrow."

She reached down and for a second she thought Callias would refuse, but the Captain grudgingly accepted her hand.

"You fight well," the blonde began, but was interrupted by the sound of two bodies

heavily hitting the ground. Lykeas was sitting on top of Erinya, his staff pressing hard against her throat. The weapons master struggled and wriggled, but Lykeas pushed harder, locking his thighs around her hips.

"You give?" He managed to say, panting heavily.

The Amazon struggled some more, more for appearances sake than anything else, before she went limp, grinning wildly.

"I give! I give!"

Lykeas rolled off her, a big grin of his own spreading across his face. He reached down and pulled the Amazon to her feet, and for a while they just stood in front of each other, panting and grinning.

"What kind of move was *that*? " The weapons master finally managed to say, dusting off her hands. "I've never seen anything like it!"

"Well," Lykeas smiled, "I didn't want to stay out here the entire day, so I had to put an end to it."

"Okay, that makes sense, but *that* move?"

"Well," Lykeas said again, the black eyes shimmering with mischief. "*I* didn't make you step on my staff, did I? You did that all by yourself."

The Amazon shook her head and gave him a warm smile.

"You'll have to teach me that one day."

They suddenly became aware of all the eyes following them and managed to compose themselves. Callias stepped over to Erinya and together they began to walk off the field. Xena looked at Lykeas, a crooked smile on her lips.

"The Double Grasshopper Move?"

"She had it coming." He smirked, enjoying himself tremendously. "Blew her right off her feet."

Xena raised an eyebrow and put an arm around his shoulder. "It most certainly did."

## CHAPTER IX

Lykeas was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. His back was hurting slightly after the powerful dive he had made with Erinya earlier the day, but that aside he felt good. He could feel the familiar anticipation of battle enter his limbs, and he knew he wouldn't get much, if any, sleep that night. Outside the hut, the village was quiet, most people having gone to bed hours ago. Suddenly he heard the sound of quiet footsteps walking outside and come to rest in front of his door. A gentle knock followed. He sat up and moved back to lean against the wall.

"Come in."

The person outside hesitated for a moment before slowly opening the door and coming inside.

"Ephiny?"

The surprise on Lykeas' face was quickly replaced by something else. "What do you want?"

The Regent stood for a moment, her eyes darting from one side of the hut to the other.

"I... I thought we should talk."

"I thought you said you never wanted to see me again, much less talk to me."

"That...that was a long time ago, Lykeas. Perhaps we could...perhaps we could move on."

"Move...on?"

The black eyes narrowed dangerously and Ephiny involuntarily took a step back.

"I have," the Regent began, swallowing hard. "I have no family left beside you and I thought-."

"I'm not your family!" The dark man rose from the bed slowly, his movements almost feline. "Didn't we establish that once already?"

Ephiny felt the need to step away once more, to put some distance between them, but she remained standing, her eyes now staring defiantly into his.

"You're my brother, Lykeas, whether you like it or not. Our mothers were joined and I know they would want-."

Her head flew back from the impact of the blow. He raised his hand to strike again and she closed her eyes, bracing herself for the second blow. But nothing happened. She opened her eyes and for an endless moment, they looked at each other. He lowered his hand to his side before putting it behind his back. First then he broke eye contact and looked down at his feet.

"You better go."

Ephiny was suddenly filled with an overwhelming sense of loss and she had to take a few breaths before she could speak.

"Is that all you have to say?" The question lingered in the air for a few heartbeats.

"Yes."

She turned and walked to the door.

"Ephiny?"

"Yes?" She answered, without turning around.

"I'm sorry I hit you." The words were spoken in a surprisingly soft tone.

"I'm sorry you hit me, too."

She walked out and closed the door behind her.

She almost ran into Gabrielle, who had to grab onto the Regent's shoulder not to fall.

"Ephiny! Are you all right?"

The Amazon removed a few blond strands from her eyes and gave Gabrielle an unconvincing smile.

"I'm fine, Gabrielle. Lykeas and I just had a small disagreement, nothing to worry about."

Gabrielle threw a glance at the closed door and then at her friend's face.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Ephiny shook her head.

"No, right now, all I want to do is sleep." She gave Gabrielle's hand a gentle squeeze. "I'll see you in the morning."

Gabrielle watched as the Regent disappeared in the darkness before she turned to look at the door again.

*No, not tonight. I can't deal with him tonight.*

She walked to her own hut and noticed to her dismay it was still empty. Although she knew it was stupid, she couldn't help but feel just a bit hurt by Xena's continuing absence, and she wondered briefly where she could be. All plans for the attack had, to her knowledge, been made and she couldn't think of anything else the warrior might be doing.

*Unless, of course...*

She smiled to herself and began to walk towards the stables. Xena was probably having a quiet chat with her beloved horse, and she better go get her, before the warrior forgot that other living creatures might want her attentions as well. As she passed the practice field, she noticed a shadow leaning against the fence, facing away from her. She stepped a few steps closer.

"Callias?"

The shadow spun around and the moon revealed the beautiful face of the Amazon Captain.

"Your Majesty! What are you doing out here on your own and at such a late hour?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Probably the same as you, Captain. Enjoying the peace and quiet of the night."

She took a quick decision and climbed up to sit on the fence, and after a moment's hesitation, Callias joined her.

"Can't you sleep?"

The smile left Gabrielle's face.

"No, I can't stop thinking about what's going to happen tomorrow. What if something goes wrong? What if everything fails and people get killed for no reason? What if-."

Her words were cut off by Callias, who tentatively reached out to take the Queen's hand.

"Don't think like that, my Queen. You'll only drive yourself crazy. We'll fight because we have to and we all know that we might die tomorrow, but there isn't a single Amazon here, who isn't willing to die for her people, for her Queen...including me."

Gabrielle squeezed the hand holding hers and gave Callias a weak smile.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that, Callias. I wouldn't want a single Amazon to die for me...including you."

A strange expression showed on the Captain's face and she looked away.

"I *would* die for you, my Queen," she said in such a quiet voice that Gabrielle almost didn't hear her.

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came. She eased herself down from the fence to stand in front of the Amazon Captain.

Callias, I..." She stopped, not sure if she should say something.

The Amazon jumped down from the fence, landing elegantly next to the Queen. The soldier slowly raised her head to meet Gabrielle's gaze. Gabrielle saw the emotion surfacing in the intense blue eyes, and for the slightest of moments, she was captivated and unable to move away. Callias leaned forward, inch for inch bringing her face closer to the Queen's.

"Callias, no..." Gabrielle breathed, feeling the heat radiating from the woman in front of her, and then she felt nothing, but the soft lips pressing gently against hers. For a second, Gabrielle's mind went black, she just stood and let herself be overwhelmed by the powerful feelings the blond warrior invoked in her. She felt her heartbeat increase as the kiss intensified, and the Amazon gingerly began to explore her mouth with her tongue, her hands enveloping Gabrielle's waist, pulling her closer. That awoke Gabrielle from her state of paralysis and she pushed the Captain away.

"Callias, no!"

A mortified expression showed on the Amazon's face and she took a few steps backwards.

"I'm... I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

Then suddenly she turned and ran.

"Callias! Wait!"

But the Amazon Captain had vanished into the darkness.

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Gabrielle whispered to herself, kicking the fence in

frustration.

"Why did this have to happen now?"

She let out a frustrated sigh and began to walk back to the Royal hut. She needed to be alone right now, to gather her thoughts and find a way to straighten things out with Callias. She was too engulfed in her thoughts to notice the dark silhouette standing in the doorway of the stable and the cold azure eyes narrowing, as they followed the lithe figure of the Queen be embraced by the night and disappear.

30 Warriors moved soundlessly through the thick forest. Another 20 were positioned in the trees only a small distance from the more open, bushy area that worked as a natural border between forest and plain. Further in, 50 warriors were waiting among the trees, invisible to anybody who would have passed. Lykeas and Xena were standing impatiently with these warriors, all quiet, all straining to hear what happened, all waiting for the signal to move. The remains of the Amazon force were camped closer to the village, but still inside the forest, waiting for the command to attack the surviving soldiers on the plain. The afternoon sun was warm and shining with an ever increasing red light, but none of the rays penetrated the dense roof of leaves, and the warriors shivered in the darkness. The forest was still, not a single bird or animal was heard and a feeling of nervous dread hung in the air, blending in with the strong anticipation of battle emanating from everybody in hiding. Lykeas absently caressed the hilt of the sword, subconsciously comforted by its presence at his side again. He turned to look at Xena and they exchanged a quiet smile before both returned their attention to the clearing ahead. Callias and her soldiers had arrived at the borderland. She ducked under a low hanging branch and took cover behind a tree. She raised a hand to halt the warriors behind her, and knew, without looking back that they had all melted into their surroundings. She carefully moved to look past the tree and study the scene in front of her. The enemy camp was calm and not a lot of activity was to be seen. Small groups of soldiers were scattered all over the area, some sitting around a fire eating, others talking or playing dice. However, groups of 5 were constantly patrolling the area, circling the camp and guards were positioned at the outskirts. The Captain noticed that every soldier, even those who were eating and gambling, all had their weapons within reach, ready to jump up and fight if necessary. She moved behind the tree again as a patrol walked by only a few yards away. When it had passed, she raised her hand again, signalling her soldiers to be ready. She took a deep breath and the shrill cry of hawk cut through the air, and instantly, as if one being, 30 Amazons moved and stormed through the bushes. Ear shattering war-cries followed and confusion in the enemy camp was total. Xena felt all her muscles tense by the sound and she had to force herself to remain standing in the shadows. She couldn't see anything, but she could clearly hear the sounds of battle. Metal hitting hard against metal, the eerie sound of swords sliding down another and the groans and shouts of the soldiers. She more felt than heard the impacts of the blows, felt how the sharp blades sliced their way through armour and leather to enter soft yielding flesh. She could feel arms pausing, before pulling back, releasing streams of blood to mar the ground in the deadly colour of war. Then she heard Callias shout.

"Retreat! Retreat! Now!"

Her sword was in her hand before the Captain had finished the sentence and she began to move forward. Suddenly her vision was filled with Amazons rushing past her, and she stepped aside, taking refuge behind a tree. Then the warriors were gone and for a

single second nothing was heard, then the angry shouts of men rang in her ears.

The accent was foreign, but the words weren't.

"Come On! Let's get them! They're running!"

Another voice shouted.

"No! Don't! It's against our orders! We're not to enter the forest!," but the voice was drowned out by furious shouts and immediately followed by the sound of heavy boots entering the forest. Xena braced herself for what was about to happen, a predatory smile on her lips. Between 40-50 soldiers came rushing into sight, determined at first, but then slowly coming to a halt, looking hesitantly around.

"Where did they go?"

"Damn! Don't say those fucking bitches got away?"

*On the contrary, we're right here.*

The grin on Xena's face broadened and she tightened the grip on her sword.

She heard a whisper in the trees and, for a moment, she felt almost sorry for the men.

*"Fire!"*

From everywhere arrows flew through the air, finding their targets with deadly accuracy. The shouted curses were quickly replaced by screams of anger and fear as the soldiers saw their comrades fall to the ground around them. Another wave of arrows followed, mercilessly continuing the bloody harvest of men.

*"Attack!"*

From behind every tree and every bush, Amazons emerged with grim determination written on their faces. Warriors lowered themselves from trees, and arriving at the clearing was a unit of 50 soldiers with a savagely grinning Lykeas in the lead. The fight was bloody but short. 10 minutes later no enemy soldiers were left alive.

"Okay!" Xena shouted, bringing everybody's attention to her. "We give it an hour to see what happens and if nothing does, then we attack the camp."

Small cheers were quickly silenced by a look from the warrior.

"This is not over yet!"

Without a sound they retreated back into the forest.

The moon rose to reveal a village that was quiet but yet alive with activity. Everyone there who had been left behind, whether being too old or too young to fight, had spent an anxious afternoon, then evening and finally night waiting for news of the attack. Gabrielle had been pacing the Royal hut till she couldn't take it any longer and had gone outside. She immediately realized, she wasn't the only one who couldn't stand the confines of their huts as the village was full of people. Some were walking around talking quietly, others were standing at the outskirts, eyes filled with worry searching the forest. She found Ephiny among the latter, the Regent's face unnaturally pale in the

moonlight.

"I should be there." She spoke quietly, not looking at Gabrielle. "I shouldn't have let Xena talk me out of it."

"She needs you here," Gabrielle tried to reassure her friend. "She needs to know there is a strong leader ready to take over if anything should happen, and..." She felt her throat constrict at the next words. "And Xena knows I'm not capable of that."

Ephiny spun around.

"That's not true, Gabrielle! You're more than capable to reign this village *and* the Nation, and we both know that, and so does Xena."

Gabrielle gave her a sad smile, "In times of peace maybe, but when it comes to war and fighting, I'm afraid I'm terribly inadequate. I don't-."

"Someone's coming!"

All over the village, faces turned toward the forest and soon after, shadows slowly began to emerge.

Ephiny recognized the slow, staggering movements and let out a small sigh.

"The wounded are being brought in."

"Kelif!" She shouted, "Get your people ready. The wounded are coming!"

"How many?" The healer shouted back, running towards her Regent.

A rasping voice answered, "It's not that bad, only about 15-20 and most aren't hurt that badly, only a few..." The voice broke and Gabrielle recognized Areia. The brown-haired Amazon was bleeding from a deep cut above her right ear and her sword arm was wrapped in a makeshift bandage, but what frightened the Queen the most was the total lack of life in the brown eyes. Ephiny took a step forward, searching the soldier's face.

"Phila...?" She managed to whisper.

Areia could only nod, tears filling her eyes. "She...she saved my life... She..."

The Regent put her arm around the soldier and gently led her away. Gabrielle felt like she was going to throw up, she took a few deep breaths, then the healer arrived at her side.

"Your Majesty?"

"About 15-20 and most shouldn't be hurt that badly." She repeated in a desolate voice.

"Any casualties?" The healer asked in a controlled and businesslike tone.

"A few;" Gabrielle whispered, then she pulled herself together. "I don't know how many."

The healer nodded, "Okay, have the most seriously wounded sent to my hut and the

others to Erinya's. We'll need all the room we can get."

Gabrielle nodded and the healer began to move away before Gabrielle's voice stopped her.

"What about the dead?"

The healer turned and for a second a sorrowful smile replaced the mask of professionalism.

"The dead can wait, Your Majesty, the living can't."

Slowly the Amazon army returned to the village. Some could walk by themselves, others were half supported, half carried back. Gabrielle watched in silence as the endless flow of warriors passed her, and although one part of her mind told her that they had won, that they escaped with as small a casualty as possible, another part kept seeing the shocked, tearstained face of Areia. Some of the soldiers gave her small exhausted smiles as they passed while others acknowledged her presence by nodding briefly. Her eyes desperately searched for the sight of one warrior. At times she had to restrain herself from not running forward when she thought she saw a familiar figure, but every time her hope was crushed.

"Lykeas!"

She almost ran to him and flung her arms around him. He stiffened immediately, but didn't pull away. She released him from her grip, but held onto his arms. He was pale and his face was smeared with dirt and blood, but otherwise he appeared unharmed.

"Xena? Where's Xena?"

"She's all right, Gabrielle." His voice was hoarse and he cleared his throat. "She's still at the camp."

"Why? What is she doing there? I thought the battle was over."

"It is, she's going through some documents we found. She wants to know who they are...or were."

The last statement was accompanied by a smile resembling a sneer, and Gabrielle let go off his arms.

"So...Xena wasn't hurt?"

"No, she's fine."

Relief washed over Gabrielle and she suddenly felt very tired.

Lykeas gave her an awkward pat on the shoulder and started to walk away.

"Lykeas?"

"Yes?"

"How many died?"

He looked at her, his brow furrowing.

"Oh... Only a few, about four or five, I think."

"Anyone... anyone I know?"

"Uhm, I don't know... Phila and... and a small black-haired one, Terisa I believe it was. And then one or two from the other village, don't know their names... and..." He wiped a drop of blood away from his nose, his brow furrowing some more. "And Callias, I think."

Gabrielle pushed herself forcefully through the crowd hovering outside the healer's hut. A tall woman stood in the door blocking the way, but when she noticed it was the Queen, she stepped aside and let her in. The hut was buzzing with a hasty but controlled activity. People were kneeling besides pallets, washing away blood, bandaging wounds and whispering words of comfort. An almost perceptible quiet existed and only hushed voices and splashing water were heard. Kelife looked up from her position next to a pallet, the ground around it, coloured with blood. She barely acknowledged the presence of her Queen before returning to her task. Gabrielle let her eyes roam the bodies lying on the pallets, but didn't find what she was looking for. Almost reluctantly her eyes came to rest on the person in Kelife's care. Callias was deadly pale, her face white as a sheet against the blood covering her body. A steady stream of blood was seeping from a deep cut in her side.

"Leda! I need more bandages!"

A young Amazon rushed to the healer's side, handing her the bandages. Kelife tore away Callias' tunic to get more access to the wound, before pressing the cloth against it. Instantly the bandages were soaked and the healer let out a low curse.

"Leda! Do we have any tar?"

"No, we were supposed to get some more next month, remember?"

Another string of curses followed.

"Okay, Leda, you now what to do."

The helper rushed past the Queen and out of the hut.

Kelife looked up and her eyes searched the hut, but all of the helpers were occupied. She turned to look at her Queen.

"Your Majesty, I need your help."

It wasn't a request, it was a command and Gabrielle obeyed without a second thought. She knelt down on the floor, on the opposite side of the pallet. She stared at the white, dirty face and couldn't stop herself from reaching out and gently push a lock of blood stained hair away from the Captain's forehead. Callias's face was captured in a silent expression of pain. Her eyes were narrow slits and her jaw was clenched tightly together, pale lips baring white teeth biting down hard.

"I need to remove something from the wound. You must keep it free from blood, so I can see what I'm doing."

"There...there's something in the wound?"

"Yes, I think it's the tip of a dagger. It must have broken off inside of her."

Gabrielle swallowed and steadied herself.

The healer began to feel her way inside the wound while Gabrielle fought to wash away the blood that began flowing once again.

"I...I think...I got it!"

With a triumphant cry Kelife pulled out a long metal tip and immediately the wound began to bleed more strongly. Gabrielle looked for more bandages, but couldn't find any. She tore a piece of cloth from her skirt and began pressing it against the bleeding. The healer looked at her, a respectful look in the grey eyes. Wordlessly, she got up and then returned with more cloth.

"Try and halt the bleeding as much as you can. Leda should be here shortly, we'll have to seal the wound."

Gabrielle nodded without taking her eyes away from her task. Her knees were hurting and her arms were aching from the strain, but she didn't give in. In her mind she kept seeing gentle, blue eyes looking at her in an unspoken question. She saw the shy smile of an embarrassed Amazon Captain before pulling her out to dance, and she saw the horrified expression of a young woman realizing what she'd done.

"Please, my Queen. I need you to step aside."

Gabrielle was awakened from her state of reverie and in a haze moved away from the pallet, allowing Leda to kneel in her place. She barely acknowledged the red glowing pair of tongs the helper held in her hand, before the hand was lowered and a sickening seething sound followed. A low guttural groan was heard for only a moment and then it silenced. The smell of burned flesh mingled with the harsh smell of blood and urine and Gabrielle felt her head spin. She turned and ran out of the hut, through the people waiting outside, paying no attention to the concerned voices calling her name. She paused at the outskirts of the village, panting heavily. A nagging sense of shame claimed her now and she had to blink a few tears away.

*Gods! How did I ever think I could be more than a bard? I'm not a warrior, I'm not a Queen. I'm not even strong enough to help them in the only way I can.*

She straightened up and dried her eyes.

*No! I can do this! I may not fight with them on the battlefield, but I'll be damned if I'm not going to help them when they are wounded.*

A new determination entered her body and she turned to walk back to the hut.

"Gabrielle."

She froze on the spot, the tears flowing freely again.

"Xena?"

She turned to see the most beautiful sight she had ever witnessed. A pale, tired and

very exhausted warrior walking towards her. Her heart cried out at the sight of the dark blues eyes devouring her and the small smile showing on the full lips.

"Gabrielle?"

She ran forward and was immediately caught up in strong, powerful arms.

## CHAPTER X

The following night five funeral pyres were lit. Two warriors from the village, together with two from the neighbouring village had died on the battlefield, and in the early hours of dawn another soldier succumbed to her injuries. Callias fought a long, hard battle against death, each ragged breath threatening to be her last, but when the pale morning sun rose to drive out the remaining shadows, the healer raised her head and gave Gabrielle an exhausted smile.

"She survived the night. She'll be all right now."

The pyres burned through the night and everyone in the village who were capable, were there to honour the dead. Ephiny held a quiet eulogy for each warrior, outlining each soldier's courage and skills. Her voice only breaking once, when she began speaking about Terisa, the young scout, who had been stabbed from behind. It was a night of sorrow, but also a night of joy. The joy of the victorious and the joy of being alive. It was decided to have a small celebration when the injured were strong enough to participate, and life slowly returned to normal. Xena had requested that the warriors from the other village stay for at least a fortnight before returning, and Ephiny had agreed. In spite of the recent victory the thought of what might follow was never far from the Regent's mind. The documents they had found had only been used to keep track of the soldiers pay, and hadn't been able to put some light on who they were, or where they came from. Several Greek names had been among the more foreign sounding ones, and Xena had felt her body fill with rage. It was one thing when the city states forgot all the solemn promises of brotherhood they had exchanged, and began waging war on each other, but Greek men entering foreign service to fight Greek was something entirely different. Secretly she was glad none of the soldiers had survived, although she would have liked to have had the opportunity to question one about their targets. Gabrielle had spent most of her time tending to the injured, and every Amazon who might have felt displeased with their Queen and her refusal to fight, now felt a strong sense of pride. Without complaint the Queen knelt down on the stained floor, exchanged bloody bandages, washed dirt and gore from battered bodies and always she had kind, comforting words for anyone who might need it. Xena had guards posted on the borderland, so she could be immediately notified of any movement on the plain, and spent the majority of her time going over the attack with Lykeas or sparring with the soldiers.

Stretching her back, Gabrielle rose from the chair next to Callias' pallet. The Captain had been drifting in and out of consciousness for most of the day, her body raging with fever. Kelife came to stand beside her and gently put a hand on the patients forehead.

"The fever has broken."

Gabrielle nodded, "I know."

"Why don't you go home and get some sleep, my Queen? You have been on your feet for two days without rest."

Gabrielle's entire body was aching and her eyelids felt heavy and swollen, but she shook her head.

"I can't, not yet. The wounded need me here."

The healer reached out and lifted her Queen's head so she could see her face.

"The wounded have been taken care of. All they need know is to rest and the same goes for you, my Queen."

When she saw Gabrielle was about to protest she smiled. "It's by the healer's order," she said and gently pushed the exhausted woman towards the door.

"Go, get some sleep. I don't want to see you again for the next 10-12 hours."

Gabrielle gave her a tired smile, the strain of the last days clearly showing on her face. She stepped outside and was surprised to discover it was night. She had been inside the hut all day and hadn't noticed the hours slip away. On her way through the deserted village, she noticed Ephiny walking towards Lykeas' hut carrying his arms.

"Ephiny?"

The Regent almost jumped.

"Oh, it's you. I didn't hear you coming. How are the wounded?"

"They are fine, it'll take time for some, but they'll all recover."

"Ah, that's good... I know, I should have checked on them myself, but I been so busy with the funerals, and rearranging the army and... I haven't..." She trailed off, taking a deep breath to compose herself. "I haven't even said goodbye to Terisa yet."

Her eyes went to the South of the village where the memorial grounds were.

"I...I meant to bring her some flowers tonight and tell her... But I have to return these weapons to Lykeas first. I know he'd want them back, and after the way he fought for us it would be petty to refuse."

She silenced, but made no move to leave. Gabrielle reached out and took the weapons from the Regent.

"I'll do that. You have somewhere else to be right now."

Ephiny gave her a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Gabrielle, you're a true friend and a true Queen. You may not think so yourself, but you have proven to everybody in this village that you're worthy of ruling the Nation... As if we didn't know that already."

And with these as her parting words, the blond Amazon disappeared in the direction of the memorial grounds. Gabrielle walked the last way to Lykeas' hut and knocked on the door.

"Just a sec." She heard him answer as he moved around inside.

"Okay, come in."

He was sitting on the bed with nothing but a blanket wrapped around him, his wet clothes hanging on a chair close to the fireplace.

"I've put off washing for too long." He explained at her inquiring look. "Thought I might as well get it over with while I had the time."

Gabrielle nodded and gave him a tired smile.

"I know what you mean... I have your weapons with me, Ephiny thought you should have them back."

His face lit up by her words and Gabrielle groaned inwardly.

*Warriors! It really doesn't take much to make them happy. They can be stoic and brooding for days, but the moment you return them their toys, they begin purring like kittens.*

"Just put them against the wall."

Gabrielle complied and placed the sword, bow and quiver against the wall.

"Where do you want your daggers and knives?"

"Oh, I guess you can put those on the floor, I won't be able to dress for a while."

She did as she was told, but as she raised her head, Lykeas shifted on the bed and the movement caused the blanket to open slightly and expose a tanned, muscled thigh to the hip. Gabrielle stared in astonishment. His left thigh was covered in an intricate pattern of thin white scars, circling and weaving into each other, and she knew with a freezing clarity that those patterns hadn't been caused by any accidental strike. They had been carved into the flesh.

"Who did that?"

He looked at her for a second, unsure of what she was referring to, then realization hit and he followed her gaze to his thigh.

"I did."

"What?" Gabrielle exhaled softly.

"I did... I had to prove a point once."

Gabrielle looked into the clouded black eyes, then she slowly walked out of the door, closing it as she left. Lykeas stared at the closed door, but he didn't see it. In its place he saw bloodshot, grey eyes looking at him with drunken malice, a hand moving to reveal a knife.

*"Prove it."*

*"I don't-."*

*"Prove it!"*

*The woman threw the knife and it embedded itself in the wall behind the young boy.*

*"You said there was nothing I could do to you, you couldn't do yourself. So prove it!"*

*A small bronze hand reached for the knife...*

With a groan Lykeas got up and began dressing in his still damp clothes. He wouldn't get any sleep that night.

Gabrielle entered the Royal hut and was pleasantly surprised to see that Xena was there, but her feeling of joy quickly evaporated when she noticed the sullen expression in the blue eyes.

*Seems like somebody's had a bad day.*

"Where have you been?"

*Oh yeah, definitely a bad day.*

Gabrielle closed the door behind her and almost fell down on the bed. Her body was aching all over and she felt like she could sleep for weeks. Xena was standing at the wall staring at her. She had indeed had a bad day. She had woken up that morning with a terrible headache and she could still feel it throbbing in the back of her head. Then even before she'd had the chance to eat breakfast, she had had a major argument with Zelei about something so stupid, she had forgotten all about it the moment it finished. But the aggravation hadn't left her body and that, together with the restlessness she had begun to feel, her temper had been ready to explode since noon. To make matters worse, she had been sparring with Lykeas and he had beaten her rather convincingly because her thoughts had kept drifting to other subjects, and her chest still hurt from the blow she'd received because she hadn't been paying attention. Zelei had witnessed it and it was her luck that Erinya had had the good sense to pull the Captain away, before she had said something that would have left her a head shorter. After that she had gone in search of Gabrielle, only to find that the Queen was still attending to the wounded and probably wouldn't be home for hours.

*Yeah right, I wonder why.*

"So?" The question was followed by a raised eyebrow.

Gabrielle slowly pulled herself up in a sitting position on the bed.

"You know where I have been, Xena. I've been with the wounded."

"I thought they were all out of danger?"

Gabrielle sighed and began to pull off her boots.

"They are, but that doesn't mean they still don't need to be cared for."

Blue eyes narrowed.

"Yeah, I bet."

Gabrielle raised her head and looked at the warrior, a frown on her face.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Xena crossed her arms over her chest.

"Don't you think it's funny that the Amazon Queen herself so vigorously spends all her time with the wounded, tending to their every need, when the healer and her helpers are more than capable of that?"

"I'm just trying to do my part."

"Oh, is that so?"

Gabrielle let out an exasperated sigh.

"Xena, what are you talking about? I'm too tired to play games with you tonight."

"What I'm talking about is that maybe there is a reason, why you're so keen on spending every minute of your time changing bandages, cleaning wounds or holding hands with the wounded. Or I should say one particularly wounded? A certain blond Captain perhaps?"

Gabrielle shot up from the bed.

"Xena, that's ridiculous!"

But the memory of Callias's passionate kiss entered her mind and a faint colour rose to her cheeks. If possible, the blue eyes narrowed even more.

"Touched a nerve, did I?"

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, but was too late, the warrior had already stormed out of the hut. Totally exhausted she flung herself down on the bed.

*I'll deal with this tomorrow. I have to sleep first, and then I'll deal with it... Tomorrow.*

Xena rushed through the village till she found what she was looking for. She grabbed Lykeas' arm and pulled him with her, almost causing him to stumble from the force.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"We're going hunting!"

"We are?"

"Yes!"

Lykeas knew better than to argue.

The two warriors glided through the dark forest. They moved soundlessly between the trees, never within sight, but always keenly aware of the other's location. Lykeas suddenly inhaled a familiar harsh smell.

"Xena?"

"I know," a voice spoke out of the darkness. "Boar."

"Wanna go for it?"

Rattling of leaves was all the answer he received.

"Guess you do."

He followed her trail, muttering to himself.

"I hope you know how crazy this is, without spears and everything."

"It's all part of the challenge." She answered, somewhere ahead of him.

"Have I ever told you how annoying that hearing of yours is?"

"Shh..."

They arrived at a small clearing and came to a halt. Xena sniffed the air.

"It's coming."

Lykeas pulled out an arrow and prepared his bow. He threw a glance at Xena.

"Aren't you gonna use your chakram?"

Xena reached for the hilt of her sword, a wolfish grin playing on her lips.

"No."

"Okaaay..."

They waited and soon they heard a heavy animal moving through the bushes. The sound was accompanied by snorting and grunting, and Xena could feel her heart rate increase, anticipation filling her body. Suddenly the grunting stopped and Lykeas involuntarily tensed. A pair of yellow eyes were staring at them from the opposite of the clearing. He raised his bow.

"Not yet."

"But Xena-."

"Not yet."

He sighed and lowered the bow again, keeping the arrow ready. When Xena was in one of her moods, it was better to just play along and see where it would take them. He couldn't help but wonder if this would take them both to Tartarus a lot earlier than expected. In that instant the boar charged. The underbrush was torn apart and a huge black animal ran directly towards them. Xena slowly unsheathed her sword. The animal thundered through the clearing, small grunts of rage filling the night. Xena could smell the animal strongly now, and briefly closed her eyes.

*Come here... Come here... That's right, I'm waiting...*

She could feel the tension in Lykeas' body, but he didn't move a muscle and remained at her side. Just like she knew he would. She sensed the boar close the distance

between them and she opened her eyes. The arrow flew from Lykeas' bow and he immediately pulled out another. The arrow embedded itself deeply into the animal's throat, but it didn't even halt its approach. Its attention shifted from Xena to Lykeas and it lowered its head, intending to tear his legs with its fangs. A second arrow left the bow and found its target and this time the boar staggered, before resuming its pace.

"Hey you! That's right, piggy, you! Come here!"

Xena's voice caused several birds to take off from the trees and the boar turned its sole attention to her. It thrust itself against her, and Lykeas watched in horror as Xena fell to the ground, taking the boar with her. Frantically he dropped the bow and drew his sword. With all his might he brought the sword down against the animal's neck, through hard sinew and muscles, blood immediately smearing the blade. For a second the animal struggled then it went limp. He dragged the boar away, steadying himself for the sight of Xena's mutilated body. Instead he was met with sparkling blue eyes and the sound of roaring laughter.

"Gods, Lykeas! If you could see yourself!"

He extended a hand down and pulled her up.

"I'm glad you find this so amusing. I thought you'd been killed."

Xena brushed earth and leaves off her leathers and aside from a few cuts and scrapes on her legs she appeared unharmed.

"Ah, Lykeas, you should know me better than that. It impaled itself on my sword when we went down, didn't you see?"

"If I had, I definitely wouldn't have been so busy stabbing it from behind, would I?" He grumbled, but a grin was slowly spreading on his face.

"Gee, Xena. I'd forgotten how it was to go hunting with you."

Xena returned his grin, "Just like the old days."

"Yeah... What now? I don't really feel like carrying it all the way back to the village."

Xena poked the animal with her foot. "Who said anything about going back?"

The smell of roasted meat made Lykeas' stomach rumble and Xena threw him an amused glance.

"I take it we're feeling a bit hungry."

He smiled sheepishly, "Perhaps, just a little."

They were sitting comfortably resting their backs against a tree, a blazing fire burning in front of them. A sharpened branch with several chunks of meat had been placed just above the flames. For a while the only thing heard was the occasional seething from the fire when the juices of the meat came in contact with the flames. Lykeas lazily stretched his body with such an enthusiasm that all his bones cried out in complaint.

"Getting old?"

"Fraid so."

They began to eat, burning their tongues and fingers on the hot meat, juices running down their chins.

"We make quite a sight," Lykeas grinned and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his tunic. "And I'd just washed this."

When sated, Xena leaned back against the tree, enjoying the feel of her body slowly beginning to unwind and relax. She closed her eyes and inhaled a few deep breaths of air. The night was slightly colder than the ones before, but she didn't mind. The cold air was slowly clearing her mind, and she felt the throbbing in the back of her head lessening and then disappear completely.

"So... Are you gonna tell me why we're here?"

"Like I said, I wanted to go hunting."

"Uh huh."

Xena opened her eyes and turned to look at the man beside her, half hidden in shadows.

"It's no big deal... I just made a terrible fool of myself tonight."

"So what else is new?"

She gave him a friendly slap.

"Watch it!"

They both knew that taking this conversation any further would lead to a discussion of more personal matters, something that neither was comfortable with, so Lykeas changed the subject.

"When do you think the reinforcements will arrive?"

Xena picked up a twig and threw it at the fire.

"I don't know."

"You think they *will* come?"

"Yes, it's only a question of time."

"I wonder who they are..."

"Me too."

They fell silent and soon the calm, even breathing told Xena, Lykeas had fallen asleep. She was pleased for him, she didn't think he had gotten a lot of sleep the last couple of nights. Neither had she for that matter, but perhaps a trip to the forest, hunting boar was all it took, because she soon felt her eyelids grow heavy and a warm, soothing sensation enter her limbs. Still, she resisted falling asleep right away,

enjoying her state between sleep and awareness far too much. Unbidden images came to her mind and it didn't take long before she found herself at another fire, in a different forest, many years ago.

*The fire had almost died, but neither had made a move to throw more wood on. They had been alone, sitting close to each other, the remains of the army camping further away.*

*"I'd wish you'd stop doing that, it drives me crazy."*

*"What?" Lykeas said, looking up from the knife resting in his hands.*

*"That knife," Xena elaborated. "I'd wish you stop playing with it all the time, it makes me nervous."*

*"Oh, sorry." But he hadn't put it away, but begun staring at it instead.*

*"You know, it's funny..."*

*"What's funny?"*

*"This was my father's knife."*

*Xena's brow furrowed.*

*"Really? I thought... I mean, you said your father-."*

*"I know," he interrupted. "He forgot it when he left. My mother brought it with her... I don't know why, perhaps as a reminder or something."*

*He looked up and Xena was surprised to feel a shiver run down her back, but the expression in his eyes...*

*Do you know what the funny part is?"*

*"No."*

*"He didn't recognize it."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I showed it to him just before I killed him, but he didn't recognize it."*

*"You killed him?"*

*"Yes."*

*"How?"*

*"How? What do you mean how?"*

*Xena shook her head, "No, I mean how did you find him? How did you know who he was."*

*"He told her his name, remember?"*

*When he noticed her confusion he continued, "He told her not to forget her name and*

*she never did."*

*"But how-."*

*"Lisisis was so kind to tell me. She didn't want me to go through life without knowing, who my father was."*

*"I see."*

*Xena wasn't sure whether she should encourage him to continue or try to change the subject. So she decided to wait and see what happened. She could see in his eyes that his mind was far, far away.*

*"Remember when we were in Athens? Before we shipped out?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"I looked him up. He wasn't hard to find... He had become respectable, rich, with slaves and everything. He was married."*

*"Oh," Xena commented, well aware that he wasn't listening.*

*"A slave fetched him for me... He was pretty annoyed, I think he'd just been woken up. He asked me what I wanted and I showed him the knife."*

*"What did he say?" Xena found that she was becoming intrigued by the story. This definitely beat the drunken tales of her men, she was otherwise subjected to.*

*"He just looked at me and asked if I was crazy. Apparently, his memory wasn't worth much."*

*The dark-haired man sighed, "At least not till I shoved him up against the wall... but it wasn't the knife he remembered... It was my eyes, or perhaps I should say my mother's."*

*He looked up and Xena felt him staring right through her.*

*"I told him, I was glad he remembered."*

*He pulled himself out of the haze that had entered his mind, and tilted his head slightly to look at Xena, a faint smile showing on his lips.*

*"What then?"*

*"Then I killed him."*

She awoke with a start. For a while she took in the sight of the black sky and the white stars, before she turned to look at Lykeas. He was still sleeping, a peaceful, almost vulnerable expression on his face. She shook her head to remove the last traces of sleep and began rebuilding the fire.

## CHAPTER XI

Gabrielle awoke from a restless sleep. She wasn't surprised to find the bed empty and tried to ignore it, but after a while she had had enough and got up and dressed. It was early dawn outside and she knew she should be exhausted and try to sleep a couple of

hours more, but she knew her body well enough to tell that sleep wouldn't return. Besides she felt relatively rested and the heaviness had left her head. She stepped outside into the grey light of the morning. A faint mist lingered between the huts and the air felt damp against her skin. She took a deep breath and looked around, unsure of what to do. The village was still sleeping and no activity was seen or heard. Without really acknowledging it, she began to walk towards the healer's hut. She paused outside the door and debated with herself whether to go in or not. She knew it wasn't really necessary for her to be there, and that Xena probably would resent it when she found out. The last thought was also the deciding one. She felt a small fire of anger ignite inside of her.

*How can she even think something like that? Doesn't she know I love her? Doesn't she trust me?*

Gabrielle realized that because of the warrior's unreasonable behaviour, she was suddenly more determined than ever to enter the hut. There was no way in Tartarus that Xena was going to tell what she could and couldn't do. She wasn't a naive village girl any longer, she was a grown woman, an Amazon Queen for Gods' sake. A Queen with responsibilities to fulfil and a duty to be there for her people in whatever way she could. The fact that Callias was one of the wounded had nothing to do with her resolve.

*Touched a nerve, did I?*

Xena's last comment came to mind, but she pushed it away and entered the hut. The hut was dark and the by now familiar smell of dried blood and something she suspected was vomit filled her nostrils. The floor had been cleared of all pallets except one, the other injured apparently well enough to be allowed home to recover under the care of friends and families. Kelife was sitting on a chair next to Callias' pallet, her head resting against the wall behind her. The healer was fast asleep. Gabrielle gently shook her awake.

"Kelife, wake up! It's time to go home."

The pale eyes were bloodshot and the face grey with exhaustion.

"Wh-What! Your Majesty? What are you doing here? Didn't I tell you to get some sleep."

"Yes, you did and I have. Now it's your turn, go home, go to bed. There's no need for you to run yourself down."

*We may need your skills later...*

Kelife opened her mouth to protest, but Gabrielle silenced her.

"It's by the Queen's order."

The healer frowned at having her own words thrown back at her, but then she rose from the chair, a tired

smile on her lips.

"I guess, I could use a bit of sleep. I don't think there should be any problems," she

gestured towards the

patient. "But in case something does happen, you just go get me, okay? No matter what."

Gabrielle nodded and ushered Kelifé out of the door.

"We'll be fine, go home and sleep. I don't want to see you for the next 10-12 hours."

For a second Gabrielle thought the healer was about to stick her tongue out at her, but Kelifé just gave her an

little mischievous smile.

"As you wish, my Queen." Then her expression turned serious. "You have a good heart, Gabrielle. I'm

honoured to have you as my Queen."

Gabrielle stood in a stunned silence and watched the healer walk away. Kelifé's words slowly made their

way to her brain, and a beautiful smile showed on the young woman's face. She closed the door again and

sat down on the chair beside Callias. She studied the Captain's face and was relieved to see that a bit of

colour had returned to her cheeks. She hadn't spoken to her since the night at the practice field and to be

honest, she didn't know what to say, when the moment arrived. She desperately wanted Callias to know that

it was okay what had happened, that she didn't need to feel ashamed. It just couldn't happen again. A little

voice in her head that she had been able to silence till now suddenly began to make itself heard.

*Oh, come on, Gabrielle. Why don't you admit it? You enjoyed it when she kissed you. You're not fooling*

*anybody. And don't pretend you didn't know how she was feeling, nobody is that blind.*

"But I didn't," Gabrielle whispered to the empty room. "At least not at first."

*Really? What took you so long? Was it the way she she looked at you when she thought you didn't notice?*

*Was it the dancing or the fact that she was willing to die for you and almost did?*

"I love Xena, there's nobody else for me," Gabrielle once again whispered to the room.

*Oh, and where is your precious warrior now? She ran off as usual, didn't she? They way she always does*

*when the going gets tough. Where's her faith in you? Where's her faith in your love?*

Gabrielle pressed her hands hard against her head, willing the voice to go away and it did, but only to be

replaced by another.

"My Queen?"

Callias was awake.

The afternoon had begun to change into evening when Lykeas and Xena finally arrived back at the village. They had spent a relaxing day with hunting and frustrating the Hades out of the Amazon guards in the forest. Xena had begun by betting with Lykeas that he wouldn't be able to sneak up on one and soon the innocent little wager had turned into an exciting little game they both enjoyed thoroughly, much to the guards' dismay. So it was with a rare feel of satisfaction and peace, Xena bid Lykeas goodbye and went inside the Royal hut only to be greeted by a fuming Gabrielle.

"Where have you been?"

Xena vaguely recalled having used the same words the night before, and that opening hadn't turned out very well. This time she sat down on the bed while Gabrielle stared at her, standing in the middle of the hut.

"Hunting." The warrior meekly replied, hoping they could get this argument over with soon.

"You disappear for the entire night and half a day without telling anybody, and that's all you have to say?"

"I can take care of myself," Xena replied, beginning to feel just the slightest hint of annoyance.

"You didn't ever consider I might be worried about you, did you?"

Gabrielle was clearly not happy and Xena sighed, this wasn't going well. She knew she shouldn't say this, but she couldn't stop herself.

"I thought you'd be too busy to even notice I was gone. Don't think I'm not aware of your little walk on the wild side, Gabrielle. I saw you kiss her."

For a moment all words left Gabrielle and she could just stare at the warrior, disbelief mingled with guilt written on her face.

"*She* kissed me." Gabrielle finally managed to say.

"Oh, really? You didn't look like you minded it very much. Frankly, to me it looked like you were having a jolly good time with her tongue in your mouth."

Gabrielle paled at the words, but at the same time felt the fury she had been holding inside her all day begin to build.

"I meant to tell you."

"When? You've had plenty of time to tell me"

Speaking the thoughts that had been on her mind for days, added to the anger filling Xena's body and she was helpless to control it. She didn't want to control it.

"Perhaps if you didn't run off all the time, I would have had the chance to actually tell you," Gabrielle replied harshly. "But that has always been at trademark of yours hasn't it, Xena? To run off whenever something gets too complicated for you to deal with."

Xena rose from the bed, the blue eyes glaring dangerously.

"I wouldn't begin talking about running if I were you, Who is it, who's practically taken any opportunity that came along to try and leave me."

Gabrielle began to reply, but stopped herself, taking a deep breath. This wasn't going anywhere. She wasn't sure where Xena's last statement had come from, but she knew the warrior well enough not to take it lightly.

"Xena, I would *never* leave you."

"You have before," the warrior growled.

Gabrielle felt her temper flare again.

"If you're so keen on spending time with me, how come I practically haven't seen you for the last two weeks? It seems to me you've spent more time avoiding me than being me with."

"In case you haven't noticed, " Xena retorted and took a step forward. "I've been busy fighting a war! I've spent every day of the last week, trying to come up with a plan to save your precious Amazons' necks when the reinforcements arrive. You and everybody else might have forgotten, Gabrielle, but I haven't. They will arrive and when they do, they *will* attack."

"You don't know that!"

"Oh yes, I do, because that's exactly what I would do. A strong leader can't allow his men to see him in defeat."

"And you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

Their faces were inches apart and the air between them almost sparkling with electricity.

"Just because *you* aren't capable of leadership doesn't mean I not," Xena spat out and immediately regretted her words, but whatever apology she was about to make disappeared from her lips, as Gabrielle slapped her in the face.

"Don't you *ever* say that again!"

Xena didn't even flinch, just stared at her in utter disbelief. Her initial reaction had been to fling Gabrielle through the room, but she clenched her jaw and forced the thought away.

*Never! I'll never hurt her!*

Rage ran in her veins and her breathing was ragged.

*Out! I have to get out of here!*

She spun on her heels and for the second night in a row, the Warrior Princess stormed out of the hut. Gabrielle stared blindly at the door.

*This can't be happening... This can't be happening...*

She wanted to scream in rage and frustration, she wanted to cry to release the immense pain she was feeling in her chest and she wanted to run after the warrior, grab her and never let her go, but instead she sank listlessly down on the bed.

Xena spent the next week avoiding Gabrielle. Not that she ever openly acknowledged it to herself, she just found other things to do and other places to be. Fortunately for her, there was a lot to do. Warriors from three other villages had arrived, and hours of heated discussion followed between Xena and Zelei about which steps to take when the army arrived. Zelei openly doubted that any more soldiers would show up, and accused Xena of being a control freak with a severe case of paranoia. Xena's response was to disappear into the forest for hours with Lykeas, and if Zelei had thought about it, she would have known that those trips probably saved her from being hurled against the nearest wall. Gabrielle didn't understand Xena's behaviour and had gone over their argument in her head countless times to find out what had triggered it all. She was hurt by the warrior's lack of trust and still angry for having her abilities as Queen questioned. It had taken her a long time to feel comfortable in her role as leader of the Amazons, always doubting herself or having her capability doubted by others. Xena had stood by her all that time, but now when she had finally gained her confidence and was respected and loved by her subjects, the one person who should always be there for her had abandoned her. In her heart she knew Xena was proud of her, but her anger and misery together with the nagging sense of guilt she carried with her, prevented her from reaching out. At times she would curse Xena for doubting her, and at other, she would curse herself for getting into this mess in the first place. She felt guilty for hurting Callias first emotionally, then physically. Although in her right mind she knew that she wasn't to blame for the latter, and that in war soldiers get wounded, she couldn't lose the thought she somehow was to blame. So she spent a lot of time with the Captain trying to be her friend, knowing full well that Xena would get the wrong impression, and the fact that she actually enjoyed being with the blond Amazon did nothing to improve the situation. As the days passed it became harder and harder to be the one to make the first step, particularly because neither really knew where it had gone wrong. Gabrielle thought Xena was behaving unreasonably and childish, and Xena, who'd rather die than admit it, had been deeply shaken by what she'd witnessed at the practice field, and was hurt and not just a little angry, Gabrielle had chosen not to mention it. They still shared a hut, but Xena spent most of her nights in the forest either patrolling the border or hunting with Lykeas, and when Gabrielle didn't have work to do, she spent hers reading scrolls, eager to learn everything she could about the history and culture of her people. She also spent a considerable amount of time with the Amazon Captain, who had recovered enough to leave the healer's hut and begin walking around supported by crutches. It gave Gabrielle a cruel sense of satisfaction, the rare moments she noticed Xena seeing her talking with Callias, and although she instantly regretted it afterwards, she couldn't

help it. Ephiny was too tied up in work to be of any real help, although she did try to talk to Gabrielle about it and Lykeas remained neutral, never indicating that he was even aware of any problems. Not being very comfortable with emotional issues himself, he found the entire story somewhat tiresome and was beginning to look forward for some action that would put an end to Xena's bad mood.

The third week after the battle, the celebration to honour the dead and celebrate victory was held. In spite of the Regent's words of caution, a lot of Amazons felt the need to wash away all thoughts of the past and all worries about the future, and the drinking steadily increased through out the night. There was plenty of food and wine since three fifths of the soldiers were on duty, some patrolling the border, others the forest and the rest guarding the village. However, there was no danger of the celebration being dull since everybody else had decided to participate in the festivities with twice as much enthusiasm as usual, and soon roaring laughter and music was all the sullen guards in the forest could hear. Xena had first considered skipping the party, but Lykeas had stubbornly refused to go with her, and she hadn't felt like going into the forest on her own with nobody to distract her from her thoughts, so she had stayed. To her surprise she realized that she was actually having a good time, and in the back of her mind she knew it probably had something to do with the countless glasses of wine she had consumed, but the company wasn't bad either. Lykeas had found somewhat of a friend in Erinya, and together the three warriors enjoyed themselves tremendously, telling preposterous stories and bragging about their skills and courage as fighters. Gabrielle was sitting further away, closer to the dancing and once in a while she turned to look at Xena, but to her silent annoyance the warrior didn't even indicate that she had noticed her presence. Soon several more soldiers joined the warriors and Gabrielle lost sight of Xena who, until then, actually had thrown several glances in the Queen's direction, but her eyes had never rested long on her, but always come to a halt staring at the blond Amazon beside her. Once the two pair of blue eyes had met and Xena had lost all sense of what was going on around her, concentrating only on the challenging, but gentle eyes staring back. Xena looked away first.

"...And ever since then, we never had any problems with getting him to bathe regularly!" Lykeas finished his anecdote to a roar of laughter and he smiled briefly. He was feeling quite at ease, in spite of being surrounded by Amazons, something he'd have sworn would never happen. Xena emptied another glass of wine and reached for the wineskin. She remembered the incident Lykeas had just told about very well, since it was of one her men, who'd been subjected to Lykeas' rather unusual idea of an education. She caught his eye and gave him a big grin.

"Kleipion was never the same again after that little lesson."

Lykeas returned her grin with a smug smile, "Well, that was sorta the idea behind it all, wasn't it?"

He raised his glass and they toasted, their eyes meeting in a quiet understanding. One of the soldiers from the regular army began to tell an anecdote of her own, but Xena was unable to pay attention for long. She was beginning to feel restless. The wine, the stress of the last couple of days and the never ceasing rhythm of the drums had blended together into a fiery, intoxicating cocktail running through her veins. All her senses were keenly alert and she felt her entire body fill with an energy that made it almost impossible for her to remain seated. She closed her eyes and tried to slow her

breathing and fight the impulse to get up and run till she dropped from exhaustion. As she opened her eyes she found herself staring directly into a pair of dark brown eyes, openly admiring what they saw. Xena returned the gaze, a sultry smile playing on her lips. The woman across from her was slender, but the short leather skirt and top didn't nothing to hide the firm muscles playing under the tanned skin every time she reached for her glass or turned to say something to the soldier beside her. Xena didn't recall ever having seen the warrior before and came to the conclusion that she was from one of the other villages. The woman leaned forward to reach for the wine skin, thereby giving Xena an uninhibited view of her cleavage, and there was no doubt in the warrior's mind that that exactly was the sole purpose behind the movement. For a moment her gaze lingered on the soft flesh before she returned to look at the woman, who gave her a seductive smile, obviously not minding the appreciative look in the blue eyes one bit. Xena suddenly found herself wondering what it would feel like to bury her head in the warrior's long chestnut coloured hair, nudging her thigh between the firm legs, her hands slowly sliding down to... She brought herself back to reality with a small shake of the head, but the movement together with the look in the dark warrior's eyes hadn't gone unnoticed by the Amazon, who gracefully rose from her seat. Without a word she extended a hand to Xena, who took it, suddenly feeling terribly nervous. She knew she hadn't thought this through. She had responded to an attractive woman without thought or consideration of the consequences. It was a game she had played countless times for so many years as a warlord, and it was so deeply integrated in her that she was helpless to respond. But things had changed and now, in spite of all her skills, she felt like a player, who had entered a somewhat familiar, but still foreign game without knowing all the rules. She was about to mutter some kind of excuse and then disappear, when her eyes fell on Gabrielle leaning close to Callias, whispering something in the Captain's ear oblivious to the blues eyes watching them. Xena turned to the woman still holding her hand.

"Let's dance."

Callias smiled at her Queen again and was about to speak when something caught her eye. Gabrielle noticed the Captain's nonplussed expression and followed her gaze to the dancers. It took her a few seconds before she realized that she actually was seeing was her disbelieving mind told her she couldn't be. Xena was dancing with another woman, their bodies so close together that not even air could pass between them. The warrior's hands were on the Amazon's hips, whose own hands were tightly around Xena's neck, occasional sliding one down her back, caressing the dark hair. They swayed together in a sensuous rhythm, practically not moving from the spot. As if feeling Gabrielle's gaze, Xena raised her head and looked straight at her, the blues eyes both challenging and inviting. Still with their eyes locked, Xena let her hands slide down to cup the Amazon's rear pulling her closer against her body. Gabrielle's eyes widened for a second before narrowing. She rose from her seat and without a word or a second glance at Xena, left the celebration. She entered the Royal hut and within seconds felt a presence behind her. Arms encircled her from behind and calloused hands reached for her breasts. Gabrielle pulled herself forcefully out of the embrace and turned to face the warrior.

"How dare you humiliate me like that in front of the entire village!"

Xena didn't answer, but stepped forward and Gabrielle suddenly found herself with her back against the wall of the hut. She tried to move away, but Xena's arms came

down on either side of her body holding her in place.

Lowering her head till their faces were only inches apart Xena drawled, "I'm not the one who's been publicly flirting with one of her subjects all night."

There was a dangerous edge to the warrior's tone and a shiver ran down Gabrielle's back, but she didn't have time to respond as Xena lowered her mouth to hers and forcefully thrust her tongue inside her mouth. With one hand Xena began to unlace Gabrielle's brown leather top while the other went down to slip up under her skirt. Gabrielle's senses railed against the sensual onslaught, her body just wanting to give in to the warrior, while her mind was furious about the way she was treated. Xena's tongue was everywhere in her mouth, demanding and fierce, leaving the young woman breathless. She felt a hand move inside her top and couldn't help but release a moan when the rough fingers found an erect nipple. Xena pressed her harder against the wall, trying to get Gabrielle to put her legs around her waist. Gabrielle's mind finally surrendered to her body and she returned Xena's kiss with a passion matching the warrior's, her hands going around the bronze neck to pull her head further down. Xena broke the kiss and obligingly moved down to take a nipple into her mouth, eliciting another moan from the blond woman. Gabrielle felt a hand push her legs apart and she closed her eyes to give in to the sensation.

"I bet Callias never made you feel like this."

Gabrielle's eyes snapped open, a cold fury burning through the haze of desire and arousal. She shoved the warrior hard in the chest, causing her to stagger and take a few steps back.

"So is that what this is all about? You see this as some kind of competition where the winner gets to fuck the Queen!"

Xena's face was flushed, her eyes dark with the desire. She stepped forward and tried to push Gabrielle back against the wall, but Gabrielle swiftly evaded her hands and moved away.

"So tell me, Xena! Is it?" Her voice loaded with anger. "Not that you really have to worry about losing, since Callias is still recovering and nowhere capable of shoving me against the wall and take me. So I guess that means you win."

"Gabrielle..." Xena growled and closed the distance between them, but Gabrielle avoided her again.

Xena's expression hardened.

"If you're not gonna give me what I want, I'll go find somebody who will."

"Then I suggest you do that," Gabrielle spat out, green eyes flashing, "Because there's no way you'll be fucking me tonight."

For endless moments they just stared at each other, faces flushed and breathing laboured. Xena was feeling consumed by anger and desire and had to force herself to remain still and not reach for Gabrielle again. The tension in the hut was unbearable and for a moment Gabrielle felt a small tingle of fear, but then Xena turned on her heels and marched out. With the warrior's departure Gabrielle felt all strength leave

her legs and she slowly sank to the floor, burying her head in her hands.

### **Part 3**

#### CHAPTER XI

Lykeas awoke with a thundering headache. He remained lying on his back for a couple of minutes before slowly, very slowly sitting up on the bed. Fortunately the room stopped spinning fairly quick and after a few deep breaths, he managed to stand. He noticed he was still fully closed and sighed in relief, he wasn't sure his stomach would have approved if he'd have had to bend down and pick up any clothes. He opened the door and squinted against the harsh light of the sun. It was noon, but the village was practically deserted and Lykeas came to the conclusion that he wasn't the only one, who'd had slightly more to drink than good was. He let the fresh air caress his face and wash away the ache in his head and soon he began to feel more like a human being again. He closed the door behind him and began walking to the stables, deciding that a short stop to see Rarjan was in order. He hadn't had the change to ride for weeks and knew the horse missed their trips together just as much as he did. Halfway there he noticed Zelei coming from the other side of the village, a sour expression on her face. He ignored her and walked passed the Captain inside the stable. For some reason unknown to him, Zelei followed him inside. He could feel her eyes at his back, but continued to stroke Rarjan's mane, whispering quietly to his horse.

"It was quite a show last night." Zelei's voice interrupted the silence.

Lykeas didn't turn around and briefly argued with himself whether he should answer. He knew he'd probably regret it, but he couldn't stop himself.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, then you must be the only one," Zelei answered and Lykeas more felt than heard her step a bit closer. "I'm talking about the little display between our Queen and her warrior."

The way she spat out the word Queen didn't escape Lykeas' attention and he slowly turned.

The Captain pleased with herself for getting his attention continued, "I don't think Xena got lucky last night, do you? From the look on the Queen's face when she left the celebration it must have been a very cold night for the Warrior Princess. Or perhaps it's just a game they play, to get their juices flowing. I bet our little Queen loves it when she is thrown on the floor and thoroughly fucked all night by her warlord."

Lykeas raised his hand to smooth out an eyebrow.

"You know, you really shouldn't talk like that."

He knew Zelei was trying to provoke him and he also knew that it was working. The Captain put her hands on her hips.

"Oh, and why not?"

"Because it's your Queen you're talking about and she demands your respect whether

you like it or not and..." His voice was soft, but cold, "She...is also my friend and I won't have anybody talk about a friend of mine like that."

He stared at Zelei and for a moment the Captain could swear she saw something in the black eyes, but before she could identify it, it was gone and replaced by his usual unreadable look. He walked past her and left the stable. Zelei suddenly felt disappointed, she had begun to enjoy this confrontation and didn't want it to end just yet. She quickly followed him outside and fell into stride beside him.

"She may be your friend, but she's no more Queen of the Amazons than I am, although I'm more likely to be qualified than she is. Hades, everybody in this village is more qualified than she is."

Lykeas stopped and turned to look at the woman beside him, but didn't speak.

"The Amazons doesn't need a leader, who's too weak to fight and refuses to defend what's ours. She's not even a real Amazon, this charade should've been brought to an end long ago."

"Zelei..." The warning in the dark man's voice was clear.

"Oh, come on, Lykeas," the Captain smirked, "An Amazon has to be willing to fight for what's hers, and from what I've heard, even that crazy mother of yours knew that, although I'll admit it didn't do-."

Her legs disappeared from underneath her and she cried out in surprise as she fell to the ground. Before she knew what had happened she felt a heavy weight on her chest and a hand closing around her throat. The grip tightened and she tried to throw the body off her, but to no avail. Her pale brown eyes stared into the black ones above her, only inches away from her face. A second hand locked around her throat and her vision began to blur, obscured by a red fog. Her hands which until then had been on Lykeas' chest trying to push him away, moved down to her throat, her fingers frantically struggling to loosen the grip. As her strength left her and her body began to go limp, Lykeas leaned down and whispered, his mouth almost touching her ear.

"You're gonna die now."

"*Lykeas*, get off her!"

Zelei barely registered her Regent's panicked, but commanding voice.

"*Now!*"

Lykeas slowly turned his head and stared into the brown eyes. Ephiny saw a myriad of emotions briefly run across his face, then painfully slow, he loosened his grip around Zelei's throat and stood up. For minutes the only sounds heard were the hoarse gasping and coughing from the Captain, who was still lying on the ground, her face deadly pale. When her breathing had calmed, Ephiny stepped forward and pulled Zelei to her feet, then moved away again, to study the two persons in front of her.

"What in Tartarus was that about?" Her voice cold and controlled, practically oozing authority.

Lykeas' gaze had never left the Regent and didn't do so now.

"Zelei and I... We had a little...disagreement."

His eyes rested briefly on the Captain before returning to Ephiny.

"She said that...strength was the best weapon and I said...speed was... I was just proving my point."

The Regent's eyes narrowed, barely able to control her anger, but she didn't say anything and turned to look at Zelei.

"It's that true?"

The Amazon Captain looked away, "Yes," her answer sounding strained, her throat still recovering from the abuse.

Ephiny looked at one then another.

"Is that all you have to say?"

They both nodded in reply.

"Zelei, go get Kelife to look at your throat and then come to my hut, I want to talk to you."

The Captain nodded again and hurried away.

"And you, Lykeas, you're gonna remain inside the guest hut for the rest of the day. You're not to leave under any circumstances, and if necessary I'll use force to keep you there. Is that clear?"

He looked at her with the so familiar veiled expression, not one movement revealing what he was thinking. Then he gave her an almost imperceptible nod and left in the direction of the hut. Ephiny's eyes followed the dark man til he disappeared from her view, then shook her head in a mixture of frustration and confusion.

Inside the hut, Lykeas took off his leather tunic and the thin tunic of wool he was carrying underneath. He kicked off his boots and threw himself on the bed wearing only a short pair of breeches. This was going to be a bad day, he just knew it. Lying on his stomach he lifted one then another shoulder, trying to loosen up his tense muscles. He could feel a painful ache where his spine ended and his skull began, and knew without any doubt that he would be having the headache of a lifetime within the next couple of hours. He heard his door open, but recognizing the steps didn't turn around.

"Let me help."

He moved over and felt the bed shift slightly as the warrior positioned herself on the bed, straddling his hips. She began thoroughly and efficiently to work out the knots, occasionally moving a hand up to press down on the sore muscles between neck and head.

"Gods, Lykeas! You have to learn to relax. Your muscles are like stone."

She found a particular painful area and he squirmed underneath her.

"That hurts."

"It's supposed to. If you'd only follow those neck and shoulder exercises I told you about, this wouldn't be necessary."

"I forgot," came the noncommittal reply.

"Well, don't come complaining to me then, when you have one of your headaches."

Lykeas just smiled against the pillow. Xena continued her now more gentle ministrations in silence and Lykeas felt himself slowly begin to drift off.

"I'll kill her."

"No, you won't." His voice muffled from the pillow and his mind wondering how it was that Xena always seemed to be fully aware of everything that happened.

"You're right, I won't... But I'd really like to though, she's been bothering me since our arrival."

"Well, she won't have the oral skills to bother you for a while, I've made sure of that."

"I know," Xena's hands stopped and she absently counted the scars on Lykeas' back. "What exactly was it all about."

Lykeas managed to shrug. "She...she said something about Gabrielle that she shouldn't have."

"I suspected that much," Lykeas could feel the warrior tense against him. "Maybe I'll kill her anyway."

She felt Lykeas move underneath her and she lifted herself off of him and sat down on the end of the bed. Lykeas sat up with his back against the wall, pulling his knees up and resting his arms on them.

"I don't think Ephiny would be too understanding if she was suddenly one captain short," he said with a small grin. "But you're right, it's tempting."

Xena gave him a menacing grin in return, her mind going through all the appealing things she felt like doing to Zelei and, she admitted to herself, to another captain as well. For a while they were both silent, Lykeas gaze distant and thoughtful, and Xena's focused on the jagged scar marring her friend's lower abdomen from just above the navel to the hip. Then reaching a decision, she cleared her throat.

"Uh, Lykeas...?"

He turned his attention back to her.

"Yes?"

"Back when...I mean, when you left..."

"Yes?" He repeated calmly, but she could see the black eyes had become keenly alert.

"Well, I just want you to know, I'm sorry about...about what happened and

everything."

He looked at her in silence and she couldn't read his expression.

"I know... I know things didn't turn out the way you wanted them to. I know you must feel I let you down, but I swear... I didn't mean to. I really wanted it, just like you, but then..." She trailed off, feeling very uncomfortable by the blank look on his face.

"Things change, Xena." He said softly. "And it's not like it came as a total shock... I mean, I sorta saw it coming."

She looked away, unable to hold his gaze. He reached forward and gave her hand a gentle squeeze before returning to his position against the wall.

"It's okay. It may not have been what I wanted, but..." This time it was him who looked away. "In the end, I just wanted you to be happy...one way or the other."

Xena looked at him, startled by this unlikely emotional response from the dark warrior. She knew he would be terribly embarrassed if she commented on it, so instead she just gave him a warm smile.

"Thanks."

He shrugged and looked away again.

"Lykeas?"

She waited till he had returned his eyes to her.

"I want you to be happy too."

"Yeah well, I-"

His was interrupted by the sound of running feet outside and several voices shouting. Xena shot up from the bed and stormed outside, Lykeas close behind on bare feet, pulling the leather tunic over his head. Several Amazons ran past them to the village square and Xena and Lykeas wasted no time in following them. A crowd had already gathered and they pushed their way through till they were almost face to face with a panting Amazon warrior. Xena grabbed the woman's arms to get her attention.

"What?! What is it?!"

In spite of clearly having run for several miles, the Amazon was white as a sheet.

"The...The soldiers are coming!"

"The soldiers? Are they on the plain?"

The warrior shook her head and a strange expression entered her eyes.

"No... They are in the forest... They are coming here!"

Xena narrowed her eyes trying to make sense out of the panting soldier.

"But how can that be? What about the border patrols? Why haven't they notified us?"

Tears began to flow from the warrior's eyes.

"They...they're dead. They were ambushed. They were butchered by the soldiers. We...we could hear their screams...even through the forest."

The Amazon sank to her knees, shock and disbelief written on her face.

"By the Gods! Those screams, I can still hear them."

Xena stepped away from the despairing woman, a cold, calculating expression in her eyes.

"Okay, listen up folks! You all heard her. I want to see all warriors and anybody else capable of fighting back here fully armed in two minutes. I want somebody to get the Queen and the children into safety, and I want-."

She never got to finish her sentence for in that moment hell broke loose and death made its entry into the village.

Soldiers stormed in from all directions of the village and immediately the sounds of battle filled the air. The Amazon's in the square were scattered as three men on horses rode between, cutting down warriors as they went by. Out of the corner of her eye, Xena saw Lykeas spin on his heels and sprint the way back to his hut, narrowly ducking a spear from a soldier suddenly appearing between two huts. With a low curse, Xena unsheathed her sword, her chakram and armour were still in the hut, but she didn't have the time to worry about that as one of the riders moved directly towards her, raising his sword. She waited until the last moment then jumped to the side, grabbing onto the soldier's leg and pulling him off the horse. The soldier barely managed a shout of surprise before Xena plunged her sword into his chest.

Inside the hut, Lykeas went straight for his sword and without boots or armour returned outside. The village was chaos. Everywhere people were either killing or being killed. Amazon warriors, some only partially dressed were engaged in fighting with fully armed soldiers, while riders kept coming through, their swords slicing through unguarded flesh on their way. And all the time, in a neverending stream, enemy soldiers kept coming. Lykeas saw Xena standing on the same spot where he had left her, bodies scattered all around her. Right now she was slowly forced back by four soldiers in brown uniforms, but before he could move, he heard the air sing and he instinctively ducked. A sword penetrated empty space where his head had just been and he kicked out behind him, grinning in satisfaction when he felt his bare foot connect with the soldier's groin. He turned and saw a young man, sinking to his knees, clutching his private parts. Without thought, Lykeas swung his sword, almost separating the soldier's head from his body. With an animalistic cry, he turned and ran forwards, letting himself be swallowed whole by the mayhem of screams, blood and death.

Still groggy from sleep, Gabrielle stumbled out of the hut. Her eyes widened in shock as she saw a young Amazon run pass her, a soldier on horseback closing in from behind. Gabrielle screamed out a warning, but was too late. A spear penetrated the Amazon and for a second she was still, before her body fell off the spear to the ground. The soldier roughly moved his horse around to stare into the green eyes of the Queen. His face lit up in a bestial grin and he dismounted, drawing his sword. Gabrielle took a step back, but found herself with her back against the hut. A strange

calmness entered her body. Forgotten was the chaos around her, silenced were the cries and clangs of metal, and the smell of blood and smoke disappeared. She only saw the broad, bearded soldier rapidly close the distance between them. Her eyes locked onto his face, her gaze never wavering and her back straight, the only indication of fear being the tight clenching of her jaw. The man was so close now that she could smell the sour odour of sweat coming from his body. He raised his sword and she closed her eyes.

*Forgive me, Xena.*

Ephiny placed her foot against the dead soldier's chest and yanked her sword out. Promptly another soldier charged and she brought her sword up to block. She had been caught off balance and the powerful blow made her sink down on one knee. Pressing his advantage, the man angled his sword to stab her from above, but then stared in disbelief as his intestines slipped out from the horizontal cut in his stomach. He dropped the sword to press his hands against the wound, his brain marvelling at the surreal experience of feeling his own intestines between his fingers. Then he fell to the ground and the last thing he saw before he died, was the bloody dagger in the Amazon's left hand. Ephiny got up and caught a short glimpse of Kelife ushering the children down a narrow path between two huts, before her attention was drawn to a horse thundering towards her. She ducked to the left, but felt a sharp pain in her left arm as the rider's sword sliced through the flesh. She felt the blood run down her arm, but didn't have time to look as the rider charged again. The dagger left her hand in one fluid motion and sank deeply into the man's throat, and with a gurgling sound he fell forward, then sideways down the horse.

Zelei found herself cornered by three men and her grip tightened around the axe. She knew she had to even the odds fast and she swung the axe. She felt a cruel satisfaction as she watched the blade sink into the thigh of the closest soldier. He screamed and fell backwards, blood splashing out from the vein that had been opened. Zelei turned her attention to the soldier with the sword, shifting her axe from hand to hand, her face contorted into an inhuman grimace.

Leda screamed out in pain as the sword penetrated her heart and all light disappeared from her eyes.

A white hot pain made Callias' eyes tear up, but she didn't halter her approach. In a haze she saw the Queen close her eyes and the soldier in front of her lift his sword to deliver the fatal blow. With an impossible force drawing both from adrenaline and pain, she threw herself against the soldier's side, causing them both to fall. The man cried out in surprise and anger, and tried to shake the Amazon off him. Callias tightened her grip around the man's chest, trapping his arms down his sides. She knew if she let go she would die. She could already feel herself begin to lose consciousness from the pain in her side. A warm liquid drenched her tunic and it took her foggy brain a few seconds to realize it was her own blood. She felt her grip around the man weaken, and as he felt it too, he pushed her off him and got to his feet. He plunged his sword against her chest, but an inch before it should have penetrated her, Callias felt her body being pulled out of danger, her shoulder almost dislocating from the force of the movement. Xena stepped over the bleeding Captain and closed in on the soldier. Her face was smeared with blood, the blue eyes glowing and her entire body radiated primal power. The soldier knew he was dead even before he felt the blow.

Lykeas spun around and found himself face to face with Ephiny. They both only just managed to stop their swords inches before they would have met. Ephiny gave him a strange smile.

"There's no reason to make this harder than it is already."

He couldn't help himself and smiled in return.

"Guess not."

Side by side they sliced, plunged and cut their way through the next ten soldiers. Lykeas' arm was crying out in complaint every time he raised the sword to deliver another blow, and blood and sweat kept running into his eyes, obscuring his vision. Suddenly seemingly out of nowhere four soldiers emerged and began circling them. Ephiny turned till her back was against Lykeas' before charging. Lykeas kicked the sword out of the first soldier's hand, ignoring the excruciating pain in his foot, and let out a chilling laugh as the sword flew through the air and impaled another soldier from behind. He heard a low groan, and out of the corner of his eye, saw Ephiny step away from the dying man at her feet. He quickly discarded the second soldier and searched the square for his next opponent, when he felt the slight warmth against his back disappear. He turned and his eyes widened as they took in the sight of Ephiny slowly sinking to the ground, an arrow penetrating from her chest. Their eyes locked and time stood still as black and brown mingled for the last time. Lykeas saw life fade from the brown eyes and Ephiny fell forward, her body convulsing a few times, before lying still on the bloody grass.

Lykeas stared, his entire body motionless. He didn't hear the soldier behind him before his head exploded in pain and he spiralled into darkness.

\*\*\*\*\*

Open up my heart and see what's inside,

Take a look inside me, inside my mind

And you'll see my heart is broke in two

'Cos I've seen the real you.

Images of violence fill up my mind,

And you see the silence, feel it inside

And you'll see my heart is broke in two

'Cos I've seen the real you.

So sad we seem, so far we've been

She knows the scene

And I see your heart is broken too,

'Cos I've seen the real you.

## CHAPTER XIII

"The only abnormality is the incapacity to love."

- Anaïs Nin, 1903-1977

Xena's gaze briefly rested on Ephiny's funeral pyre as she passed, but the warrior didn't slow down. As she was embraced by the forest, she stopped and took a deep breath, relieved to be free of the smell of burnt flesh. The forest around her was quiet and the rattling of leaves when caught in a breeze was all she heard. She followed Gabrielle's trail without making a sound of her own, until her eyes saw a familiar figure sitting against a tree, knees pulled up under her chin and arms wrapped around them. She took a few steps closer and although she could swear she didn't make a sound, Gabrielle raised her head and looked directly at her. Their eyes met and for a second neither moved, but then Gabrielle bolted up and buried her head against Xena's chest, her arms going around the warrior's neck. Xena had to take a step back to regain her balance, before wrapping her arms tightly around Gabrielle's waist, pulling her as close as she could. How much time passed as they stood together, locked into a fierce embrace, Xena couldn't tell, but she didn't care. All she concentrated on was the woman in her arms, crying quietly. As she felt Gabrielle begin to relax and loosen her death grip around her neck, Xena put a finger under the bard's chin to raise her head. Gabrielle looked up and the warrior gently began to wipe away the tears, the calloused fingertips remarkably soft against Gabrielle's cheeks. Without a word, Xena led Gabrielle back to the tree where she had been sitting earlier and sat down with her back against the trunk, pulling the bard down on her lap. Gabrielle leaned back and rested her head against Xena's shoulder, shifting slightly sideways so she could put her arms around the warrior. She used all of her willpower to ignore the hollow ache inside and instead focus entirely on the strong arms holding her. Xena raised a hand and let her fingers run through the bard's hair in a slow, comforting caress, repeating the motion over and over again. She felt the tension slowly leave Gabrielle's body and bent her head to plant a light kiss on the blond hair.

"I miss her."

Xena left her lips rest briefly on the silky hair before answering, "I know."

"It's not fair." Gabrielle's voice breaking slightly.

Xena lifted her head, staring up at the sky, "No."

Gabrielle tried to snuggle even closer to the warrior, if possible she would have crawled inside of her and never come out again.

"Why did so many have to die?"

Xena knew it was a rhetorical question, Gabrielle only speaking her thoughts out loud, even so, she didn't have an answer. Many had indeed died. Two thirds of the village, including the warriors from the other villages, had been killed in the nightmarish battle that had taken place three days before. The Royal Guard had been practically extirpated and more than half of the regular army had been wiped out as well. Of the warriors patrolling the border, none had survived. Even after the battle was over, more than two dozens of Amazons had succumbed to their injuries, in spite of Kelife's frantic attempts to save their lives. The only bright point was that none of the children

had been hurt, and that was the one thing everybody focused on when the pain in their hearts became too much. They had lost their Regent, but the children were alive. They had lost lovers and friends, but the children were alive. Although to some it was a small comfort as they watched loved ones die in their arms. Almost immediately after the battle, funeral pyres had been lit in spite of protests from the relatives, Kelife insisting it should be done to avoid any epidemics. For two days the sky over the village had been darkened by smoke, a darkness reflected in the eyes of the survivors. The bodies of the enemy soldiers had been gathered in two big piles away from the village and then put on fire, nobody lingering to watch the flames do their work. Three men had been captured before the army retreated and were now held in custody, their future fates as yet unknown, but Xena doubted it would stay that way for much longer. Too many had died and Xena knew she would have to question them soon, now all the funeral arrangements were over, and people would begin to concentrate on something other than their immediate grief. What happened to the men after she had questioned them was none of her concern, but it was Gabrielle's. She sighed and looked at the bard, now sleeping in her arms. Tonight she could grieve like anybody else, but when dawn arrived, Gabrielle would have to leave her safe haven in Xena's arms and step out to become the leader her people needed her to be. Xena knew in her heart that Gabrielle would find the strength required, but she was mortally afraid of what it might cost the young woman in the end. Without loosening her hold, she managed to get to her feet and began walking back to the village, the bard still sleeping in her arms.

"We can do this the easy way or we can do this the hard way, and frankly I don't care which, but I think you might do."

Xena's face was only inches away from the terrified soldier tied to a chair. When she didn't get a response, she turned to look at the other two captives, who were also tied to their chairs, a malicious grin on her lips.

"Don't think you'll get anywhere with this silent routine of yours, I know you can understand me."

She walked behind them and smiled at their futile attempts to turn their heads to see what she was doing. She bent close to the first soldier and whispered seductively into his ear, "You know, I don't really need three of you to get what I want."

She moved to stand behind the next soldier and leaned forward again.

"Actually, *one* of you will be enough to tell me what I want to hear."

She stepped behind the last man and practically purred.

"So...you do the math."

She walked around to face them again and noted to her satisfaction that her words had been understood. She smiled pleasantly at them, the smile never reaching the blue eyes.

"But, of course, I'm not inhuman or anything," she clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, "so I'll let you make the decision."

The soldiers' faces paled as their minds went beyond the ingratiating tone of her voice

and the meaning of the words struck.

"It's your pick," Xena gave them another sweet smile, "I'll be back in fifteen minutes to hear, who you've decided should live."

She walked to the door and opened it, but lingered in the doorway, turning to look at them again.

"Make the most of it."

Xena paused outside the hut and closed her eyes, willing the adrenaline coursing through her veins to disappear. She needed to stay focused and not lose sight of her objective with this small performance.

*But damn! It feels good.*

Her ears picked up a sound and she turned to look at Callias. The Amazon Captain was leaning heavily on two crutches, the low afternoon sun making her blond hair shimmer with a reddish glow.

*Even on crutches, I can't deny she's beautiful. At least Gabrielle has good taste...although she did choose me first. Guess her judgement must have improved along the way.*

The last thought released a sudden, sharp pain in the warrior's chest, but not once did her face betray what she was feeling. She raised an inquiring eyebrow at the Amazon, who obviously was trying to gather her wits and say something.

"Do you think they'll talk?"

They both knew that this wasn't what she wanted to say, but Xena just shrugged.

"Eventually. Eventually they all talk, it's just a matter of time."

Callias nodded and cleared her throat while Xena waited patiently, suspecting that the Captain was about to approach the subject she had come for.

"I...I wanted to thank you for saving my life."

The warrior's face remained expressionless, prompting Callias to go on. The Amazon was clearly feeling uncomfortable, but her gaze never wavered, and, although reluctantly, Xena couldn't help but feel a great deal of respect for the decisive Captain. It took courage to face an angry Warrior Princess. Of course, Xena didn't feel angry, instead a strange, all-important sense of calmness had settled inside her body, but then again, Callias couldn't know that. The Captain cleared her throat again.

"Well, I just wanted you to know that I'm in your debt, if there's anything-."

"No, you're not," the warrior interrupted.

The Amazon looked puzzled.

"What...what do you mean "no"? You saved my life, I owe you." Her face hardened, "It's a question of honour, and I wouldn't feel comfortable by just letting it slide by and pretend it never happened."

"You have already repaid me."

"What?" Callias narrowed her eyes in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You saved Gabrielle's life." The warrior's voice was very quiet. "And for that I can never repay you. You owe me nothing, whereas I will forever be in your debt."

Xena walked away, leaving the Captain to stare at her back in astonishment.

The people in the council's hut were quiet, all digesting what they'd just heard. Xena was leaning against the wall, her arms crossed and waited impatiently for somebody so say something. The occupants in the room were the same who had been there weeks before, except for the empty chair, constantly reminding everyone of what had happened. The only new addition to the council was Kelife, who sat in Xena's chair, after solemnly having declined to sit in the Regent's, and nobody had felt the need to argue. Lykeas fidgeted in his seat and Xena knew the silence and inactivity was beginning to bother him.

"Do you believe they tell the truth?" Erinya asked, a small frown on her face. "It sounds almost too fantastic."

Xena stared dispassionately at the weapons master.

"I would think that the battle we experienced the other day is proof enough. It make sense...at least to me."

"I take it that's because it's the way you would do it?" Zelei smirked, watching the dark warrior with half closed eyes.

"Probably," was all the answer she got.

The room was fell quiet again until another captain broke the silence.

"So what you're saying is, is that these people are trying to conquer Greece by taking one small piece at the time."

Xena nodded.

"Although," Callias continued, "that by that rate it would take forever to finish."

"Yes, but it's practical," Xena replied, her gaze resting on the Amazon's face. "If a foreign force invades and conquers a huge part of land, they'll be met with fierce resistance everywhere and even old enemies as Sparta and Athens will forget old grudges to unite and drive them off Greek soil."

She looked around in the room to see if they were still following her.

"But if they instead take their time and only take one city here, one kingdom there and wait till things have settled down and people gotten used to having them around, perhaps even welcome the new rulers, then nobody will see them as a serious threat until it's too late. They will be able to slowly and gradually expand their territory before anybody realizes what happened."

"That would require enormous resources."

Xena looked at Lykeas, "Yes, resources we all know the High King of Persia possesses."

"I don't think that any Greek would take kindly to a Persian army invading his country," Zelei objected. "No matter how slow they take it."

"Oh?" Xena slowly turned her head to look at the Captain. "Do you think any man in this country would have raised an eyebrow if the Amazon Nation had succumbed to a Persian Army? Do you think they would be too worried if the Centaurs' territories were taken as well? And what about the Islands? Or if some of the so-called kingdoms ruled by nothing more than petty murderers were to fall into their hands? Would they care enough to assemble a costly army and risk the lives of their young men? Trust me, to most Greek men if something takes place further away than the walls of their cities, it might as well not take place at all. Besides, they would make sure it didn't appear as a Persian army. It'll be sponsored and equipped by Persia, but most of the soldiers will be mercenaries and officially Persia will claim to know nothing of it."

"Will they return and try again?" Gabrielle spoke for the first time, staring down at the table.

"Here?" Xena inquired and Gabrielle nodded. "No, they soldiers said their orders were to take the Nation with as few casualties and as fast as possible, and if somehow things didn't work out, they were to retreat and meet up with the main force."

"And where's that stationed?"

Xena looked at Lykeas, uncertainty showing on her face, "That's the funny thing, they claimed it should be somewhere north of the river Ister."

"But that's crazy! It's too close, an army of that size would have been noticed."

Xena let out a small sigh and nodded, "That's exactly what I don't understand. How come we haven't heard anything? Troop movements of that size can't possibly have gone undetected."

"What did the prisoners have to say about it," the weapons master asked, a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Ah," Xena shrugged in disgust. "They didn't know or they claim not to know and frankly I believe them. They are all too low in the hierarchy and, in my opinion, too stupid to have been informed. They are apparently all kept on a need to know basis only."

"Perhaps they are lying?" Zelei gave the warrior an innocent smile.

"No, I don't think so."

"Well, I guess you'd know what you're talking about. After all, I've heard you can be rather persuasive when you want to or at least were...back in the good old days."

Xena found herself getting increasingly tired of the Captain's attitude, and mentally she wondered why of all the people who'd been killed, Zelei couldn't have been one of just them. She caught Lykeas staring at her and she returned the almost invisible smile on his lips, they were clearly thinking along the same lines. Callias, who was

also fed up with her colleague, decided to change the subject.

"So what, if anything, are we gonna do about it?"

Xena's eyes flickered to rest at Gabrielle before she returned her gaze to Callias.

"I don't know what you are gonna do, but I'm going north."

"What do you mean?" All eyes in the room fell on the Queen.

"What I said, I'm going north," Xena's jaw tightened. "I'm going to Ister to see for myself what's going on and if necessary do something about it. There's no way I'm gonna let an army, Persian or not, get foothold on Greek territory. It's just too close...it's too close to home."

Even Gabrielle had to look away from the intense fire burning in the blue eyes, and she looked down at her hands in her lap, and saw to her surprise they were curled tightly into fists.

#### CHAPTER XIV

"When are you leaving?"

Gabrielle was sitting on the bed in the Royal hut looking down on her hands, and Xena who had been leaning against the wall, took a step forward, but stopped herself.

"In a day or two."

"I'm not coming with you."

The words were spoken so quietly that Xena had to strain to hear them, and even though she had been prepared, they cut deep into her heart. She closed her eyes briefly, but even with her eyes close she could still see the blond woman on the bed, looking desolate and pale.

"I know."

"I can't leave them," Gabrielle continued as if she hadn't heard the warrior speak. "We lost so many, more than half of the huts in the village are empty, they need me. The Gods only know if I can do anything to help them, but I at least I have to try... I can't abandon them, I won't...not right now."

Xena leaned back against the wall, her legs suddenly feeling weak.

"I know;" was all she managed to say.

Gabrielle looked up and in spite of her words, Xena could see the doubt written all over her face, and she took a decision.

"You should stay, they need you here, and if anybody could do anything to help them it would be you."

The bard gave her a weak smile, then her expression changed slightly and Xena saw something in the beautiful green eyes, she couldn't quite define.

"If I..." Gabrielle looked down at her hands again for a second, then looked up, "If I

asked you to stay, would you?"

*I can't, Gabrielle... Don't you see that?*

"I have to go, you know that."

For a moment it looked like the bard slumped further down on the bed, then she straightened her back.

"Is Lykeas going with you?"

"Yes, and maybe also Areia. She said there wasn't any reason for her to stay here anymore."

"I'll talk to her if you don't mind, I don't want people to leave, although I sure knows it's tempting, but if this village is ever going to return to some semblance of normality, I'll need people to stay. I don't want the village to die out, I owe Ephiny that much."

"I understand that."

For a while silence hung in the air, then Xena headed towards the door. Gabrielle looked up at the movement.

"Xena?"

The warrior turned.

"Yes?"

"The prisoners, they have to die, haven't they?"

"It's not my decision, Gabrielle. It's yours. I...I can't help you with that. The Queen decides who lives and dies in the Nation, not me."

Gabrielle looked away from the blue eyes looking at her, afraid that if she didn't, she would say to Tartarus with her resolve to be there for the Amazons, to be their Queen in more than name only.

"If you want, you can appoint a new Regent..." Xena's voice was hesitantly and uncertain.

"No, I'm not going to run from my responsibilities again."

The bard's face was determined and Xena suddenly didn't see a young insecure woman on the bed, but a confident and passionate Queen loyal to her people beyond any doubt. Her heart both warmed and froze at the thought.

"You should probably send for help from the other villages for supplies and let it be known that anybody who might be interested to come and live here are more than welcome to do so, that way the village will be populated faster. You should also ask for at least 50 warriors, so you have some kind of defence and I think it'd be wise, if you ever have any doubts to ask Kelife what she thinks. She seems like a reasonable person to me, also keep a look on Zelei. She's a troublemaker and I..." Xena suddenly stopped, afraid she had overstepped her boundaries, but Gabrielle just smiled.

"Thank you, Xena. I'll keep that in mind."

The warrior nodded in relief and absently ran a hand through her hair.

"Well, then... I'd better go find Lykeas."

She put her hand on the door, but didn't open it.

"Gabrielle..." .

"Yes?"

"Callias is a good woman, you should rely on her, too."

Xena closed the door quietly behind her.

Walking through the village, Gabrielle felt her throat constrict again. Although days had passed since the attack, she still hadn't gotten used to all the visible reminders there were left. A small fire had erupted and luckily only two huts had burned, but the charred remains were still there. She shivered from the thought of what could have happened if the direction of the wind had been any differently. In so many ways they had been fortunate, but it was hard to believe when you saw the still recovering wounded limping pass on crutches or heard the cries of pain from the healer's hut, and then there was the never ending line of relatives and friends paying their respects to the death at the memorial grounds. Even from a distance you could smell the flowers which had been planted there and were meticulously tended to by those who had been left behind. The worst of it all though, was the sense of hopelessness and despair that hung in the air and seemed to take hold of everyone in the village. Gabrielle knew she had to do something, but to be honest she didn't know what. She desperately wished Ephiny was there, she needed the subtle and friendly guidance of her Regent, but she wasn't and now Xena was leaving as well.

Although, she knew the reason why, she couldn't help but feel there was more to it than that. Xena had behaved differently after the battle, not hostile or annoyed, that Gabrielle could deal with, no, she had been withdrawn and distant as if she had already left in her head. The warrior had slowly pulled herself further and further away. She was never cool or unfriendly and had stood by Gabrielle when she needed it most, but now after the funerals were over and the time to live again had begun, the warrior had become resigned and silent. It was a mood Gabrielle didn't understand the reason for and it scared the Tatarus out of her.

*I'm losing her and I don't know why.*

As she neared the practice fields, she saw Xena and Lykeas sitting on the fence with their backs to her. Before she could step any closer, Xena turned her head and looked at her, their eyes meeting for the briefest of moments, then she spoke quietly to Lykeas, before sliding down from the fence and disappearing in the direction of the stables. Gabrielle felt like she had been punched in the stomach, and just stared after the warrior. Lykeas shifted on the fence and turned to face her. She slowly turned her gaze to him and he gave her a faint smile.

"Hey."

She didn't answer, but stepped closer to climb onto the fence beside him.

She could feel his eyes search her face.

"Are you all right?"

She had to smile at his hesitant tone of voice, and wondered for a second how he would react if she told him how she really felt. He'd probably rather face a pack of starving wolves, then having to listen to the emotional problems of the Amazon Queen.

"I'm fine."

He nodded to himself and she could tell he knew better, but obviously didn't know where to go from there, and most likely didn't want to either. A thought suddenly struck.

"But what about you? How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm fine. My head's healing nicely." He gestured to the stitches barely visible above his right ear. "Xena's always said I was terribly thick headed, but it sure came in handy this time."

He smiled at her again and Gabrielle realized he hadn't understood her question.

"No, I mean, how are you doing..." Gabrielle strained to find the right words.

"How...how do you feel about Ephiny? I mean..." She faltered and could almost see the walls go up in his eyes.

For a long time he just looked into her eyes, and Gabrielle had the unpleasant feeling he was trying to read her mind, and even worse, succeeded in doing so.

"I'm sorry she died." He then said noncommittally. "I know she was your friend."

"She was your sister."

He stared at her and the slightest hint of emotion flickered across his face, but whether it was anger or something else she couldn't tell.

"It doesn't matter anymore what she was, Gabrielle. She's dead."

He jumped down from the fence.

"I'll leave you alone. I know you have a lot to think about."

"What do you mean?"

"The soldiers."

Gabrielle closed her eyes, feeling another burden settle on her shoulders.

"You're right, I can't believe how I could forget that for a second."

"Probably because you wanted to. That's usually the way it works."

He lifted his hand in a half-hearted greeting and as he began to walk away, and

Gabrielle suddenly found herself becoming angry at his lack of response, her mind refusing to believe he could be so cold.

"Lykeas?"

He turned, his face expressionless once again.

"You're not fooling anybody."

His eyes were suddenly filled with such a sadness that Gabrielle forgot all about what she had intended to say.

"I have no intention of fooling anybody, Gabrielle."

He left her there, sitting on the fence, staring after him.

Xena carefully opened the door to the hut and looked inside. Gabrielle was lying on the bed fast asleep. She was fully dressed and a few scrolls were scattered around her and some had fallen down onto the floor. A single candle illuminated the room, bringing shadows to life and making Gabrielle's hair shimmer in a soft glow. For minutes the warrior just stood motionless, watching the young woman on the bed. She wanted to be able to remember this moment forever. She wanted always to be able to recall the beautiful, pale face and the soft, slightly parted lips. She wanted to remember the sound of her breathing, the scent of her hair and most of all, she desperately wanted to see into those hazel eyes that always took her breath away, making her lose sight of everything else around her. In that moment Gabrielle opened her eyes. Xena almost shrank back when she saw the beautiful eyes looking back at her, and felt how she was slowly losing herself in the depths of them. Without a word, she left the hut and the woman inside. She hurried through the village, suddenly desperate to reach the forest. She avoided the guard there and dived aimlessly into the darkness. She broke into a run, but no matter how fast she ran, she couldn't shake the dull ache in her heart. When she finally came to a halt, she was panting and her body covered by a light sheen of sweat. To her surprise she noticed her legs and arms were covered by several cuts and scrapes from thorns and branches. She hadn't even noticed it happening while running. The moon emerged from the clouds and bestowed the trees around her with patches of black, grey and silver, the colours shifting whenever the leaves were caught in a breeze, but the warrior paid it no attention. When she had finally regained her breath and the beating of her heart had stilled, she began to slowly walk back towards the village, her feet not making a single sound on the soft ground. As she stepped out from two trees, she saw Gabrielle. The bard was standing with her back to the warrior, her eyes searching the forest. Xena didn't dare breathe as the young woman slowly raised her head and turned to look at her. She felt how all her senses were brought back to life the moment their eyes met. She felt the warm wind against her skin, she heard the rattling of leaves from the trees around them, and she sensed the presence of the small animals hurrying through the bushes a few feet away, but somehow it seemed to come from far away, and it all paled in comparison to the intensity she felt radiating from the woman in front of her.

"Xena?"

The word was spoken softly, almost a caress and the warrior felt a shiver run down her back. She wanted to speak, but the words died on her tongue.

"Xena, I don't understand..." Gabrielle's voice nearly broke and the warrior had to restrain herself from taking the bard into her arms.

"Why do you..." She stopped and looked away for a moment.

"Don't you love me anymore?"

This time her voice was barely above a whisper and now it was Xena who looked away, unable to hold her gaze.

"What's happening? What's wrong with you?"

The bard was angry now and took a few steps closer

"Look at me!"

When the warrior didn't comply, she closed the remaining distance between them and put a hand under her chin, forcing the dark woman to look up. The bard's green eyes shining with fury and frustration were in stark contrast to the emotionless blue looking back at her. Gabrielle's expression hardened and without a word she wrapped her arms around Xena's neck and crushed her lips against the startled warrior's. The blond woman's tongue forced its way into Xena's mouth and as her grip around the warrior tightened, Xena felt her knees go weak. Involuntary her arms went around Gabrielle's waist and she felt herself melt into the searing kiss. Bodies interlocked, they sank to the ground, tongues and mouths never ceasing the relentless assault. Xena pushed Gabrielle down onto her back and lowered herself to cover the bard's body with her own. Their kisses and touches became frantic and desperate. Clothes were torn from bare skin, and demanding hands and mouths sought claim to each other's bodies with a frenzy and urgency that drove all other thoughts away. It was only the two of them together and nothing else mattered. They clung together unable and unwilling to let go even for the briefest of seconds. Afterwards, without having spoken a word, they fell into an exhausted sleep in each other's arms. When Gabrielle awoke the next morning, she was covered by a blanket and her clothes had been neatly placed in a pile beside her. There was no sight of the warrior.

## CHAPTER XV

The first couple of days passed in silence. Lykeas occasionally threw a glance at Xena, but the warrior stared straight ahead, oblivious to everything around her. They rode fast and only paused when it was absolutely necessary for them to catch a few hours of sleep, or to give the horses a rest. The road they were following was in a remarkable good condition, a testimony of the fact they had left no man's land behind them and entered a kingdom. Three kingdoms separated them from the river Ister. The first two were minor ones, ruled by Polyidos and Simmias, men Xena had heard little, but nothing bad about, and she doubted they would have any problems passing their territories. The last kingdom, however, was another matter. King Kassander was known as an arrogant and proud man, and if one first found oneself on his bad side, there was no turning back. He was hungry for power and wealth, believing himself to be a direct descendant from Achilles and wanting nothing more, than having his name branded into history for all times to come. On more than one occasion, when still a warlord, Xena had sacked his villages and robbed him off his gold, and although it was years ago, she knew he still had a price on her head. If she were to fall into his

hands, she would be executed on the spot.

*Or perhaps I should consider myself lucky, if that's all he'd do to me.*

She looked at Lykeas and tried to remember if he had ever been with her on one of her many raids in Kassander's kingdom, but she couldn't remember. As always, when she thought back to her past, it was hard to distinguish one village from another, and one kingdom from the next. There had been so many and she hadn't cared. It all came together in a mist of blood and smoke, and only a few scenes were clear and unmistakable. Scenes like Cirra and Corinth, her encounter with the Horde. These were images she would never forget no matter how much she tried, and in some way she supposed it was only fitting. She turned to look at Lykeas again. He'd been at Cirra with her, but she doubted he would remember if she asked him. He noticed her look and gave her a questioning glance in return, but she looked away.

*Maybe one day...*

She was abruptly brought back to reality by the sound of a scream coming from somewhere ahead of them. Without a second thought she pushed Argo into a gallop, barely registering the look of surprise on Lykeas' face as she thundered down the road. Lykeas sighed and brought Rarjan into a gallop as well, quickly closing the distance between them. As they came closer they could hear the sound of flowing water and soon after they saw a river cutting through the land ahead with only a small bridge to bind the road together. A young woman was standing on the bridge, sobbing uncontrollably. When she saw them coming, she frantically gestured towards the water, and Xena practically jumped off Argo and ran to the young woman without losing a step.

"My baby! My little girl's in the water. Please help her, she can't swim!"

Xena looked down at the roaring water and swallowed when she saw a small form appear on the surface for a few seconds, only to be dragged under again by the current. She swiftly removed her armour and sword and was about to jump into the water, when the small form appeared again. The river had pulled the girl further away, but even from the distance she could hear the low thud as the small body was crushed against a rock sticking out of the river, and Xena knew without a doubt that the little girl was dead. She stepped away from the edge and the woman looked at her, terror and denial written on her face.

"What are you doing? Please help her! She can't swim."

Xena reached out to the woman, but she shrank away.

"Why won't you help her? Don't you understand, I can't swim either! Please, she needs your help. The other man was willing to help!"

The warrior's brow furrowed and she grabbed the woman around her wrist.

"What other man? Is there somebody else in the river?"

When the woman just stared at her without answering, Xena turned to look at Lykeas, who was still sitting on Rarjan.

"Lykeas! Can you see anybody in the water?"

He rose in the saddle and let his eyes search the river.

"No, but the current's awfully strong. If anybody's in there he'd have been dragged further away."

"Take a look, will you? I'll try to get the girl out."

Lykeas shrugged and left the road to ride parallel with the river. Soon the river narrowed and the current became less dangerous, but there was no sight of anybody. Just as he was about to return to the bridge he saw something in the middle of the river, clinging to a branch that had been trapped between two rocks. For a few seconds he just took in the scene in front of him, then an almost resigned expression crossed his face and he slid out of the saddle. Discarding armour and weapons on the way, he ran the last yards to the river, before jumping straight into the water. Immediately he felt the strong pull of the current and realized too late that he had underestimated its force. Before he managed to take another breath, he was dragged under the water again. He fought the panic that was rising inside him and willed himself to relax. It wouldn't do either of them any good if he lost it, and somehow, of all the different scenarios Lykeas had pictured himself dying, drowning in a river while trying to rescue a stranger hadn't been one of them. Just before he thought his lungs would explode, he felt the current release him and he shot through the water, towards the surface. Finally he was able to breathe again and he drank in the air so forcefully that his head began to spin. When he had himself under control once more, he realized he was able to tread water and remain on the same spot. He had been pulled further to the other side of the river, and apparently the current was less strong there. Still, by the time he was close enough to reach the man holding onto the branch, he was practically drained of all strength and had swallowed more water than he'd thought humanly possible. He grabbed the man's arm, but didn't get a reaction.

*Oh fuck! Don't say I have to get him back to the bank on my own.*

He shook the man a few times, but except from fluttering of eyelids there was no response.

*Just great! Just great! Remind me to thank you for this one, Xena.*

He gave up his attempts to wake him up and put his arm around the man's chest. With a powerful kick of his legs, he pushed them away from the rocks and with only one arm free, he started to swim back to the bank. After what felt like forever he entered shallow water and could reach the bottom with his feet.

"I got him."

Strong arms, lifted the man out of his grip and Lykeas felt how the last strength left his body. He slumped under the water, only to feel a hand pull him back up.

"Oh, no you don't."

He smiled at the sound of Xena's voice and felt his body be half dragged, half carried out of the water.

"Don't think for a second you can deny me the pleasure of teasing you with this noble deed. If I didn't know better, I'd say you'd just done something heroic."

In spite of the playful words, the concern in Xena's voice was evident and Lykeas felt a faint warmth enter his otherwise freezing body.

"So that's why you pulled me out. You were afraid you wouldn't get the chance to bother me with this."

Xena gently placed Lykeas next to the other man on the bank.

"Exactly, your reputation's been totally ruined. If you're not careful people might actually think you're a nice guy."

"Uh, we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?" Lykeas replied, just before slipping into unconsciousness.

Xena threw a couple of branches on the fire before sitting down on her bedroll. She grabbed her sword and began the slow, meticulous task of sharpening the blade. Not that it really needed it, she always kept it in perfect condition, but there wasn't anything else to do. Her gaze fell on the two men lying on the other side of the fire. Lykeas hadn't been hurt in the river, just gone out cold and still was, but by now she suspected his state of unconsciousness had turned into sleep, so she wasn't worried. The other man, although he was hardly more than a young boy, had received quite a few bruises and cuts, but nothing too serious and he would be fine in a couple of days. After dragging them out of the river, she had made a fire and gotten rid of their wet clothes and covered them with blankets. She'd had a hard time with the young woman who'd lost her daughter, and if it hadn't been out of respect for her loss, Xena's temper would've flared several times. She had managed to retrieve the small body from the river and had accompanied the woman home. The woman's village had only been a few miles away so it hadn't taken too long, and immediately after having delivered the woman into the care of her husband and mother, Xena had headed back to the river. She hadn't been too happy about leaving Lykeas and the boy alone, but she couldn't let the at times hysterical, at others catatonic woman go home alone. To her great relief Lykeas' weapons had still been where he'd left them, she wouldn't have liked having to tell him they were missing. After taking care of Argo and Rarjan, she had made camp on the bank, caught a few fish and was now waiting impatiently for her patients to wake up. A small movement made her look up from her work and look at the young boy. His head moved slightly and a small groan escaped his throat, before he slowly opened his eyes to look around. Brown eyes widened as they took in their surroundings and came to rest on Xena. He sat up with a start, only to discover his current state of nakedness and frantically wrapped the blanket closer together. A furious blush showed on his cheeks and Xena had to fight not to laugh.

"Don't worry. I swear, I didn't peek."

The young boy blushed even more from her last words and this time Xena couldn't suppress a smile.

"Who are you?" He finally managed to say.

"My name's Xena and sleepyhead there beside you is Lykeas."

The young boy removed a few light brown strands from his eyes and looked at the man beside him. Then suddenly remembering, he turned his gaze back to Xena.

"The girl! The girl in the river! Did she make it?"

Xena shook her head sadly, "No, she died... Did you know her?"

"No, I didn't. I was on my way home when this woman came screaming about her little girl had fallen into the river. I wanted to help." He cleared his throat to get rid of the lump he felt there. "I guess, I wasn't much of a help."

Xena gave him a reassuring smile, "You shouldn't blame yourself for failing, only for not trying. You risked your life for somebody you didn't even know that's nothing to be ashamed of."

"So did he." The brown-haired boy gestured towards Lykeas. "And he succeeded."

"True, but it's the intentions that counts and I'll bet your intentions were a lot more honourable than Lykeas' were."

She gave the still sleeping form an affectionate smile, "Lykeas doesn't rescue people on a regular basis, only when he's in the mood for it."

An uncertain smile showed on the young boy's face, obviously not quite sure how he should interpret her last remark.

"Will he be all right?"

"Oh yeah, he's just sleeping. Nothing to worry about."

Xena studied the young boy closer. He'd light brown hair and gentle brown eyes. He was slender of build, but there was nothing frail about him. He was well muscled with the right proportions and would in time grow into a beautiful man. The way he spoke and his entire manner, made Xena wonder whether he was royalty or perhaps the son of a wealthy merchant. Guessing her thoughts he reached out and Xena hid a amused smile and shook his hand.

"I'm sorry, I should have presented myself sooner. My name's Alexias, I'm the son of King Polyidos."

"Nice to meet you, Alexias."

She was about to say something more, when Lykeas stirred under the blanket and slowly sat up. He rolled his neck from side to side before focusing on the young boy beside him. Alexias reached out and after quick glance at Xena, Lykeas shook his hand.

"I'm Alexias, thank you for rescuing me, that was very courageous."

Lykeas face took on such an awkward expression that Xena laughed out loud.

"See, I told you, Lykeas. Your reputation will never recover from this."

He gave her a crooked smile.

"Perhaps not." Without a second glance at Alexias, he stood up. "Where are my weapons?"

Xena reached behind her and tossed the weapons to him. "They're all here, but..." she paused. "Lykeas?"

"Yes?"

"Not that I mind the view, but perhaps you should consider getting some clothes on, you're embarrassing our guest."

Lykeas looked down at his naked body and then at the young boy, who was blushing furiously again while staring into the fire.

"Oh..." He gave Xena a suave grin.

He got dressed in his now dry clothes and picked up Alexias' and handed them to the boy. The boy just stared at his clothes, then Xena and then Lykeas. Xena arched an eyebrow and Lykeas tilted his head slightly.

"Yes?"

"Uh... Would you, I mean... Could you...turn around?"

Early the next evening they arrived at the gates of King Polyidos' castle. In spite of several protests from the young Prince that it wasn't necessary, Xena and Lykeas had decided to accompany him home to his father. It wasn't that much of a detour and besides, neither warrior thought it would be a bad idea to have the King on their good side. Alexias' horse had disappeared after he left her at the river, so the Prince had been riding behind Xena on Argo all the way, since there was no way Rarjan would accept a second rider.

Polyidos' castle had been built in the middle of the city on a slightly higher level that gave a good view of the city and the lands surrounding it. It wasn't the most grand or the most impressive castle, Xena had ever seen, but the solidly built houses in the city and the carefully maintained roads, spoke volumes of the King's wealth and care for his subjects. When they rode through the city toward the castle, people everywhere bowed their heads for the young Prince or shouted friendly greetings and wishes of good health to him and his father. Clearly the people cared as much for their King as he did for them. When they finally arrived, the gates were immediately opened and they rode into a huge courtyard that belied the small size of the castle from outside. Barely had they dismounted before a small, chubby man came running towards them as fast as his small legs could carry him.

"Your Highness! Your Highness! I'm so relieved to see you again! His Majesty has been so worried since your horse returned without you." The man stopped to take a few much required breaths.

"We've all been worried, I can't tell you how happy I am to see you again. I trust you haven't been hurt?" The last remark was followed by a suspicious glance at Xena and Lykeas.

Alexias stepped forward and put a reassuring hand on the sweating man's shoulder.

"I'm just fine, Charmides. I haven't been hurt. Actually," he gestured towards the warriors, "these two people saved my life. If it hadn't been for them, I most likely

would have drowned."

The chubby little man's eyes widened at the Prince's words and he rushed to shake first Lykeas' then Xena's hand.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! The Kingdom of Polion is in your debt. If it hadn't been for you... Uh, I don't even dare to think the thought." He clapped his hands together and from out of nowhere two servants arrived.

"Proklos, Praklos, show these two heroes to our finest guest chambers and from this minute, I hold you responsible to see to that their every request and every need are taken care of, is that clear?"

The two men, who were obviously twins, nodded and then spoke in unison.

"Yes, sir. We'll see to it right away."

"Oh, hold on just a minute, we're actually-." Xena began, but was stopped by Alexias.

"Please, I know you must be anxious to move on, but my father will be devastated if he didn't have the chance to thank you for your deed. Please...", he said again, when he saw the doubting looks exchanged between the warriors. "Just stay for one night. Your horses will be able to rest and I know my father will like to talk to you, it's so seldom we get any visitors from the South."

Xena shrugged, "I guess it can't hurt, just one night."

"Okay," Lykeas said, "a nice, warm bed isn't something I willingly decline."

"Capital! Capital!" Charmides was practically jumping up and down on the spot. "We have the softest beds in the Kingdom. Proklos and Praklos will take you to your rooms and I'll see to that your horses are being cared for. Dinner will be at eight, but don't worry a servant will be sent to notify you. Uh...is there anything else...?"

The little man scratched his chin in a thoughtful manner, "Oh yes, we'll have new clothes brought to your rooms, so you don't have to worry about that."

Lykeas began to open his mouth, but Alexias put a hand on his arm, "Just humour him. When Charmides is like this, there's no way of stopping him." He smiled at the dark warrior, "You can wear whatever clothes you like."

Charmides frowned at this, but didn't say anything.

"Uhm," Lykeas said, looking rather overwhelmed. "Okay, but I'll take care of my horse. Rarjan doesn't take kindly to other people."

"As you wish. The stables are over there. I'll show you."

"No, Your Highness. I think it'll be better, if you pay a visit to His Majesty and inform him that you have returned. He's been very worried."

Alexias nodded, "You're right, Charmides. I'll do that right away."

He gave a small bow to Xena and Lykeas, "I'll see you at dinner then."

Charmides began leading them towards the stable, but Xena lingered at moment to

look around. It was a very beautiful and apparently friendly place they had arrived at, and she was actually looking forward to meeting the King, who was responsible for it all. As she hurried to catch up with Lykeas and Charmides, she noticed Alexias standing on the top of the stairs leading into the castle. The young Prince was staring after Lykeas with an expression, Xena knew all too well. It was the same expression she had seen on the face of a young, green-eyed village girl in what seemed to be a completely different lifetime.

"It's quite a place they got here." Lykeas looked around, clearly appreciating what he saw.

"Uh huh," Xena agreed and dropped down on the bed with a small sigh. "Is your room the same?"

"Yep, the view is different, but else it's the same."

The guest chambers were small, but beautifully and richly decorated with wall paintings and tapestries. The marble floor was inlaid with mosaics picturing scenes from hunting and war, and a huge fireplace took up almost the entire wall opposite the bed. A skin from a bear was placed in front of the fireplace and to the left of that was a small table and a chair.

Lykeas rose from the chair and stepped over to the window. The view from Xena's room was of the city and the route they had travelled all day. His own view was of the Royal Gardens and was quite stunning if one cared to look which Lykeas hadn't. He turned and leaned against the wall next to the window to look at his friend. Xena was lying sprawled out on the bed and was still wearing her armour. She opened one eye and looked at him.

"What?"

"It's almost eight, don't you think you should get ready for dinner?"

"Ah, but I'm so comfortable." She raised her arms before letting them fall back on the bed. "I could stay here all night."

"Well then, at least get cleaned up. You stink!"

Xena opened the other eye. "I do not!"

"Do too!"

"Do not!"

"Do -." Lykeas stopped himself and gave Xena an angelic smile. "I see your range of conversation hasn't improved much over the years."

"You should talk," Xena said good-humouredly and slowly sat up on the bed. "But I guess, I do smell a bit."

She disappeared out of a small, almost hidden door next to the bed and soon Lykeas heard the sound of splashing water. With a deep sigh, he slumped down on the bed and closed his eyes. He could get used to this.

He was woken up by a sharp knock on the door and propped himself up on one elbow.

"Come in!"

Proklos or Praklos, Lykeas couldn't tell the difference, peeked inside.

"The dinner is ready, miss...uh, sir." Lykeas gave the servant a conspiratorial smile.

"You can call me miss if you want to."

"Don't play with the servants, Lykeas," Xena chided with a smile, coming out of the bathroom.

Lykeas winked at the servant and rose from the bed, "I'm never allowed to have any fun."

They were led through several corridors and colonnades before they arrived in front of a heavy oak tree door with two guards on either side. Praklos, as it had turned out to be, knocked three times on the door and it was promptly opened from inside. They stepped inside into a surprisingly small dining hall, it was more of a room than a hall and Xena was pleasantly surprised. She always felt extremely ridiculous when seated at the end of the preposterous long tables some royalty used, having to shout her lungs out to converse with her dinner companion at the opposite end. Fortunately that wouldn't be necessary tonight, as the table was only meant for six or eight people and the chairs had been placed close together at one end. The man sitting at the end of the table rose from the chair and walked around the table to meet them. He was middle-aged, but there was no sign of grey in his black hair. He was dressed in a white tunic and a purple robe. His dark brown eyes scrutinized them in a reserved but friendly manner, and Xena was suddenly glad she did take the time to clean up. The heavy oak tree door behind them closed with a bang and both warriors jumped. The King raised his hands as if to reassure them.

"Don't worry, Praklos always does that. I gave up years ago to get him to close it quietly."

He smiled at them and they returned his smile, not knowing what else to do.

"So you're the two people my son owe his life." He paused for a moment, searching for words. "I'm eternally grateful for what you did. As long as you live you'll be honoured and welcome guests in my kingdom."

He stepped closed and stopped in front of Xena, studying her up close. Xena began to feel uncomfortable and shifted from one foot to the other. Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Xena..." The word lingered between them. "Xena..." The King spoke again, practically tasting the word. "So you're Xena."

Xena returned his gaze without blinking. "Yes." Her short reply didn't hide the tension she was feeling.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The King reached out and Xena barely managed to hide her surprise as she shook his hand.

Still holding onto her hand the King continued, "I'm a great believer in letting bygones be bygones." He smiled at her slightly suspicious expression. "Guests in my home don't have to worry about anything but whether their beds are too soft or the food too salty."

He smiled again and Xena gave him a relieved smile in return, she was starting to like this man already. He moved to stand in front of Lykeas and solemnly reached out again.

"Thank you for saving my boy."

Lykeas shook the King's hand briefly. "Uh, don't mention it."

"Ah, but I will." The King replied and began walking back to the table, "and as often as it pleases me."

He sat down and gestured towards the chairs, "Please sit down, my son should be here any minute if Charmides isn't keeping him with one of his lectures."

As on cue a knock sounded and the soldier standing at the wall reached out to open the door and Alexias stepped inside. His eyes swiftly surveyed the room before coming to a hold on Lykeas.

"Good, Alexias. Right on time, come and sit down."

Alexias walked around the table to sit on his father's right, opposite Xena and Lykeas. The King clapped his hands once and immediately the room was invaded by servants carrying dishes, plates and bottles of wine. Almost as fast as they had appeared they disappeared again, the only proof they had been there, being the now fully loaded table. Xena eyed the huge amounts of food in front of her. Gabrielle would've thought she'd died and gone to the Elysian Fields. Suddenly she had to swallow and reached out for her glass. The King followed her example and raised his glass.

"A toast for the heroes of the day, Xena and Lykeas, who rescued what's most precious to my heart."

They toasted and began to eat. Their conversation was friendly and harmless, but Xena couldn't shake the feeling that the King was waiting for the right moment to approach more serious matters. Lykeas didn't talk much and enjoyed most of the meal in silence. A couple of times when he looked up, he caught Alexias staring at him and every time the boy looked away, a faint blush on his cheeks. After they had finished the servants appeared again and cleared the table. Then they returned with four glasses and a decanter and not until they had left, did the King speak again.

"Well now, I've had a pleasant meal in pleasant company, but now I think it's time you tell me why you're here, and afterwards I may have something to tell you."

## CHAPTER XVI

"Death."

"Kelifé?"

"I'm a healer, Your Majesty. I don't take lives or sentence people to death."

"So it's life then?"

"Yes."

Gabrielle looked at the woman beside her, "Callias?"

Although the Captain was clearly uncomfortable, she returned Gabrielle's gaze without wavering.

"Death."

If Gabrielle was surprised she didn't show it, but instead turned to look at Erinya.

"And you?"

The weapons master looked down at the table for a moment, before looking back up at her Queen.

"Life."

"What!" The outrage in Zelei's voice was clear. "Erinya, how can you say that after all what's happened. I would expect this from Kelife," she gave the healer a sharp glance, "but not from you. Have you forgotten Leda already?"

"No, Zelei. I haven't forgotten Leda and I never will," the weapons master's voice was quiet but firm, "but killing those three soldiers won't bring her back, nothing will. Besides, the only crime these men have committed is that they fought in a war. We don't prosecute our soldiers for that, do we?"

"It's hardly the same," Zelei's voice was practically dripping with venom. "They attacked us and killed off half the village. They deserve to die! We need them to die to recover from this!"

Erinya just shook her head, "Perhaps, but people die in war and we attacked them first."

"That was self-defence!"

"True, but how would we've reacted if they'd taken prisoners and later executed them for nothing more than fighting on the other side."

"But that's what war's all about!" Zelei exasperated. "The victor makes the rules! It's that simple! In the end it doesn't matter who's right or wrong. It's who won that's important."

"Okay, that's enough you two!" Gabrielle cut through, giving both her subjects a stern look. "You're not helping."

Zelei gave Erinya one last hostile glance before looking at her Queen, a vicious smile on her face.

"I guess it's up to you then, my...Queen. You decide whether they live or die."

"I'm well aware of that, Zelei." Gabrielle's voice was cold. "And I'd appreciate it if you didn't use that tone with me, or I might have to find somebody else to lead the

regular army."

Surprised showed on the Captain's face, but only for a second.

"Yes, Your Majesty." She bowed her head slightly, "I apologize."

Gabrielle continued to stare at her Captain until Zelei looked away, then she turned her attention back to the three other people in the room.

"If you'd all leave me alone, I have to think this over. Come back after an hour and I'll inform you of my decision."

They all rose and left the hut, except Callias who lingered at the door."

"Your Majesty?"

Gabrielle turned to look at the Captain, "Yes?"

"I'm sorry if my decision disappointed you, but I had to do what I thought was right."

Gabrielle gave the Amazon a tired smile, "I wouldn't expect anything less from you, Callias."

The Captain nodded to herself, relief evident on her face. She started to leave, but paused again.

"Your Majesty?"

"Yes?"

"If...if you need anything or anybody to talk to... Well, I just want you to know that I'm here that is...if you need or want...to talk or anything."

"Thank you, Callias." Gabrielle gave her a warm smile. "I might just hold you to that."

The Captain smiled briefly then hurried out of the hut, leaving Gabrielle alone. Gabrielle rose from her chair and walked over to the window. She drew the curtains back and looked outside. It was late afternoon and already the village was painted in shades of orange and red.

*Autumn's coming fast.*

To her dismay she noticed that Zelei and Erinya had continued their argument outside and that several Amazons contributed eagerly to the debate. A small crowd was beginning to gather in front of the hut, all waiting to hear their Queen's decision.

*What I am going to do? Should the men live or die? I'd wish Xena was here, she... No! I have to decide this for myself, for my people. They rely on me and trust me to do the right thing. But what's the right thing?*

She sighed and moved away from the window and sat down on a chair.

*Erinya's right, but in some way, so is Zelei. They killed so many...but it was war. They attacked us and we attacked them. I don't want to decide this, I don't want to be the one who sentences them to die. If I do, I'll be just as responsible for their deaths as the executioner. Actually, I'll be even more responsible, their blood will be on my*

*hands.*

She absently tapped her fingers on the table.

*I have to think of what my people need, what they want. This isn't about me, it's about them. I have to be strong... They need me to be strong.*

She leaned forward and rested her head on her arms.

*But I don't feel strong.*

She stayed in the same position and didn't move till she heard a knock on the door.

"Come in."

The four council members stepped inside, all looking expectantly at their Queen.

"I'll tell you outside."

They nodded and moved aside to let Gabrielle out. The moment the Queen stepped outside all voices silenced and all eyes turned to her. It was almost dark now and several fires were lit. The air was heavy with tension and suspense, and Gabrielle swallowed involuntarily. She felt a presence at her side and turned to look at Callias who'd come to stand beside her. The Captain's face was expressionless, but Gabrielle was none the less grateful for her silent support. She turned back to face her people.

"I, as the ruling Queen of the Amazon Nation and with the authority bestowed on me, have decided to sentence the three captive soldiers to death. The execution is to take place immediately."

A roar of voices filled the square and several Amazons were hugging each other, tears running down their cheeks. Gabrielle's face was blank as she turned to Callias.

"Captain, see to that it's done and do it in private. I don't want a public execution."

Zelei snorted, but a glance from the Queen silenced her instantly. Callias saluted and turned to the Royal Guards standing at the hut.

"Areia, Pellene. Come with me."

The three soldiers left in direction of the prison and silence fell once again. Hushed voices whispered and glances darted from the Queen to the prison and back again. Suddenly Callias emerged from the darkness, but without her soldiers. She walked over to her Queen and kneeled down.

"It has been done."

Cheering and shouting obscured any reply Gabrielle might have had and she only nodded in acknowledgement. A soldier in the regular army suddenly stepped forward and kneeled down and then, one by one, every Amazon in the village kneeled down before their Queen. Gabrielle took in the display before her, a strange smile on her face. Then she slowly walked through the lines of kneeling Amazons, gently touching each of them on the shoulder, before continuing towards the Royal hut and without looking back, disappeared inside.

"Seeing something interesting?"

"Nah, not really."

Lykeas closed the door behind him and stepped over to Xena who was standing at the window looking out at the city. The sun had set hours ago and only a few flickering lights from the houses below were visible. They stood side by side for a while, enjoying the cool air and the gentle breeze that made the flames in the fireplace join into a slow, alluring dance with the shadows on the walls. Then Lykeas walked away from the window and sat down on the bed. He began to roll his head back and forth to loosen up his muscles and Xena turned her head slightly to look at him.

"Say please."

Lykeas grinned, "Please."

With a quiet sigh she moved over to Lykeas who scrambled to the middle of the bed, before lying down on his stomach. Xena straddled his hips and began kneading the stiff muscles.

"You'll never learn, will you?"

"And miss this? No."

Xena smiled to herself and continued her task. Her mind began to wander and she couldn't help but wonder how many times she'd done this before.

"So what do you think?" Lykeas interrupted her thoughts and she paused for a moment.

"I think it's too much of a coincidence."

"Uhm, me too."

Their talk with the King had been interesting to say the least. Much to Lykeas' surprise, Xena hadn't had any scruples about telling the King everything that had happened and consequently why they were here. Polyidos had listened in silence, only interrupting a few times to ask for a clarification of one thing or another. He had paid particular attention when Xena mentioned the brown uniforms the soldiers had been wearing.

*"Brown uniforms? With a small black insignia just above the heart?"*

*"Yes. Have you seen them?"*

*"Yes, I have. Several times actually. Three months ago, I heard rumours of a warlord crossing my kingdom and together with my army I went out to meet him. However, instead of attacking, he avoided us the whole time until he had left the territory. That was the first time I saw the brown uniforms. I didn't think much about it until four weeks ago, I heard that another warlord was coming through. Again they avoided us and again, they wore the brown uniforms."*

*"Couldn't they have been from the same army and perhaps been delayed, trying to catch up?"*

*"I thought so too, but about two weeks ago it happened again. Although this time it wasn't a real army. It was several small groups of men, all heading in the same direction with no apparent connection, except the uniforms."*

*"Did the men look they were coming from battle?"*

*"Now that you mention it, yes they did."*

*"Have you heard anything about them since?"*

*"I was going to send a message to King Simmias to inquire, but when I heard that Xena, the Warrior Princess was in my Kingdom, I decided to wait."*

*"Did you think I was with them?"*

*"Forgive me. I suppose, I should've known better, but I have my people to think of and I take no chances when it comes to them."*

*"Don't apologize, it's not more than a few years ago, you'd have been right to be worried."*

*"I know, but let's not talk about that. Instead I wanted to ask you, if you would consider bringing my message to Simmias since you'll be travelling through his kingdom, and I know this is of great interest to you as well."*

Without hesitation, Xena had agreed.

She moved away from Lykeas and went over to the fireplace to stir up the fire. Lykeas reluctantly resumed his former position, sitting on the bed. Xena remained standing at the fireplace unconsciously still holding the poker, staring straight into the flames. Then abruptly she turned to look directly at him.

"I've done something very stupid."

"Oh," was all Lykeas managed to say, slightly unnerved by the look in her eyes.

"But I'm willing to take the consequences," She continued, as if she hadn't heard him. "I have to."

"I see," Lykeas replied, but in truth he didn't have a clue about what she was referring to.

Then a thought struck, "Ohhh."

She smiled weakly at him, "Yes, ohhh."

He scratched his chin thoughtfully and watched as Xena began pacing the floor.

"Well, I think..." He paused, having no idea what to say. "I think, I should get some sleep. It's gonna be an early start tomorrow."

Xena stopped her pacing, "Yeah, you're right. I should do that as well," but she knew she wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

Lykeas got up from the bed and opened the door, then on a second thought, he looked

back into the room. Xena was standing at the window again, staring out at the darkness.

"Xena?"

She didn't look at him. "Uh huh?"

"You know I'm awful, when it comes to stuff like...like that." He swallowed. "But if you ever... Well, I'm willing...willing to try, and at least...I can always listen."

A smile showed on Xena's face, but the night was the only witness.

"I'll keep that in mind."

He nodded to himself and closed the door behind him.

Three people stood in the castle's courtyard which was bathed in the grey light of dawn. The King stifled a yawn and smiled apologetically at the two warriors.

"I'm afraid it's been a while since I last was up at this hour."

Xena grinned, "Well, there has to be some advantages to being a king."

The King pulled out a scroll from a pocket in his white robe. "Here's the message I want you to bring to Simmias." He paused for a minute and looked at them in a thoughtful manner, before continuing. "King Simmias is one of the nicest men I've ever met, but when it comes to politics..."

"Yes...?"

The expression on Polyidos' face indicated he'd just made a decision.

"Simmias is greatly loved by his subjects, but it's no secret among them that in reality he has little involvement in the affairs of the kingdom. Therefore, I'll advise you to speak to his wife, Queen Phillinna, about these matters. For years she's been the rightful ruler of the kingdom in anything but name, but under no circumstances treat Simmias with disrespect. He's not stupid, he just doesn't... Well, it's hard for him to remain focused for a longer period of time."

Xena nodded, "Thank you for the advice, we'll make sure to follow it."

She accepted the scroll the King handed her and placed it safely in Argo's saddlebag. She hesitated for a moment before pulling out two scrolls of her own.

"I'd be grateful if you would see to that these two scrolls are delivered to the Amazons. Will that be possible?"

"But of course, I'll send a messenger right away, it shouldn't-."

The King was interrupted by the sound of hooves on the cobble and Charmides' voice, protesting loudly. They turned to see Alexias coming towards them, dressed in armour and leathers, leading a horse behind him. Charmides was wringing his hands and kept dancing around in small circles, while still managing to keep up with the Prince.

"But, Your Highness, you haven't thought this through. It could be dangerous, what

would His Majesty think if... Ah, Your Majesty! I'm so relieved to see you. His Highness is determined to accompany the warriors and won't listen to reason."

"Alexias?"

The King frowned and left Lykeas and Xena. He led his son out of hearing range and an animated debate began. Xena gave Lykeas an amused smile, but his attention was on the scrolls in her hands.

"What's in the scrolls?"

"This one informs them of all what we've learned so far and what our future plans are."

"And that one?" Lykeas pointed at the slightly smaller scroll in the warrior's other hand.

When she didn't answer, he reached out and took it out of her hand. Xena's eyes narrowed for a second, but then her face was a mask again. Lykeas ignored her expression and opened the scroll. He read the short text and then without a word, rolled it together again and fastened the string around it. He handed it back to her and their eyes met. The blue eyes didn't show any emotion, while the black ones had a speculating and searching look to them.

"Excuse me."

They both turned to look at Polyidos who was standing next to his son.

"Alexias has set his heart on going with you to see Simmias. I am not happy with his decision, but he's old enough to decide for himself, so I won't stand in his way. Of course, it all depends on whether you're willing to let him accompany you." He gave them a faint smile, "Don't feel obligated to agree. Whatever you decide, it won't change my opinion about you or lessen the gratefulness I feel."

Lykeas released a quiet sigh and looked at Xena, who only shrugged, obviously letting the decision up to him. He turned to look at Alexias, who was regarding him with both anticipation and badly hidden eagerness.

"How old are you?"

"I'm eighteen."

"You look younger."

"I know." There was a defiant edge to the Prince's voice, but Lykeas paid it no attention.

"Can you fight?"

"Yes, I've been leading the-."

Lykeas raised his hand to silence the Prince.

"Ever killed anybody?"

Alexias nodded, but when noticing the warrior's expression, hurried to give a more

oral confirmation. "Yes, yes I have."

"Good horseman?"

"The finest," the King interrupted proudly and put an arm around his son's shoulder.

Lykeas' gaze went from the King to Alexias and then back again.

"Okay."

He mounted Rarjan and looked at Xena who was already sitting on Argo.

"Let's go."

The King gave his son a warm hug and Alexias endured it for a moment, before easing himself out of the embrace. He mounted his own horse and looked down at the King.

"I'll make you proud, father."

"I'm proud of you already, Alexias... Be careful."

"I will." The Prince turned to look at Charmides, who was fighting tears. "Don't worry, my friend. I'll be back before you now it."

The chubby man blew his nose and gave the Prince a heartfelt smile.

"I'm counting on it, Your Highness."

Without further delay, the three riders left the castle.

## **Part 4**

### CHAPTER XVII

It was three days after the execution and the Queen still hadn't left her hut. She'd had her meals brought, but most had been sent back without being touched. Kelif had paid her a visit, but the Queen had assured her that she was all right and just needed to be alone. The Amazons had respected her wish, but as the third day turned into night, Callias decided she wasn't going to play along anymore. She knocked on the Queen's door and without waiting for an answer stepped inside. Gabrielle was sitting on the bed surrounded by scrolls and looked up from the scroll she was writing in.

"What is it, I said... Oh, Callias, it's you. Look, I'm sorry, but I don't feel like having company tonight."

The Captain just closed the door and stepped over to the bed.

"You're gonna stop doing this to yourself."

"Do what?" Gabrielle's voice was annoyed.

"Feel guilty. You did what you had to do and there's absolutely nobody in this village, or the entire Nation for that matter, who think you made the wrong decision. They saw

a strong and just Queen in a difficult situation, but you handled it with the firmness needed without betraying your heart, and they all respect you and love you that much more for it. You're not afraid of showing doubt or weakness, but you're not afraid of showing strength and resolution either when it's required, and three days ago, it was."

The Amazon paused from her passionate speech to take a breath.

"Then why is it I can't sleep at night." Gabrielle's voice was barely a whisper.

Callias pushed a scroll aside and sat down on the bed. She reached out and took the quill from the Queen's shaking hand.

"Look, Gabrielle..."

The Queen smiled at hearing her name from the Captain's lips for the first time.

"I've been a warrior all my life, and I can't say that I understand all the things you must be feeling right now, but I do know that sometimes in life we're faced with problems that forces us to react in a certain manner. We may not like it or approve it, but it's not gonna prevent these things from happening from time to time, and as with all things beyond our control, we'll have to compromise and adjust. The life you lived ten years ago is not the life you live today, and the person you were ten years ago is not the person you are today. The world around us changes and because we live in that world, we change with it."

Gabrielle smiled at the Amazon, "For a warrior, you certainly have a way with words." She sighed, "I appreciate what you're trying to say, Callias. I really do, and I guess that some part of me agrees, but the thing is..."

"Yes?"

"I made a promise to myself once never to take a life or to fight again. I may not have fought, but I've taken lives. Three defenceless men died because of me."

The Captain reached out and took the Queen's hand. "You were a different person when you made that promise and in a different situation. It's impossible to go through life without altering or revising your beliefs and priorities. Your priority this time was the Amazons and you acted accordingly. *You* began the healing of the emotional scars we all carry. *You* saw what we needed and gave it to us and if the time comes, we'll do the same for you and that's how it should be, because you're our Queen and we're your people."

"But what am I worth if I can't stay true to myself?" Tears were slowly running down Gabrielle's cheeks.

"You wouldn't be feeling this way if you weren't."

And with that, the Amazon pulled her Queen into a tight embrace. Gabrielle rested her head against the soldier's shoulder and cried quietly. Callias moved her hand in small soothing circles on the Queen's back, while whispering soft words of comfort. Most of her words didn't make much sense or were impossible to make out, but it all worked to calm the woman in her arms and soon the sobs subsided.

Gabrielle moved away and regarded the blond Amazon with a small smile. "Thank

you, I needed that."

Callias smiled in return, "It's all part of a Captain's duty. Whether it's fighting off soldiers or offering a shoulder to cry on, I'm here to assist."

"I was hoping you were here as my friend and not as my Captain." Her words were playful, but her expression serious.

"Oh, I..." The Amazon hesitated, then grinned. "Let's say I'm here as your friend *and* Captain."

"Works with me," Gabrielle grinned in return, "but let's not have anymore of those my Queens or Your Majestys, I never pull rank among friends."

"Well, I don't know..."

"*Almost* never." The Queen interrupted, giving Callias a poor attempt of a menacing glare.

The Captain smiled, "Let's compromise. I'll continue to address you with your rightful title in public, but in private I'll call you whatever you want me to. Is that a deal?"

"Deal." Gabrielle shook the soldier's hand, "But you won't have to call me anything but Gabrielle, although..." She adopted a sober expression, "I probably could get used to a couple of "as you wish, woman who outshines the beauty of Aphrodite," and "yes, you the most skilful of bards," or what about, "if you say so, my Queen of light and wisdom," wouldn't that be appropriate?"

"Let's not get carried away, shall we?" The Captain smirked, "I begin to think, you've been inside this hut for too long."

Gabrielle just smiled and for a while they sat in silence. Then Callias gestured to one of the scrolls on the bed.

"Care to tell me a story?"

The Queen's eyes lit up, "I'd love too. I haven't been able to tell my tales for quite a while now."

She moved over so Callias could lean against the headboard beside her.

"Anything particular you'd like to hear?"

The Captain thought for a moment, "I'm sure they're all excellent, so why don't you just tell me one of your favourites."

"Okay," Gabrielle looked at the scrolls before her. She reached out for one, but stopped herself. "I don't need the scrolls to remember this story."

She gathered the scrolls and carefully put them on the floor beside the bed, before returning to her position at the headboard. She took a deep breath and her eyes took on a distant and faraway expression.

"It was winter and the weather was freezing. We'd been travelling for almost a week,

when suddenly a group of..." She faltered.

Callias who'd closed her eyes when Gabrielle began to speak, opened them again to look at her questioningly.

The Queen gave her a quick smile that didn't quite reach the green eyes, "I think, I'll tell a different story instead."

The Captain's eyes searched her face, "Okay..."

"I sing the song of Narcissus, the river god's son and Echo, the nymph who loved him..."

Gabrielle's voice carried softly through the dark night.

Slowly, a thought penetrated the heavy layers of sleep and made its way into Gabrielle's mind.

*I'm warm.*

She was about to sink under again when her consciousness made another attempt.

*How can that be?*

Reluctantly she opened her eyes.

*Callias...*

The Captain was lying on her stomach, facing away, but with one arm over Gabrielle's waist. Gabrielle's face was practically touching the Amazon's shoulder and her arm had taken a disturbingly possessive hold around the Captain's lower back.

*Oh boy!*

She eased herself away from the still sleeping woman and got to her feet. She had told several stories the night before and every time she'd wanted to stop, Callias had encouraged her to continue and the bard in her had willingly obliged, in spite of her exhaustion. Eventually they must have fallen asleep. She tried to stifle a yawn without success.

*Apparently that wasn't too long ago.*

She studied the Captain for a moment and smiled to herself. The passionate and persuasive speech the Amazon had given her last night had done wonders. She knew she would never be comfortable with the role she had played in the three men's death, but her feeling of guilt and frustration had, if not disappeared, subsided to a small ache she could learn to live with.

*I did what I had to do. What they wanted me to do. I don't like it one bit, but nobody's ever said it's fun to be Queen. I just hope, I won't have to make another decision like that for a long time...preferably never again.*

She sighed and wondered if it would be considered improper if she climbed back into bed beside the Captain and slept for a few more hours.

*Hades, it's not like I'm gonna tell anybody.*

Her musings were abruptly interrupted by a loud knocking on the door and for the second night in a row, an Amazon entered the Queen's hut without waiting for permission.

"Your Majesty, I won't accept this any longer, I-." Zelei stopped in her tracks and a mocking smile showed on her face. "I see it's true what they say about, "out of sight, out of mind." That didn't take you long, did it?"

Callias who'd been woken up by the noise, leapt off the bed and approached the brown-haired Amazon dangerously.

"Apologize, now!"

Zelei crossed her arms defiantly, but did take a few steps back.

"Getting ambitious are we, Callias? Trying to sleep your way to the top, eh? Too bad it won't do you any good as she won't be Queen for much longer."

Gabrielle reached out and held back the fuming Captain. "What do you mean, Zelei?" Her voice was demanding and cold. "Is there a problem?"

"Yes, you!" The Amazon spat out. "I'm going to do something that should have been done for a long time ago."

"And that is?"

Zelei pulled out a dagger and threw it at the floor where it embedded itself only inches away from Gabrielle's foot.

"I hereby challenge you for the right of Queen. Meet me at the practice field in two hours and if you don't, I'll see that as a surrendering of your authority as will the Amazon Nation."

Zelei's eyes narrowed, "And if you do show up, it'll be a fight to the death. Don't expect anything else, *I've* no scruples when it comes to killing."

Gabrielle's green eyes locked onto the Amazon's brown. "I'll be there, Zelei and now get the Tartarus out of here before I let Callias throw you out with your head first."

The Captain took a step forward, but Zelei raised her hands in contempt. "Don't worry, I'll leave now, after all, I wouldn't want to spoil your last moments together, and I mean last."

She walked out and closed the door behind her. Then they heard her shout from outside, "Two hours, Gabrielle, I hope you enjoy!"

Gabrielle slumped down on the bed, an overwhelming sense of tiredness settling heavily in her body.

"Gods, how I don't need this right now."

She gave the worried soldier a faint smile, "At least she had the courtesy to let me sleep a few hours before barging in here."

"My Queen... I don't know what to say."

"It's Gabrielle in private, remember? And you don't have to say anything." She patted the bed and Callias sat down beside her. "We both know that I can't decline the challenge, I won't decline. Zelei as Queen would be just as bad as..." She stopped herself, not wanting to relive that particular memory.

"But, Gabrielle, she will try to kill you. I know Zelei and she's not kidding. She will kill you!"

"Only if she defeats me." The Queen smiled weakly, "As the challenged, I've the right to choose weapons and I've seen her fight with a staff, I'm better than she is."

"A staff? You want to fight with a staff?" The Captain said incredulously.

"It's the only weapon I know how to use."

They were silent for a long time.

"You could appoint a Champion..."

Gabrielle looked away for a moment, "I already have, but she's not here."

"I see... Then you have to fight for yourself."

Gabrielle nodded, "I know, the Queen can only appoint a new Champion if her present one dies or freely renounces the privilege."

"Perhaps if Zelei would be willing to wait, we could send a messenger and-."

"No, Callias, we both know Zelei won't agree to that and even if she did... I have to do this on my own."

"Gabrielle," the Captain looked at her with solemn blue eyes, "I swear, if...if she kills you, I'll challenge her the moment you've drawn your last breath."

Gabrielle took the Amazon's hand, "Callias, I-."

"I mean it, Gabrielle," she interrupted, "either she will die or I."

"If you do challenge her, I want you to promise me one thing."

"Anything."

Gabrielle looked into the soldier's eyes, "Promise me you'll challenge her for the Nation, not for me. I don't want your death on my conscience too."

"But-."

"Promise me."

Callias placed a gentle kiss on the Queen's hand.

"I promise."

*"Get down from there!"*

*The warrior scrambled down from his horse, almost losing his balance when his feet hit the ground. He swallowed nervously as the dark man stepped closer and stopped only inches away.*

*"Did you deliver my message?"*

*The warrior nodded, "Yes, sir."*

*"And?"*

*The messenger swallowed again, but the lump in his throat didn't want to go away.*

*"They refused."*

*Black eyes narrowed, "Refused?"*

*"Yes, they said they would rather die than surrender."*

*"Really..." A hand smoothed out a black eyebrow. "Did you tell them what would happen if they didn't"*

*"Yes, yes I did, sir. But I don't think they believed me."*

*"Is that so..."*

*The dark man turned to the man standing on his left, "Orestes, get the prisoners."*

*The warrior nodded and disappeared in direction of the cages. The messenger wondered whether he was allowed to leave, but one look at the dark eyes told him he was not. The sound of hooves caused the two men to turn and their gazes followed the fast approaching rider. The black horse came to an abrupt halt before them. The rider looked at the messenger, "Ageon, leave us."*

*"Yes, Princess!"*

*The man hurried away, and in spite of his burning curiosity didn't dare look back.*

*The woman on the horse and the man on the ground, eyed each other intensely.*

*"What do you think you're doing, Lykeas?"*

*"I'm going to make them surrender."*

*"By using the prisoners?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Didn't I tell you no?"*

*The dark warrior only shrugged and blue eyes turned colder.*

*"I won't tolerate disobedience."*

*"I thought you might change your mind. Hades knows you've done that a lot lately."*

*"Sir...?"*

*They both turned to look at Orestes.*

*"The prisoners..." The warrior faltered when he saw the look in the blue eyes. "The prisoners have been prepared."*

*"Take them back."*

*"But, Lykeas said-."*

*"Take them back!"*

*"Yes, Princess!" The man left immediately.*

*The two warriors stared at each other in silence. The wind brought with it the smell of smoke, horses and blood, and distant shouting and laughter could be heard blending in with occasional screams of pain, but neither paid it any attention.*

*"I don't understand you, Xena. What is it you want?"*

*She didn't answer.*

*"What's wrong with you? It's like I don't know you anymore. What the fuck's going on in your head?"*

*"Xena?"*

*Xena?*

*"Xena?"*

Her eyes snapped open and she shook her head to clear her mind.

"Where did you go?"

She shifted in the saddle and looked at Lykeas riding beside her.

"Did you fall asleep?"

She gave him a sheepish grin, "I think so. Gods, I can't remember the last time, I fell asleep in the saddle."

"You really *are* getting old."

"Watch it, Lykeas. I can still take you on any day."

He returned her grin, "Only you, Xena. Only you."

He dug his heels into Rarjan and the horse galloped forward to catch up with Alexias who was riding further down the road. Xena took out a water skin and poured some of the water over her head, she didn't want to risk falling asleep again.

"Are you coming?"

Lykeas had turned in the saddle and was looking back at her.

Without answering, she ushered Argo forward and joined the men ahead.

In spite of the practice field being surrounded by people it was eerily quiet, not even whispering was heard and all eyes were on the path leading to the village. Suddenly, like one being, the crowd parted to make room for their Queen as she approached the field, casually holding a staff in her right hand. Small smiles of encouragement followed her on the way, but nobody spoke and the silence seemed even thicker than before. Gabrielle's eyes met Callias' for just a second and she gave the Captain a reassuring smile. The Captain tried to return it, but failed miserably. Zelei was waiting impatiently on the field, a malicious smirk on her face. She had been informed of the Queen's choice of weapon and was holding her own staff in a tight grip. It wasn't her preferred weapon, nor was it the best weapon for a quick kill, but she had no doubt she'd find a way to end this soon. The Queen seemed to inspire that in her. Gabrielle walked out on the field, but stopped a few yards away from Zelei and turned to face her people.

"Amazons, today I was challenged for the right of Queen by Zelei and I've accepted the challenge. I don't have to tell you about the rules of this ritual or the consequences if I lose."

She paused, trying to find a way to express her feelings.

"No matter what happens today, I want you all to know how proud I am of having been able to call myself your Queen. Your courage, strength and love have made me a stronger and better person and for that I'll be eternally grateful. You accepted a stranger, a simple village girl as your Queen and offered your support, help and guidance whenever I was faced with problems or challenges...including getting into this." She gestured at her Amazon attire.

Her last remark, earned her several warm smiles and Gabrielle smiled in return. She wanted to say something more, but couldn't find the words, so instead she looked at Erinya who nodded and walked out on the field.

"This is a fight for the right of Queen. It will continue till one of the participants have either surrendered, is incapable of fighting or have been killed. The chosen weapon is the staff and no other weapons may be used, nor may any other person interfere or assist in the fight, and the result cannot be disputed. The victor will be acknowledged as Queen of the Amazons."

She turned to look at first Gabrielle then Zelei.

"Are you both ready?"

They nodded.

"Very well then. Let the fight begin!"

Slowly the two combatants began circling each other. Gabrielle trusted her skills with the staff, but she was worried about Zelei's greater strength and endurance. She wasn't sure whether the Amazon wanted to end the fight as fast as possible or have a little fun playing with her. A powerful blow forced her to take a few steps back.

*I guess that answers the question.*

Zelei pressed her advantage and delivered a hit to Gabrielle's knee. She managed to

bring her staff down and block, but the force of the blow made her own staff slam against her leg and she cried out in pain. Zelei moved a few feet back and regarded her coldly.

"It's not too late to give up."

Gabrielle gave her a challenging smile.

"That goes either way."

The Captain's eyes narrowed and she charged again, this time going after the Queen's head. Gabrielle ducked and thrust the tip of her staff into Zelei's stomach. The Amazon groaned and staggered, but didn't halt her attack. She aimed at Gabrielle's head again, but as the bard brought her staff up, she changed direction and hit her hard in the chest.

*God dammit, Gabrielle! You saw that coming a mile away, why didn't you block it?*

She didn't have time to speculate as Zelei ducked under her staff and went for the kill. The bard barely succeeded in getting out of the way, and both felt and heard the staff as it passed only inches from her throat.

*She wants to smash my windpipe.*

Already the staff was getting heavy and Gabrielle's skin was glistening with sweat, and she knew she had to stop being on the receiving end. The continuous blocking of the Amazon's blows were tiring her too fast, and preventing her from finding her own rhythm. At the next blow, instead of blocking, she moved swiftly to the left and for a second, the Amazon's entire right side was unprotected. Again she delivered a direct hit to Zelei's stomach and this time all the air was knocked out of the Amazon. Gabrielle followed up with a blow to the Captain's left hand and Zelei momentarily had to let go of the staff. However, within seconds she had recovered and the brown eyes darkened dangerously. She ran forward and, before the bard managed to react, used her superior weight to bring them both to the ground. The Amazon's body landed heavily on Gabrielle and she heard her right wrist crack as it was caught between her back and the ground. Tears of pain came to her eyes and then she felt Zelei's hands close around her throat.

"You should have given up when you had the chance, Gabrielle." The Captain hissed, "There'll be no mercy now."

The pressure increased and the bard began struggling for breath.

"Why didn't you choose another weapon? A sword would've been so much faster."

*I don't wanna die. Not like this.*

Her vision blackened and her lungs burned.

*No!*

She wrestled her left arm, which had been trapped between their bodies, free and with all her strength plunged her fingers into Zelei's right eye. The Amazon screamed and immediately let go of her throat to cover her eye with her hands. Gabrielle pushed the

Captain's writhing body away and got to her feet. She swayed for a moment as the world began to spin, but managed to keep her balance. Zelei was rolling around on the ground, still covering her eye with her hands. Without a second thought, Gabrielle grabbed the staff in her left hand and stepped over to the Amazon. She planted her foot solidly on the Captain's windpipe and Zelei's body went still.

"Do you surrender!"

The Amazon's face was contorted in hatred and pain.

"Do you surrender!"

Gabrielle pressed down harder on her throat and Zelei's eyes bulged.

"Do you surrender!"

Still the Amazon didn't reply.

*She doesn't think I'll kill her.*

The Captain's well eye stared defiantly at her.

*And she's right.*

Gabrielle unconsciously ceased some of the pressure and a smile began to form on Zelei's lips.

*But I have to end this...*

She swung her staff and delivered a direct hit against the Amazon's temple, knocking her unconscious. The last of her strength left her body and Gabrielle fell down on her knees. Far, far away, she heard the cheering cries of her subjects. She dimly saw Kelifé rush to Zelei's side and barely acknowledged Erinya declaring the fight to be over with her as the victor. The only sensation she managed to focus on was the strong arms of Callias, as the Captain lifted her up and carried her back to the village.

## CHAPTER XVIII

"Want more?"

"Nah, I'm full."

"Alexias?"

"No, thank you, I can't eat another bite."

Xena smiled to herself as she reached out and took the last piece of meat, she wasn't used to be the one who ate the most.

They had camped away from the road, taking cover behind a particularly nasty hawthorn thicket, and Lykeas had complained for twenty minutes about the thorns, which seemed to have been extra bend on getting themselves stuck into exactly his body. Needless to say, Xena had found the entire thing hilarious that is, till her hair was caught on a branch. However, the entire episode had helped to break the ice and Alexias was visible more at ease with the warriors, and had begun to actually talk to

them.

"Are we gonna keep watch?"

Xena looked up from the meat at the Prince, "Yeah, I'll take the first couple of hours and Lykeas will take the rest."

"What about me?" The indignant tone was not to be mistaken.

"Don't worry, Alexias. You'll get your share of watches. Just not tonight, okay?"

The Prince relented and moved closer to the fire. To be honest he was tired, and he knew that Xena must have been able to see it on his face. They had been travelling fast all day, hardly taking time to rest and he wasn't used to that. It was only a couple of months ago, he'd managed to talk his father out of having Charmides accompany him whenever he went hunting or riding. Alexias prided himself of his skills as both rider and swordsman, and he'd also had the opportunity to prove himself on a few occasions, but he knew his experiences didn't even come close to what the two warriors across him had been subjected to. Like everybody in Greece, he'd heard the stories of the Warrior Princess and he was dying to ask her about it, but somehow he knew it would be a bad idea. He also had to admit to himself that he was fascinated by the dark man, who'd rescued his life. It was obvious Lykeas and Xena were old friends and he couldn't help but wonder about the nature of the relationship they shared or had shared in the past. Had Lykeas been one of her men? A soldier in her army? A lover...? Had they been friends even then, and if, how had he reacted when she began to change and ultimately left? These were questions he would like to ask as well, but again he sensed he'd overstep invisible boundaries. Besides they didn't really know each other that well yet, but perhaps some day he would find the courage to ask and perhaps, just perhaps, they would answer.

He raised his gaze from the fire and noticed that they were both looking at him with slightly amused expressions. He could feel himself blush and he thanked the Gods for the darkness. They would never see him as anything but a boy if he kept blushing every other minute. Both Lykeas and Xena noticed the blush, but neither mentioned it, Xena finding it rather cute while Lykeas wasn't sure he wanted to know the reason.

"You're better known in these parts than we are. When do you think we'll reach King Simmias' kingdom?"

Alexias took a sip of water before looking at Lykeas, "Well, if we keep up the pace, I'd think we should get there in two, maybe two and a half days."

"Will we be travelling through your father's territory the entire way?"

"Yes, well sort of. There's a small piece of land between the two kingdoms that officially has no owner, but it's only a mile or so."

"And unofficially?" Lykeas absently traced a long scratch on his left arm with his finger.

Alexias smiled, "The area is known for it's exquisite yellow roses and since King Simmias loves roses..."

"So there's never been any trouble between your kingdoms?" Xena inquired.

The Prince's smile vanished, "No, we've never had any quarrels with Simmias, but..."

"Yes?"

"King Kassander has on more than one occasion violated both ours and Simmias' borders. Of course he has a perfect excuse every time and always retreats willingly."

"But?"

The young man shrugged, "But both father and I think Kassander's only waiting for an opportunity to attack. These provocations are meant to test us and see how far we're prepared to let him go. I suppose he wants it to look like we made the first move so if a war starts, he'll appear to be the one's been wronged and consequently justified to invade."

"So you've never been engaged in an actual conflict with Kassander?" Lykeas asked, inwardly deciding that King Kassander was a man he could relate to.

Alexias was silent for a long time and Xena exchanged a quick glance with Lykeas, then the Prince spoke again, his voice loaded with emotion, but which exactly was impossible to distinguish.

"He murdered my brothers."

Xena looked at the young man in surprise and Lykeas did a fairly good imitation of a raised eyebrow. However, before they managed to ask any questions Alexias continued, this time his voice was unmistakably harsh.

"Of course, nobody's willing to say it out loud, but I know...I know he had them killed."

He paused, but then spoke again, almost stumbling over the words, "Three years ago my brothers were out hunting close to the border between Simmias' and Kassander's kingdoms. Simmias has no children and he has always allowed us to use his hunting grounds whenever we wanted to, as long as we didn't step on his flowers."

A pale smile followed the last remark, then faded. "When Polyidos and Natolemos didn't return when they were supposed to, Simmias sent out a search party... My brothers had been beaten to death and then hung up in a tree. Kassander later claimed that a warlord had crossed his territories and must have been the one responsible, but we never heard or saw anything of any warlord."

"I'm sorry," Xena said quietly. "I know how it is to lose a brother."

She fiddled with her chakram for a few seconds, before getting up, "I'll go check the perimeter."

"Why would Kassander have your brothers killed?" Lykeas' voice portrayed genuine curiosity.

The Prince looked into the fire, "I...I don't know. That's why nobody believes me, they don't see a motive."

"Hmm..."

Lykeas studied Alexias until the young man looked up and met his eyes.

"What?"

Lykeas held his gaze for a while then leaned back down on the bedroll, an intrigued smile playing on his lips.

"Nothing... Just wondering."

"It's healing nicely, my Queen."

Kelifé wrapped a fresh bandage around Gabrielle's wrist, "Don't strain it too much or try not to use it at all, and it should be fine in a week or two."

She finished wrapping and leaned closer to take a look at the Queen's throat.

"Any problems swallowing?"

"No," Gabrielle shook her head.

"Speaking?"

"It takes more than that to stop Gabr... I mean, Her Majesty speaking." Callias smirked and promptly received a slap on her thigh.

"Hey!"

Gabrielle smiled innocently before turning her attention back to Kelifé, "I haven't had any problems with my throat, Zelei didn't manage to do any real damage."

"That's only because you stopped her before she got the chance," The Captain muttered under her breath, but Gabrielle heard her anyway.

"Exactly, Callias. I stopped her." She smiled at the soldier. "Don't forget that."

The healer waited patiently for the moment to pass before clearing her throat, "Okay, Callias lay down." She gestured to the pallet beside her.

The Captain frowned, "Why, I wasn't in a fight."

"No," Kelifé replied, patting the pallet, "but I need to check your stitches. I want to make sure you didn't tear any while carrying the Queen the other day. And speaking of that, didn't I tell you not to do anything strenuous till after I had removed the stitches?"

"Well, " Callias reluctantly lay down on the pallet, a small grin on her face, "if I'd known Her Majesty would be *that* heavy, I might have thought twice about it."

"Hah, hah. I glad you both find that so amusing," Gabrielle said, giving the two smiling faces a stern look. "If you're not careful, I may issue a law where I'm to be carried around all the time, and guess who'll get the honour?"

The healer only smiled and lifted up Callias' tunic to look at her wound. Gabrielle noticed a faint blush on the Captain's cheeks and casually looked away to study the wall of the hut instead. The wall was covered by small bundles of herbs and dried

flowers. The herbs drying to be used later for medicine and the flowers used to freshen the air, and drive out the smell of death that still seemed to linger in the healer's hut. Gabrielle shuddered at the memory of the last time she'd been there. It had been the second day after the battle and she had just arrived after a few hours of sleep to resume her work, when Kelifé had stopped her at the door. There had been no use for her help, none of the wounded had survived the night. Gabrielle shook her head, the image of the dead Amazons in the hut was something she'd never forget. She wondered how Kelifé dealt with it.

"Okay, they look fine, but no more carrying around Queens, is that clear?"

Callias grinned, "I promise."

The healer gave the Captain a meaningful look, "Yeah right."

Gabrielle wasn't quite sure how she should perceive Kelifé's remark and decided to change the subject.

"Kelifé...about Zelei?"

"Yes," the healer absently replied while washing her hands in a bowl, "what about her?"

"How is she doing?"

"Oh," Kelifé sighed, "she's fine. She's a pain in the arse and never listens to my advise, but else she's doing just fine."

"I'm shocked, Kelifé," Callias grinned, "I thought you loved all your patients."

"Well, believe me when I say that some of them are more loveable than others... Okay, get out of here so I can get back to my herbs."

She ushered her patients outside, but then just before they were about to leave, put a hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

"My Queen, there's a possibility that Zelei will never regain her sight on the right eye."

Gabrielle's face paled, "But you said-."

"I said she's fine and she is, but I don't think her eyesight will return." The healer gave the Queen's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I'm telling you this because I've already informed Zelei, and I didn't want you to be unprepared if she...well, we all know what she can be like."

Gabrielle swallowed and looked down for a moment, before raising her head and looking the healer straight in the eye, "I had no choice, Kelifé. I know, what you as a healer must think, but if I had to do it all over again, I would."

"Oh no, my Queen, you misunderstand me. I'm not blaming you or anything. Actually, strictly between you and me," she leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "I think she's had it coming for years."

Gabrielle's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again.

"Oh," she finally managed to say, but by then Kelife had already gone back inside, the thin straw wall only slightly muffling her melodic laughter.

"Close your mouth, Gabrielle," Callias grinned and began to lead her Queen away, "you'll attract flies."

"Your Majesty!"

They stopped and turned to see Areia approach them, two scrolls under her arm. She bowed for the Queen and gave her Captain a small nod before handing over the scrolls.

"A man reached our border today. He said he was sent out by King Polyidos four days ago to deliver these scrolls to the Queen of the Amazons."

"Where's the man now?"

"I take it he's on his way back, my Queen. Apparently, he wasn't expected to bring back a reply."

"Polyidos," Callias thought out loud, "isn't his kingdom somewhere North from here?"

"Yes," Gabrielle replied, looking intensely at the scrolls in her hands. "Xena said they'd have to pass it to get through to Ister."

"I see. You may go, Areia."

The Amazon saluted and headed back towards the forest. Callias regarded the Queen questioningly, who still hadn't made any attempt to open the scrolls.

"Aren't you going to read them?"

The Queen didn't respond.

"Gabrielle...?"

"Oh, sorry. I was thinking about something."

She unrolled the largest scroll and quickly read the text, before giving it to Callias.

"It seems that everything's going according to plan," the Captain said after a few minutes and returned the scroll. "It's nice of them to keep us informed, I didn't think they'd do that."

"No, neither did I." The green eyes were distant.

Callias looked thoughtfully at the smaller scroll and bit her lip, "Well, I'd better get going. I got some things to do."

Gabrielle gave her a somewhat poignant smile, "I'll see you later then."

The Captain nodded and swiftly walked away. The Queen lingered for a moment before slowly making her way back to the Royal hut. Inside she sat down on the bed and for a while just looked at the scroll in her hand. Then, without conscious thought,

she took a deep breath and unrolled the parchment.

*I hereby renounce all privileges and duties as Champion of the present Amazon Queen, Gabrielle of Poteidaia.*

*I no longer feel capable of providing the protection and support that is required when holding such a position, and have therefore no other choice but to take the consequences and retire.*

*I do this freely and have neither been pressured nor influenced to do so by a third party.*

*As my successor I recommend, Callias, Captain of the Royal Guard, who through her courage and loyalty have shown herself more than worthy for the post.*

*From the moment this document has been delivered to the Queen, I consider my responsibilities as Champion to be over.*

*Xena of Amphipolis.*

Night had fallen and the first stars appeared, before the Queen moved from the bed and walked outside.

"Whoa, Argo!"

In the last minute the horse managed to stop just before it would have run down a man walking on the road. They had just rounded a corner and out of nowhere an elderly man had appeared, walking in the middle of the road, oblivious to everything around him. Lykeas had some difficulties in getting Rarjan to stand still, the sudden halt having frightened the horse, and Rarjan danced nervously before slowly calming down.

"What in Tartarus do you think you're doing? You could have gotten yourself killed or worse, injured my horse." Xena's voice was harsh and it was clear she didn't really give a damn if the man had been hurt, but that Argo's faith was an entirely different matter.

The man was dressed in a perfectly white tunic and sandals. He looked up at her with blue-grey eyes that shone almost as much as his bald head in the afternoon sun. He gave her a warm and friendly smile and pointed at a white flower lying on the dusty road.

"I lost her, the wind took her right out of my hand." He bent down and tenderly picked up the flower, "I'm so glad I found you again," he whispered affectionately, before putting it into a small pouch hanging from his belt.

"Look, sir, I'm sure-." But before Xena could finish her sentence, Alexias had jumped down from his horse and enveloped the man into a warm embrace.

"My Lord, it's so nice to see you again."

Xena stared at Lykeas who only shrugged.

"Ah, Alexias, my dear boy. It's nice to see you too. What have you been up to lately?"

It's been so long since you last came for a visit."

The Prince moved away from the embrace, but kept his hands on the man's upper arms. "I know, sir. I've been busy with my studies and training," he noticed the puzzled looks from the two warriors, still on their horses. "But where are my manners, My Lord, may I introduce you to two of the finest warriors I've ever met, Xena and Lykeas and this," he gestured towards the little man, "this is His Majesty King Simmias IV."

The King gave them a dazzling smile, "It's so very nice to meet you. You're friends of Alexias?"

Before the warriors could respond, the Prince cut in, "They saved my life, sir. If it hadn't been for them I'd have been dead."

The smiling expression on the King's face disappeared and was replaced by one of sorrow. He put his own hands on Alexias' and looked intensely at the young man, "I'm so glad you didn't die, I don't think I could've taken it, if you'd be gone too."

His sorrowful look vanished as quickly as it had appeared and he gave the two warriors another brilliant smile. "Let's get going, I'm late already and Phil will be worried."

He began walking down the road humming for himself, occasionally stopping to pick up a flower or study a colourful stone. Lykeas looked at Alexias as the Prince returned to the saddle.

"That's King Simmias?"

The young man nodded, "Yes, got a problem with that?" His voice was slightly defensive.

Lykeas looked down the road a huge grin on his face, "Nope, can't say that I have."

He urged Rarjan forward and quickly caught up with the King. Alexias glanced at Xena, but the warrior was lost in thought as she stared at the retreating back of Simmias. Then she turned to look at the Prince.

"Is Queen Phillinna by any chance like her husband?"

Alexias gave her a reassuring smile, "No, they are quite different."

"Ah, good."

They joined the men ahead of them and began the slow journey to Simmias castle, constantly being delayed by an enthusiastic King searching for flowers in the ditch along the road or running off somewhere, chasing butterflies. Soon Xena was at the end of her tether and her mood wasn't improved by the fact that Lykeas found the entire thing highly amusing, and even, much to Simmias' delight, pointed out several flowers that the King might find interesting. Finally she shot him a look that if possible would have killed him right on the spot. Lykeas only gave her a pleasant smile in return and else ignored her for the rest of the trip. It was late evening before they reached the castle, and they were met in the courtyard by a servant, who gently but firmly, took the King by the arm and led him away. Another servant showed them

to their quarters and announced that Queen Phillinna had asked the two warriors to join her in the garden later for tea, and until then, dinner would be brought to their rooms. After the meal, Alexias excused himself and went out in search of an old friend, and Xena and Lykeas found themselves alone in the room.

"I wonder what Phillinna's like?"

Xena let out a long breath, "Me too, Lykeas. Me too."

And then they both broke down laughing.

## CHAPTER XIX

A warm spicy, intoxicating scent lingered in the air and Xena paused for a moment, trying to pin down what it was. It was roses, no doubt about it. The sweet scent had reached her nostrils even before she'd entered the garden, but there was something else as well. Something...comforting. She frowned, not sure where that had come from, but it was true. The scent was full of the last warm rays of the evening sun, it whispered of days long gone and spoke of joys yet to come.

*Okay, get a grip, girl!*

The warrior shook her head, deciding she'd been out in the sun too long. She followed the path between the green hedges towering over her, feeling like she was entering another world. The path circled and turned constantly and when once she looked back, the castle had disappeared from her view. The gravel under her feet and the voice of a single bird singing was all she heard, and for just a second, she felt very alone. Then she rounded another corner and the path opened up and came to a halt in a round circle of grass. She noticed other paths ending and leading away from the circle as well, and wondered briefly where they led, before focusing on the woman, sitting on a white bench in the centre of the circle. The woman was dressed in a simple white dress with elegantly woven patterns around sleeves and neck. Her long blond hair hung loosely down her back, making a golden contrast to her pale skin. She looked up from the book she was reading, and dark green eyes found blue. A slow smile spread on her face and she gestured for the warrior to come nearer. Xena, suddenly feeling very self-consciousness, tentatively stepped closer. The green grass was soft under her feet and she didn't make a sound as she closed the distance and sat down on the edge of the bench. The smile hadn't left the woman's face as she reached out touch the warrior's arm.

"I'm so glad you could join me."

The simple touch on her arm, sent a wave of electricity through Xena's body, and it was a while before she could answer.

"We have things to discuss." To her surprise her voice sounded hoarse, and she cleared her throat, before continuing. "We have a message from King Polyidos."

The woman leaned back and gracefully crossed her legs, and Xena noticed for the first time that the Queen wasn't wearing any sandals, the pale skin seeming even whiter against the grass.

"I know." She spoke softly and looked at the warrior patiently. Xena mentally slapped her head and gave the scroll to the Queen. Phillinna read it in silence, her face

showing no emotion, except a small nibbling on her lower lip, which Xena found almost too endearing. When finished, she folded the scroll again and put it down on the grass.

"I take it, we're expecting another guest as well."

"Guest? Oh yeah, Lykeas should be here any minute."

Xena found she couldn't hold the Queen's gaze and let her eyes roam the hedges surrounding them, efficiently shielding them from prying eyes and ears. The sun had partly disappeared behind the high walls of green and the circle of grass was bathed in a glowing red light.

"Are we far from the castle?" Xena heard herself inquire.

"No, but the garden's been designed the way that the castle isn't visible from here." The Queen smiled, "Sometimes it's nice to get away without really being away."

The warrior kept staring at the various paths leading away, keenly aware of the Queen's eyes on her.

"Thank you for escorting Simmias home."

Xena turned to look at the woman, her brow furrowed. "Your Majesty, I mean no disrespect, but I think it's a tad irresponsible of you to let your husband run around alone outside the castle," she hesitated slightly.

With a gentle nod the Queen urged her to continue.

"His Majesty seems to be a...a kind and caring man, and I wouldn't want any harm to come to him."

Almost imperceptibly Phillinna's features mellowed and her eyes took on a faraway look.

"You're right, my husband is a kind and caring man, and I wouldn't want anything bad for him to happen either, but..." She smiled and green eyes focused on the warrior, "I want him to be happy also and nothing makes him happier than searching the countryside for flowers."

Xena nodded, "I understand that, Your Majesty, but you shouldn't let him leave unescorted."

"Ah, but he isn't or usually he isn't." She gave the warrior another smile, "Simmias sneaked out before dawn this morning, and we'd been searching for him all day when you brought him back."

A question burned on Xena's tongue, but she wasn't sure if she should phrase it. The Queen raised an eyebrow and silently asked a question of her own.

The warrior smiled a bit sheepishly, "I was wondering how... I mean, what does the people of this kingdom think about King Simmias and his...little hobby?"

"Xena," a warm shiver ran down the warrior's back when she heard her name spoken from the pink lips, "my husband has been King for almost forty-five years and in all

that time, people have never spoken one bad word against him. They know he loves them and that he cares about their sorrows and joys, so at the end of the day, it doesn't matter whether he talks to his roses or not."

Xena thought she could see the trace of sad smile on the Queen's face, but then it was gone.

"Has he...has he always been like that?"

"As long as I've known him."

The warrior studied the woman beside her. She didn't seem to be much older than her late thirties, and after Xena's impression of the King that would make her almost thirty years younger than her husband.

As if guessing her thoughts Phillinna said, "I'm his second wife, his first wife, my sister, died ten years ago."

"Your sister?" Xena arched an eyebrow.

"Yes, my sister." This time a sad smile was clearly visible on the pale features. "Esther was a frail woman, but Simmias loved her very much. When she became ill and the healers said nothing could be done, she made me promise to look after him. She was afraid he'd fall apart without her."

"Yes, but marry him?" Xena couldn't help but think that that was quite a request Phillinna's sister had made. "Did you love him?" The blunt question was out before the warrior could stop herself.

"He's a sweet man and he loves me dearly. What more could I ask for?"

Xena found there were several things she could think of asking for, but remained silent. She looked at the Queen, but noticed the green eyes had gone past her and was looking at something behind her. Embraced by, and almost hidden in the fast expanding shadows was Lykeas.

"Come sit down."

Lykeas stepped forward then hesitated for a moment before sitting down on the grass in front of them.

"Will you be comfortable there?" Phillinna asked. "I can have a chair brought?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

The Queen let her eyes rest on one, then another warrior, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

Then her posture changed and she suddenly seemed both taller and more authoritative.

"So, what are your plans?"

"That depends on what you can tell us?" Lykeas cut in before Xena had the chance to speak.

The blond woman's countenance softened and she smiled at him. "Why don't you ask

and I'll do my best to answer. Then afterwards we can discuss any further plans."

"Okay," Lykeas replied, throwing a quick glance at Xena before looking back at the Queen. "The men in brown uniforms, have you seen them?"

"Yes, not personally though, but I've heard several rumours of large bands of men crossing the kingdom, all dressed in brown uniforms."

"Have you had any trouble with them," Xena inquired, deciding it was time for her join in.

"No, they have always avoided the populated areas. It seemed like they were only intend on crossing the territory."

"They headed North?" Both warriors asked at the same time, and the Queen gave them an amused smile, before turning serious again.

"Yes, they all headed toward the border between our and King Kassander's kingdom."

"So they left your territory and entered Kassander's?"

Phillinna nodded, "Yes."

This time, Xena was faster than Lykeas, "Have you heard anything about this from Kassander?"

"No," the Queen's face was very serious now, "and that worries me. Kassander's not the kind of man, who'd allow a warlord in his kingdom not even if they only meant to cross it."

"My impression exactly." Xena looked at Lykeas and he nodded his agreement, but before he could speak, a servant appeared from one of the paths, carrying a tray with three steaming cups. He bowed for the Queen and left the tray on the bench between the women, before disappearing down another path than the one he'd come from.

"Ah, tea." Phillinna took a small sip from her cup and closed her eyes. "Delicious."

The warriors did the same, and even Lykeas, who wasn't too fond of tea, had to admit that the sweet, almost fruity taste was quite becoming. They drank their tea in a comfortable silence, both warriors noticing, but not responding to the sometimes curious, sometimes pondering looks from the blond woman. After a while, Phillinna put her cup back down on the tray, and relaxed back against the bench.

"So, now you know all I do. What are your plans?"

"I think we should take a little look around Kassander's kingdom, probably check out the castle as well."

"Yes," Lykeas agreed, "I think so too. Alexias and I will leave tomorrow."

"What?" Xena drawled, looking at him, "What do you mean, you and Alexias will leave? What makes you think I'm gonna stay here?"

The dark man looked into her eyes, "Xena, you can't travel through Kassander's kingdom without being detected and subsequently hunted down. Our best chance to

learn if the King's up to something or not, is for us to come and go as quiet as possible, and we both know that he still has a price on your head." He held out a hand to stop her from arguing, "You would be noticed, Kassander's neither a forgiving nor forgetting man."

He got to his feet and gave a small nod to the Queen, "I'll inform Alexias of our plans."

He turned to leave, but hesitated and gave Phillinna an embarrassed look.

"That way," she smiled and indicated a path, "it'll take you directly to the wing where the guest chambers are."

"Goodnight, Xena."

The warrior in question growled something unintelligible in return, and Lykeas left, a small grin on his face. The Queen hid an amused smile and straightened out a fold in her dress. She let her hand rest on the smooth fabric for a moment before looking back at the warrior.

"Can I ask you something?"

Xena tensed before leaning back, an almost defensive expression on her face that wasn't lost on the Queen.

"Sure."

Phillinna gave the warrior a faint smile as if to reassure her that she didn't bite.

"It's just, when I heard who'd arrived I was surprised."

Brows furrowed, "Why?"

"I always thought...well, after what I've heard, I thought you travelled with a bard and not another warrior. I mean, with all those stories about your deeds, I was certain that a bard had to be following you around."

The blue eyes studied the Queen for a long time, and for the first time in her life, the Queen suddenly felt the need to shift in her seat and look away, but she valiantly returned the gaze without blinking. Then the warrior ended the contact, and to Phillinna it felt like an almost physical connection between them had been broken.

"A bard did use to travel with me, but not anymore."

"Oh," the Queen tried to see Xena's face, but the warrior refused to look up.

"What happened?"

Silence, then Xena slowly looked up and gave Phillinna a bittersweet smile.

"I happened."

She rose from the bench and without hesitation disappeared down one of the paths.

"I surrender, my Queen! I surrender!"

Gabrielle stepped away from the panting Amazon on the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Erinya. I guess I got carried away for a moment there."

"Uh huh," the weapons master grinned in spite of her sore ribs, "I'd say so too."

Gabrielle reached down with her left hand and pulled the Amazon to her feet, Erinya looking at her with admiration in the eyes.

"I knew you were good with the staff, my Queen. You proved that when you fought Zelei, but I didn't know you're also capable of fighting practically only using one hand."

The blond woman looked at her wrist still wrapped in a bandage and then at the weapons master, "I have many skills. Besides," she grinned, "Kelifé would kill me if I strained it."

Erinya rolled her eyes knowingly, "Tell me about it."

They left the practice field and returned to the village, stopping in front of the Amazon's hut.

"Are you going to have your ribs checked?" Gabrielle asked, when she noticed Erinya wince slightly.

"I think I'll wait and see. They don't feel too bad."

"You're afraid she's going to confine you to bed?" the Queen teased.

"Exactly," The Amazon replied. "Personally, I think Kelifé would prefer if she could all the warriors in this village to lie down on their backs and stay there."

An unbidden image came to Gabrielle's mind and she couldn't help but grin. Erinya looked at her blankly, then realization hit, "I didn't mean it quite the way it sounded," she blushed.

"I know," The Queen smiled and started to walk away, "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

The weapons master disappeared inside her hut and Gabrielle continued her walk through the quiet village. It was dark already and most of the Amazons had retired for the night, but the air was still warm and Gabrielle didn't feel like sleeping.

"Your Majesty?"

Gabrielle froze for a second, then turned.

"Yes, Zelei?"

The Captain was standing only a few feet away, a dark leather patch over her right eye, the left staring at her intensely. The Amazon stepped closer and Gabrielle instinctively tightened her grip around the staff. To her great surprise, Zelei kneeled down.

"I want to apologize, my Queen."

"For what, Zelei?" The distrust in the Queen's voice clear.

"For doubting you. You proved beyond doubt that you're the rightful ruler of the Nation."

She rose and looked into the green eyes. The sceptical look on Gabrielle's face didn't disappear, but nonetheless she reached out and briefly shook the Captain's hand.

"I'm glad you feel that way. I'm just sorry it had to come to this," she looked at the leather patch.

"Oh that," the Amazon nonchalantly replied, "I consider that a small memento of a great fight. A badge of honour you could say... Something I'll never forget."

Two green eyes focused on one pale brown, then Gabrielle nodded, "Goodnight, Captain."

"Goodnight, Your Majesty."

Lost in thought, she watched the Amazon disappear into the night.

"You can't trust her."

"I know," Gabrielle turned and smiled at the sight of Callias leaning against a hut, looking decidedly sleepy. "But I have to give her a chance, she deserves that and who knows, she may surprise us."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Callias stepped closer and came to stand beside the Queen. "Just be careful, okay?"

"I will."

The Captain stifled a yawn and Gabrielle smiled again, "Aren't we getting enough sleep, Captain?"

"Nah," the Amazon smirked, "the Queen keeps me awake all night." She suddenly blushed and looked around, "I mean, with talking...when you tell your stories, I don't mean-."

"I know what you mean, Callias. I know." Gabrielle laughed at the sight of the embarrassed soldier. "Don't worry, if anybody heard you, I'm sure they are all green with envy by now."

The Captain smiled, "You're probably right, every Amazon in this village would envy me."

"Oh no," Gabrielle said quietly, "I mean, they would envy *me*."

Callias opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Her eyes searched the Queen's face, confusion evident on her own. Gabrielle returned the gaze without wavering, her heart pounding furiously in her chest. She wasn't sure what she wanted to happen or not to happen, she was only aware of the small sting of disappointment she felt when the Captain turned to walk away.

"Callias..."

The Amazon stopped, but didn't turn around to face her.

"Yes?"

Gabrielle's mouth was suddenly dry and she had to moisten her tongue before continuing, "Please turn around."

"Why?"

"I...I want to see your face."

The Captain stood motionless for what felt like an eternity, then she resolutely turned around, the blue eyes surprisingly calm. Gabrielle searched the Amazon's face and found what she was looking for. She stepped a bit closer.

"Would you like to spend the night with me?"

Under other circumstances, Gabrielle would have been horrified by her frankness, but right now she didn't care. She knew Callias would never make the first move and she also knew that for some reason, she desperately didn't want to be alone tonight. The soldier swallowed and looked away, "I think you know the answer to that."

As response, Gabrielle reached out and Callias hesitantly took her hand. Without a word she led the Captain to her hut and they disappeared inside.

## CHAPTER XX

"Yep, they have definitely passed here."

Alexias dismounted and kneeled down beside Lykeas, "How many?"

"Hmm, too many for my liking."

Lykeas rose and studied their surroundings.

They were on small road cutting through a thick, dense forest, the trees so close it would be practically impossible to leave the road and take cover. It made Lykeas rather uncomfortable and edgy, but the road was the most direct route to Kassander's castle, and it was also the route the foreign warriors had taken, so they didn't really have a choice. They had left Simmias kingdom a couple of hours ago and had been travelling in Kassander's ever since. As Lykeas had expected, guards had been posted at the border, but they hadn't had any difficulties in avoiding them. Clearly they weren't expecting any trouble and were more busy playing dice and talking than looking out for strangers.

*Or perhaps, they've become used to strangers by now, with all those soldiers crossing the border.*

Lykeas looked ahead, the road seemed to go on forever and when he looked back, it was the same.

Alexias studied the dark warrior lost in thought in front of him. It had been an experience, to say the least, to travel with him. In the almost twelve hours they had been on the road, Lykeas had hardly said more than ten words. All attempts by Alexias to start a conversation had either been ignored or cut short by the warrior. Not

that Lykeas' behavior had been gruff or hostile, he'd just been...distant. Xena had been pretty much the same on their way to Simmias, and the Prince could clearly picture the roaring silence there must have been around any campfire that Xena and Lykeas had shared. The thought brought a smile to his lips and he decided to make it a challenge to himself to see, whether he could get Lykeas to have an actually conversation with him before they returned to Simmias. The dark warrior turned and noticed the smile on the young man's face. He frowned, but didn't say anything. Instead he got back in the saddle and waited for Alexias to do the same.

"It'll be dark soon. We'll keep moving until we find a place to make camp. If you see somewhere suitable say so."

"Yes, sir!" In spite of the annoyance the Prince felt about being ordered around, he couldn't help but grin at Lykeas' surprised expression.

The warrior looked at Alexias for a long time, then the first smile of the day showed on his face.

"Let's just get going, shall we?"

Almost two hours passed before the forest became less dense and they could, although with difficulty, leave the road to dive in between the trees, leading two less than enthusiastic horses behind them. They were all covered by scratches and spruce needles by the time they found an acceptable place to camp.

"Not much room." Alexias announced and looked around.

The clearing they had found was less than small, and already the horses took up so much space that there wouldn't been room for a fire and for them to sleep, at least not a the same time.

"Gotta take what we can get," Lykeas replied with a hint of annoyance in his voice.

"Oh, I'm not complaining." Alexias hurried to say.

"Good."

They removed the saddles from their horses and laid out the bedrolls. The Prince noticed they would be sleeping very close together that night, and somehow that made him feel both warm and cold inside. Lykeas sat down and rummaged through a saddlebag. With a sigh, he pulled out the dry meat he had brought with him from King Simmias, and handed some to Alexias who had come to sit down in front of him, their knees almost touching. They ate in silence since the Prince didn't know what, if anything, to say and Lykeas seemed to be quite content with not saying anything at all.

"Want something to drink?" The warrior suddenly asked, almost startling the young man.

"Oh no, I'm fine."

Lykeas shrugged and took a sip from the water skin himself, before lying down on the bedroll. Alexias hesitated, then did the same. They weren't exactly touching, but the Prince was sure he felt heat radiating from the man beside him.

"Will the horses be all right?"

Lykeas shifted to lie on his stomach, facing away from Alexias, "Yeah, they'll be fine. They'll go hungry tonight, but we'll make it up to them tomorrow."

He closed his eyes and let out a small sigh and it was clear to the young man that the warrior was about to fall asleep.

Lykeas managed to remain still with closed eyes for almost two minutes, before he gave up.

"Alexias, will you please stop staring at me. I can't sleep if you do that."

He turned his head to look at the Prince, who was indeed staring at him, a faint blush colouring his cheeks.

"Uh, sorry."

"Just go to sleep, okay?"

Alexias nodded and looked up at the sky instead, hands under his head. Lykeas made himself comfortable again and closed his eyes. He was tired and wanted to sleep. Although the journey that day hadn't been particularly exhausting, the lack of cover had made it impossible for him to relax and he'd been constantly on edge, never letting his senses rest.

"You're doing it again."

"Sorry."

Lykeas sighed and turned to look at the young man.

"What is it? Is there something you want to ask? Are you worried about being here?"

"No." Alexias replied, the brown eyes looking slightly nervous.

"Well, what is it?"

"I...I just like to look at you."

"Oh..." Lykeas' eyes darted away from the Prince's face. "Well don't. Not when I'm trying to sleep."

Then he resolutely resumed his former position, facing away.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Lykeas."

And the dark warrior could swear Alexias was smiling.

"I don't think I've ever seen so many roses before in my life."

The Queen smiled at the warrior's remark, "Simmias is nothing if not dedicated to his hobby."

They were walking down a narrow path, surrounded by red roses on both sides. The air was heavy with the sweet smelling flowers, and if it hadn't been for the light breeze, the scent would have been uncomfortable. The Queen was barefoot again and Xena had noticed that Phillinna hardly ever wore shoes or sandals. When she had asked why, the Queen had replied it kept her grounded to feel the earth under her feet.

"Phil! Phil! Come and see!"

Simmiias suddenly burst out from the bushes and was gesturing wildly for them to come nearer. When he was certain they had seen him, he disappeared back into the green and red ocean. Without the slightest hint of surprise Phillinna dived in between the bushes after her husband. Xena looked sceptically at the roses and especially the thorns for a moment, then she sighed and followed the Queen.

*It's not like I got anything else to do.*

To her surprise it only took her a few steps to walk through the bushes and she found herself at the edge of a wide lawn. A few yards in the King and Queen were looking at something on the ground.

*Do I really want to know what they're looking at?*

In spite of herself Xena walked out on the grass towards the eagerly gesturing Simmiias, and the patiently listening Phillinna.

*Gods! Why am I doing this?*

The Queen looked up when she heard the warrior approach, and gave Xena an inscrutable smile.

"Look, Xena. Simmiias has found a four-leaf clover."

*Lykeas, you're gonna pay for this!*

"Is that so?" She leaned down and tried to show a bit of enthusiasm for the King's discovery. Not that any more enthusiasm was needed, Simmiias had more than enough of that for all of them.

"Ah, isn't she a beauty, Phil? Isn't she?"

"Very beautiful, dear. You've found a real treasure this time."

The King beamed, but then his expression changed, "Oh, I have to see to the white roses. I didn't get to see them yesterday."

He turned and ran as fast as his legs could carry him and disappeared in between the bushes again. Phillinna looked after her husband with an affectionate smile, but Xena thought she could detect something else in the Queen's eyes as well. They resumed walking, this time toward the centre of the lawn where a small lake could be seen. Without any ceremony Phillinna sat down on the bank, close enough to the water for her feet to touch. Xena sat down beside her and after a moments hesitation pulled off her boots and lowered her feet down into the water.

"Are you bored, warrior?"

Xena turned to look at the blond woman, who'd lifted her face towards the sun, eyes closed.

"Is it that obvious."

The Queen chuckled, "Yes."

"I'm not really use to being inactive like this, I don't like it."

"No, I could imagine. You seem to have been on the move for most of your life."

"I guess."

Phillinna opened her eyes and studied the warrior.

"Where do you see yourself in ten years?"

"Oh," Xena looked surprised, "I don't know. I usually don't think that far ahead, I prefer to live one day at a time."

"In your line of business, I suppose that's a wise philosophy."

The warrior smiled, "Yeah, you could say so."

The Queen sighed and leaned back to lie down on the grass, "Sometimes I'd wish, I wasn't queen."

"Oh?"

"Don't get me wrong," Phillinna squinted up at the woman beside her, "I love being able to do something for people, I love making this kingdom a better place to be, but sometimes... I don't know, it's like something's missing."

Xena lay down beside her, "What do you think is missing?"

"I don't know...no, that's not true, I know what's missing in my life."

"Yes...?"

"Passion," the Queen looked directly at the warrior, "passion is what's missing in my life."

Xena looked into the green eyes for a long time, then she gave Phillinna a small smile, "I hope you find it one day."

An ambiguous smile briefly showed on the blond woman's face, then she looked away, "So do I, warrior. So do I."

Xena closed her eyes and relaxed against the grass. The feel of the sun on her skin and the warm water around her feet made her drift off, and it wasn't long before she was asleep, her dreams invaded by another blond woman with gentle green eyes.

Gabrielle ran a tired hand through her hair and looked at the healer.

"Eighty people?"

Kelifé nodded, "Yes, we still need eighty people to reach the same number as before the attack, but I've heard that Amazons from all over the nation have offered to come and live here."

"That's true," Gabrielle gestured towards the scrolls on the table. "The moment they receive an affirmative reply, they should be on their way."

"It'll be nice to have a full village again."

The Queen smiled at Kelifé, "I couldn't agree more. Okay, back to business. Callias, how many soldiers do you need for the Royal Guard?"

The Captain looked up from the piece of parchment she had been studying, "I need at least twenty-five warriors, preferably more, to fill out the vacant posts."

Gabrielle nodded, "I see. Zelei?"

"I need all the warriors I can get, my Queen. The regular army has been reduced to almost a third of its original size."

The council members fell silent for a moment, all remembering the lives who had been lost in the battle. Then the Queen cleared her throat, "Erinya, how is it going with the training? How soon will your pupils be ready?"

The weapons master bit her lip, "Three of them are almost ready to assume duty, but as for the rest I'm afraid it'll be at least two more months before they're qualified as warriors."

"Okay," Gabrielle gathered the scrolls on the table. "Erinya, continue your training as usual, but if possible try to speed it up a bit. Callias, you'll get the first pick when the new warriors arrive, and the rest will be under your command, Zelei."

She looked around, "Any questions?"

They all shook their heads.

"Well, let's call it a day then."

The council members rose and left the hut, except Kelifé who walked around the table to stand beside the Queen.

"Let me see your wrist."

Gabrielle sighed, but willingly held out her hand, "It's fine, Kelifé. You really don't have to worry about it anymore."

"I know," the healer replied, ignoring the Queen's exasperated tone, "that's why I'm going to remove the bandage."

"Oh, good."

Kelifé unwrapped the wrist and nodded to herself, "Nice work, if I should say so myself." She gave Gabrielle a small pat on the back, "Try to stay out of trouble from now on, my Queen."

"I'll do my best," Gabrielle grinned and the healer turned in the door, a pensive look in the grey eyes.

"I'm sure you will."

Gabrielle collected the scrolls and carried them to the hut used for storing documents, then she made her way towards the memorial grounds. She walked past several small vases with flowers, before stopping in front of a newly planted olive tree. She knelt down and with her hands removed the weed around the tiny sprout, then sat back on her heels, her eyes moist with unshed tears.

*I miss you, Ephiny. Why did you have to die? I feel so empty inside, so alone.*

She remained sitting for a long time, staring at the sprout as if it would supply her with the answers she needed. Only when her legs began to hurt, did she rise and, with one final look at the vases around her, leave the memorial grounds. She washed her hands in the bowl outside, and began to walk towards her hut, acknowledging the greetings of her subjects with nods and smiles. Outside the hut, she paused and let her eyes run over the village, a sense of peace engulfing her body.

*It's going to be all right now. Somehow, everything's going to be all right.*

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her with a quiet sigh, it had been a long day. She kicked off her boots and was about to unlace her top, when she felt warm hands on her hips.

"I've missed you."

She smiled and turned around, "I've missed you, too."

Without further words, Callias lifted her up and carried her to the bed.

## CHAPTER XXI

The guard shook his head again, trying to rid himself of the sleepiness threatening to claim his body. He was tempted to just close his eyes and lean against the tree beside him, but he knew that not even a couple hours of sleep was worth the punishment he would receive if he was caught sleeping on duty. He sent an angry stare at the dark sky above him. Why did he always end up with the graveyard shift? Besides, in his opinion it was a waste of time keeping watch with all the soldiers stationed in and around the castle. A man would have to be both stupid and tired of life to try and get near the castle walls. He had to hand it to the Persians, although they were acting both superior and contemptuous toward him and his fellow Greeks, they most certainly knew how to secure an area and fight a battle. They had emerged from every conflict as the victor, except of course, the soldier snickered to himself, they hadn't been able to defeat the harlots down South. It had been an unforeseen defeat and Kassander had been furious, but in spite of the plans that had needed changing and the heavy drills all the soldiers had been subjected to as punishment, there hadn't been a single Greek in Kassander's army who wasn't secretly pleased with the Persians débâcle. After all, it was Persians. They could be tolerated as long as they served the means of the King, but the moment the conquest had been completed, they would be expandable. A small voice in the guard's head pointed out that it might not be so easy to get rid of the Persians when everything was over, but he pushed it away. King Kassander would

make sure things went according to plan. He had no love for the King, but he trusted him to be able to control the foreign soldiers. Kassander was not a man who liked to share, whether it was gold, women or land, he considered it his rightful property and may the Gods have mercy on any man who thought differently. The guard yawned again and tried to occupy himself with counting the tents scattered all over the plain in front of the King's castle. He had counted ninety-seven before his chin fell down to his chest, and his body slumped against the tree.

Dark eyes watched the soldier slowly slide down the trunk of the tree, to end up sitting on the ground, the spear, having fallen out of his hand, lying a few feet away. Then the eyes left the reclining guard and searched the plain in front of him.

*Fifty-three campfires. At least a hundred tents, and then there are the soldiers inside the castle. I guess that answers the question if Kassander's up to something or not. He's been hiding Persian soldiers on his lands for weeks. That's why we didn't hear about any major troops movements. There haven't been any. They split the army up in smaller bands and travelled the country as warlords and thugs instead of professional soldiers. I wonder for how long this has been going on? And does he expects further reinforcements from Persia?*

A dark figure emerged from the shadows of the forest and came to a halt before the sleeping guard. A cold, calculating stare ran over the soldier's body.

*Will he be missed?*

Lykeas stepped closer and pulled out a dagger.

*No matter, he won't be found.*

A soft voice broke the silence.

"Gabrielle, are you all right?"

Gabrielle lifted her head to look into the Captain's blue eyes, "I'm sorry, Callias. I didn't mean to wake you."

The Amazon reached out and traced a tear with her finger, "You have been crying."

When she didn't get a reply, she hesitantly began to move away from the Queen, but Gabrielle tightened her grip around the other woman, "Please stay."

Although insecure, the Captain complied and carefully wrapped her arms around the young Queen again.

"Have...have I done something wrong?"

Gabrielle lifted her head from the Amazon's shoulder, "No, no, Callias. It's me, I'm...it's just..."

"You miss her?"

It was more a statement than a question.

"She's not coming back, I knew it all along. She's not coming back." The tears were flowing again.

Callias swallowed and tried to ignore the ache in her heart, "You don't know that."

"Then why should she renounce her championship?" The green eyes were both pleading and apprehensive, waiting for an answer.

"I didn't know she had."

"Nobody does. I haven't told anybody yet."

The Captain closed her eyes for a second, feeling every sob from the Queen cut deep into her soul. She didn't know what to say. She was afraid that if she said something it would be wrong, but she was also afraid what would happen if she didn't. She could feel Gabrielle snuggle closer and she instinctively tightened her hold around the slender body. They lay together in silence for a long time, both relishing the closeness. The room was bathed in darkness and the only sound was the quiet, rhythmical breathing of the two women. The crying had subsided and Callias suddenly felt a tentatively hand caressing her stomach. Her entire body tensed, but she didn't move away. The hand travelled higher, but just before it reached its destination, another hand came down and gently pulled it away.

Gabrielle raised her head and tried to see the Amazon's face, but the Captain was looking away.

"Gabrielle, I think, I should leave."

"I don't want you to leave."

Callias gently, but firmly eased herself away from the Queen and out of the bed. Gabrielle sat up and watched the Amazon as she searched for her clothes in the darkness. She finally managed to find her tunic and dressed, before turning around to face the Queen. She could barely make out the graceful figure of the woman sitting on the bed, the green eyes studying her intensely.

"I don't want you to leave."

"I have to."

"No." The figure rose from the bed and stepped down on the floor. "No, you don't."

"Gabrielle," Callias began, unconsciously taking a step back, "you're hurting and confused. I don't-."

"Yes, I'm hurting, Callias." The young woman stepped closer, "But I'm not confused." She stopped in front of the Captain, their bodies almost touching. Gabrielle reached down and took the Amazon's hand, placing it over her own heart.

"Can you feel that, Callias? Can you...? Do you still think you have to go?"

The Captain felt the furiously pounding heart just beneath the smooth, warm skin. She began to speak, but was silenced with a finger on her lips.

"Don't you want me, Callias?"

"Yes, Gods, I want you so much." The voice was raw with passion and Gabrielle felt every word rekindle the fire in her loins. She let a single finger trace the Captain's lips

a few times, before reaching down to pull the tunic over Callias' head. She slid her arm's around the Amazon's neck and drew her down for a kiss. Just before their lips met, the Captain hesitated.

"I don't want you to hate me in the morning."

Gabrillean leaned closer and whispered into Callias' mouth, "I could never hate you, Callias. Never."

Their lips met and all further conversation was forgotten.

## **Part 5**

Walking soundlessly between the trees, Lykeas only paused once to wipe the blood from his hands, and clean his dagger. When he reached his destination, he dived out from between two trees and Alexias jumped.

"Damn you, Lykeas! Don't do that!"

"Shh, not so loud." The dark warrior looked around, "We have to get going. Are the horses ready?"

"Yes, I left the saddles on as you told me, but..." The Prince looked eagerly at the man before him, "Aren't you gonna tell me what happened? Did you find out what's going on?"

"Yes," was the only reply.

"Well?"

"I said we should get going, didn't I? We'll have time for chit chat later."

Lykeas gave Rarjan a gentle pat, then mounted. Alexias watched the warrior in silence, anger mixed with annoyance showing on his face. He had been furious with Lykeas that he wouldn't allow him to come with him to Kassander's castle. He had even threatened to follow him when he left, where the warrior had replied that in that case, he'd just have to tie him to a tree. The look in the black eyes had made it perfectly clear that he wasn't kidding.

"We're gonna ride all night, I want to get to the border as fast as possible."

Alexias shifted in the saddle, then the brown eyes widened, "Lykeas, blood! There's blood on your clothes."

The warrior didn't even glance down, "I know."

Then he kneed Rarjan forward and soon rider and horse were moving down the road in a relentless pace. The Prince hurried to follow suit, but it took him a few minutes before he caught up with them.

The ride that night was one Alexias would never forget. The trees on either side cast harrowing and unnatural shadows on the road, and several times did he feel his horse stumble, barely managing to keep her footing, when invisible bumps and rocks

abruptly got in her way. A strong wind blew against their faces, driving tears from their already hurting eyes. The endless pounding of the hooves against the ground and the howling wind penetrated his head, and always, without mercy, did he feel every shock, every tremor from the horse beneath him multiplied in his body. The landscape around him passed in one long blur of grey and black, and when dawn finally arrived, the last coherent thought in his mind was not to let go of the reins, and no to lose sight of the rider in front of him.

Lykeas forcefully reined in Rarjan who almost reared.

"Shit!"

Only years of training prevented Alexias from heading right into the warrior and horse that suddenly occupied his path. In the last second, he managed to change course and bring his horse to a halt.

"Are you crazy!? I could have-."

"Shut up and look!"

The Prince stared ahead of him, trying to see through the grey mist. One by one ten silhouettes appeared out of the early morning light. In a slow, leisurely pace the men on horses came closer until they were right in front of them. A strong, muscular man with steel like eyes and grey hair and beard, leaned forward in the saddle. The cold eyes went from Alexias to Lykeas and then back to the Prince.

"Well, if it isn't the young Alexias. What are you doing here so early in the morning? And not to mention on my land?"

The Prince's jaw tightened, "I apologize for entering your kingdom without permission, sir. My friend and I were chasing a deer and got so caught up in the hunt, we didn't notice we had crossed the border."

"Is that so?" The King replied slowly, almost tasting every syllable. His gaze came to rest on Lykeas. "And who is your friend?"

"This is Lykeas," Alexias replied before the warrior could speak, "he's staying with me at Simmias' castle."

"Oh, so you're visiting Simmias. That explains it, I did think you were a bit far from home to be hunting deer near my border."

Kassander's eyes once again took in the sight of the dark warrior, a frown appearing on his face.

"Do I...know you?"

"No."

"Hmm, you seem familiar somehow." The King replied, but then shrugged and apparently dismissed the thought. He turned to look at the Prince again.

"So, Alexias, how is your father doing? I do hope he's in good health."

"My father's just fine, thank you." The young man was incapable of keeping a slight

edge out of his tone, but Kassander appeared not to notice.

"I'm glad to hear it. And Simmias, that sweet old man, how is he? I trust he's still tending more to his flowers than to the affairs of his kingdom?"

"His Majesty is also in good health and when it comes to the affairs of the kingdom, Queen Phillinna is more than capable of handling that."

"Ah yes, the fair Phillinna. So she's still the one wearing the trousers. Well, well, if it works for them..." The last remark was obviously meant to provoke some kind of reaction, but neither Alexias nor Lykeas spoke. The King's manner grew threatening, but the words were still uttered in a voice sweet as honey.

"I see no deer with you. You weren't successful?"

"No."

Kassander eyed Lykeas thoughtfully.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

Black eyes stared directly at him, "We lost track of the deer this morning. We were just on our way home when we met you."

"Funny, I've been hunting myself together with a few friends," he gestured casually at the riders behind him, "and we didn't see any trace of deer. Come to think of it, we didn't find any trace of other hunters either."

"I try not to leave a trace."

The King crossed his arms, "You must be good then."

"I am."

For minutes the two men just stared at each other. Then Kassander slowly made room for them to pass and indicated his men to do the same.

"You must be anxious to get back. I shall keep you no further."

Lykeas and Alexias rode past them and the Prince looked back and gave the King a small nod.

"I wish you a good day, sir."

"You too, Alexias, you too."

They pushed their horses into a gallop, and the last thing they heard was Kassander shouting, "Tell your father, I'll be visiting his kingdom soon, very soon actually."

Alexias glanced at Lykeas, "I didn't think he'd let us pass. I thought he'd see right through us."

The warrior gave him an obscure look.

"Oh, but he did, Alexias, he did."

"Took you long enough."

"Yeah."

Lykeas closed the door behind him and slumped down in the chair next to Xena's. She was sitting in front of a large tapestry, picturing scenes from a long forgotten battle. Without glancing at Lykeas, she continued. "So, you didn't get into trouble?"

Lykeas smiled to himself, black eyes studying the tapestry, "No, no I didn't."

"Hum, good."

They were in the West wing of the castle which was the least inhabited part. While waiting for news, Xena had spent most of her time exploring the castle, finding the West wing to be the place she was most likely to be left alone. The endless waiting without having anything to occupy her had not become her very well, and even the Queen, who'd grown very fond of the warrior's company, had respected her wish for solitude.

"I hear you beat half of Simmias' soldiers in one-to-one combat."

"I was bored," Xena nonchalantly replied, "besides, it was only a third, the rest declined."

She turned to look at Lykeas, the blues eyes conveying more than her words, "It's been kinda dull around here while you were gone."

"Well, I'm back now."

She gave him a quick smile, then changed the subject, "So the Persians are involved?"

"Yes."

"With Kassander?"

"Yes."

"Hmm," she looked at the tapestry again. "I take it Kassander hasn't changed?"

"No."

Xena put her palms together and tapped them against her chin, "I heard from Alexias that you ran into him on the way back."

Lykeas nodded, "Yes, it was unfortunate." His brow furrowed, "Although maybe it wasn't such a bad thing after all."

Xena raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Now he knows we're on to him. It's quite possible that'll make him speed up his plans and try to complete the conquest sooner than he'd expected. Perhaps sooner than he's ready for."

"It's a possibility. He's definitely arrogant enough."

"Yes. I don't think he minds us knowing...that's why he allowed us to continue. He

probably likes to flex his muscles at us, thinking we're no threat to him."

"Are we? A threat to him?"

Lykeas' eyes lingered at the tapestry for a moment before turning to Xena., "Not in manpower, but when it comes to fighting, the people who've the most to lose always put up the toughest fight."

Xena nodded, her eyes distant, "I remember."

"No matter what," Lykeas continued, "we have to act soon. We can't allow Kassander to receive further reinforcements from Persia. The situation's bad enough as it is."

"You think we should mobilize an army?"

He looked at her, "Don't you?"

"We'll need both the armies of Simmias and Polyidos and even that may not be enough."

Lykeas leaned back in his chair, sighing deeply, "I've seen the armies and they are both adequate, but neither have been into battle for a very long time. They're all too comfortable, they have grown soft. They need to be disciplined and trained. They need to be reminded that they're soldiers, not chambermaids."

Xena shot the warrior beside her a watchful glance.

"And I take it you plan to be the one who reminds them?"

An equivocal smile appeared on Lykeas' face, then it was gone.

"Yes."

## CHAPTER XXII

The Queen walked slowly along the line of Amazons, inspecting each warrior carefully. The soldiers stood tall, staring straight ahead, not a single muscle moving. Gabrielle smiled inwardly and turned to look at the Captain.

"You've made a fine choice, Callias. I'm confident these warriors will be a valuable addition to Royal Guard."

"Yes, my Queen. I think so too."

Gabrielle continued her walk, this time past a slightly larger group of Amazons. Some of the warriors were very young, had probably only recently completed their training, but all, without exception, carried themselves with a confidence and pride that instantly endeared them all to the Queen's heart. When she reached the end of the line, Gabrielle stopped in front of the last warrior. The Amazon was obviously perplexed by the sudden attention, but did her best to appear indifferent.

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Rheia, Your Majesty."

"And how old are you, Rheia?"

The warrior's mask slipped for a second and her expression became defensive, "I'm twenty, Your Majesty."

Gabrielle hid a smile, "So, Rheia. Do you think you're worthy of serving the Nation as a soldier?"

"Yes, sir!"

This time Gabrielle barely managed to disguise her amusement.

"I'm glad to hear it, soldier."

She turned to face the rest of the warriors.

"Do you all think you're worthy of serving the Nation as soldiers? Protecting the villages, defending what's ours?"

"Yes, sir!" They all replied as with one voice.

Sparkling green eyes briefly rested on another Captain.

"Although, Callias had the first choice, I think you have something to be proud of Zelei."

The Captain stepped closer and gave the Queen a small bow.

"They're excellent warriors, my Queen. They'll make us all proud."

"I'm counting on it."

She faced the warriors again, "I want to welcome you all to the village, your new home. Huts have been prepared and are ready to be used. You'll be informed of your duties and shifts by either Callias or Zelei, depending on your regiment, and if you have any further questions you're free to ask any Amazon in the village. And that includes the Queen," she added with a friendly smile and even the toughest soldier had to struggle not to return it.

"Oh yes, one last thing. A celebration to welcome you all will be held tonight, but remember to check with your Captain first to find out when you're expected to be on duty. I don't want any drunks guarding the village, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very well," Gabrielle smiled. "You're dismissed."

One by one the new warriors left the practice field to find their assigned huts. Some only staying long enough to change before heading out, others lingering inside, already contemplating how to decorate and furnish their new homes. Callias walked over to stand beside the Queen and together they watched the last soldier leave the field.

"That went well."

"Yes, it did, didn't it."

"You have become quite good at this queen thing. You seemed very relaxed and confident."

"Oh," Gabrielle grinned, "I don't know if I'm relaxed, but I definitely feel confident." She paused, "It's a nice feeling."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"So..." Gabrielle reached out to dust off some non-existent fluff from the Captain's shoulder, "Is the Head of the Royal Guard on duty tonight?"

"Well," Callias replied, her voice suddenly an octave lower, "I think you'll have to check with the Queen about that."

"The Queen, you say...?" Gabrielle smiled seductively, her hand still resting on the tunic and the blond Amazon felt her pulse quicken.

"I'm sure she and I could come to some kind of understanding. After all," appreciative eyes roamed the Captain's body, "I've heard she's a very generous and caring person... Very giving..."

Callias swallowed hard, "Funny, I've heard that too."

Gabrielle let her hand run lazily down the Amazon's arm, a teasing smile playing on her lips.

"I'll see you tonight then, Captain."

She left the practice field, leaving a rather flushed soldier to consider the location of the nearest water hole.

For the tenth time that evening, Phillinna stepped over to the window to look out, then headed back to the fireplace, before finally coming to a halt in front of the people seated around the table.

"Is there no alternative?" She asked, her eyes troubled, but her voice firm.

"I'm afraid not, Your Majesty. I don't see we have any possibility, but to fight."

The Queen looked at her General, biting the inside of her cheek, "You're absolutely convinced about this, Nicanor?"

The General nodded, "Your Majesty, we have dealt with King Kassander in the past, even if we tried to negotiate with him, even if we reached an agreement, got his word. You know he can't be trusted."

"Yes, but war!" Phillinna exclaimed. "I don't want the people of this kingdom to be hurt. I don't want to take away their husbands and fathers, their sons and brothers. Isn't there any other way?!"

"No."

Green eyes sought out black, "You're sure it was Persians you saw?"

"Yes."

"You're convinced they'll attack?"

"It's just a matter of time."

The Queen went back to the window and stared out for a long time. Not until the impatience emanating from the other people in the room was almost perceptible did she turn around.

"Okay, if you're all certain it's the right thing to do I'll support you with troops, and I'm sure Polyidos will do the same when he hears about this."

She looked at Alexias who nodded, "I've already sent a messenger to my father asking for assistance."

"Good," Phillinna replied and started to walk towards the window again, but stopped herself in the last minute. She turned to face the warriors at the table.

"I want a straight answer, no evasions or probabilities. I want to hear your exact opinion and nothing else. Do we stand a chance against Kassander?"

Xena looked at Lykeas who was staring down at the table, obviously lost in thoughts.

"Well...?" The Queen was becoming impatient.

"After what Lykeas has told me, we have a fair chance with the combined forces of your husband and King Polyidos."

"A fair chance?" Phillinna looked resigned at Xena, "Is that as good as it gets?"

"I'm afraid so," the warrior replied quietly.

The Queen closed her eyes briefly and let out a small sigh, "I'll go inform Simmias. I don't want him to hear about this from anybody else."

She left and the faint scent of her perfume was all that remained.

Nicanor rose from the table, "I should get going as well. I have a lot of work ahead of me with the soldiers."

Lykeas abruptly raised his head and looked at the red-headed General.

"I'd like to assist you with the training of the soldiers."

"Uh, sure," Nicanor said uncertainly. "If you think you're up to that."

"Oh, but I am," he answered, "I'm very up to-."

"Lykeas, can I talk to you for a moment?" Xena's voice cut short the warrior's reply.

Dark eyes met with blue, then darted away.

"Sure."

"Will you excuse us for a minute?"

Both Alexias and Nicanor got the message from Xena's tone alone and quickly left the room.

The warrior rose from her seat and walked over to stand in front of Lykeas.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Helping out."

Xena reached out and raised his chin so she could see his eyes.

"Lykeas..." This time her voice held a clear warning, "Whatever you've got planned, forget it!"

His jaw clenched, "I don't know what you mean."

Blue eyes narrowed, "Don't play with me, Lykeas. I know you too well for that."

"I swear," he looked directly at her, "I'm not planning anything."

She gave him a dubious look, "Are you sure?"

His gaze never wavered, "Yes."

Xena stepped away and leaned against the wall, her eyes never leaving the dark man's face. Time passed slowly as they watched each other in silence. Lykeas began to feel uncomfortable and rose from his chair.

"I should get going."

He looked at her as if waiting for some kind of response.

"Yeah, I guess you should," Xena finally answered. "They're probably all in great need of some proper battle and tactics exercises."

That brought out a smile on Lykeas' face.

"You've no idea! I've never seen anything like it." The grin broadened, "I'd wish, I had some really skilled warriors to use as an example. Nothing motivates a man to learn faster than being humiliated."

Xena smiled in return, "Where are the Amazons when you need them?"

Lykeas who had been heading for the door, stopped and turned to look at her, an intrigued smile slowly spreading on his face.

"Of course! Why didn't I think of that myself. I'll send a message to the Nation to request for soldiers. I've no doubt that several of the warriors will be more than thrilled by the prospect of avenging the death of their sisters."

Xena stepped closer.

"I won't let you do that. The Amazons have suffered enough. They don't need another war right now."

"Ah, Xena." Lykeas said, studying his fingernails, "I don't think you have anything to

say in this matter. Besides, all I'm gonna do is to present them with the problem. It's up to them to decide what to do about it."

He looked up.

"Or perhaps that's not the reason why you don't want the Amazons to come?"

Xena's face became a mask, and again they stared at each other in silence. Then Lykeas awkwardly reached out to touch her arm, his voice surprisingly gentle.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

She tolerated the touch for a moment, then stepped back.

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does... I'm sorry."

She looked into the black eyes, then nodded.

"It's okay."

He gave her a pale smile, then left.

*"Don't touch me!" The young man growled dangerously. "You said you wanted to talk, so talk!"*

*The blond woman withdrew her arm, her brown eyes filled with both sadness and regret.*

*"I never meant for this to happen. Please believe me, if I could do anything to change the past I would."*

*Cold eyes studied the nervous woman.*

*"Nobody wants that more than me, Naiari, but since it isn't possible, there's really no use in talking about it, is there?"*

*"I meant to come for you, I meant to take you away from-."*

*"Just like you meant to be with my mother for the rest of your life!?" His eyes were mere slits, "It seems to me you have a problem with keeping your promises."*

*"I loved your mother."*

*"Don't say that!"*

*The Amazon hesitantly reached out again, but the young man angrily slapped her hand away.*

*"I said, don't touch me!"*

*He closed his eyes briefly, making a conscious effort to calm himself down, then he continued, "You sent for me, I'm here. What do you want?"*

*"I...I wanted you to meet someone." The blond woman turned towards her hut,*

*"Sweetie, would you come out for a minute!?"*

*The door opened and a young, blond woman stepped outside. Naiari affectionately put her arm around the young Amazon, who eyed the stranger in front of her suspiciously.*

*"Sweetie, I want you to meet somebody very special."*

*She gave the man a nervous smile, but the black eyes regarded her callously.*

*"Ephiny, this is Lykeas, your brother."*

*Brown and black eyes narrowed instantly.*

*"My...brother?" The blond woman finally spoke, "I don't have a brother."*

*"Okay, you've had your fun, Naiari. I'm leaving now."*

*"No please, don't go!"*

*The Amazon forgot all caution and grabbed the young man's arm.*

*"Please stay, I want-."*

*A fist connected squarely with the woman's jaw and she was knocked to the ground.*

*"You lost your right to tell me what to do a long time ago!" Lykeas spat out angrily, hovering over the Amazon below him. "You betrayed her! You left her to a life in Tartarus. Don't think I'll ever forgive you for that!" He reached down and roughly pulled her up by the hair.*

*"You're lucky I don't kill you." The words were spoken through gritted teeth and Naiari shivered by the sight of the black eyes, so reminiscent of the woman's she had once loved.*

*Suddenly Lykeas became aware of a sharp blade, pressing hard against his neck.*

*"Let go of her."*

*The blade pressed harder, breaking the skin.*

*"I said, let go of her!"*

*Out of the corner of his eye, the dark man studied the young woman behind him. A look of utter contempt showed on his face, then abruptly he released the Amazon who fell to the ground.*

*The blade disappeared from his throat as Ephiny rushed to her mother's side, but before she could reach the Amazon, she was violently grabbed from behind and hurled against the hut. In two steps, Lykeas was over her. He caught her by the throat and pushed her head against the wall, their faces only inches apart.*

*"Don't ever threaten me again." The voice was cold, but eerily calm.*

*As reply, Ephiny spat in his face. The dark man's first reaction was an indulgent, slightly amused smile, but then the grip tightened.*

*"I'll let that one pass for now."*

*He let go of her throat and she slumped to the ground. His impassive eyes rested briefly on the two women, then he turned and walked away.*

Lykeas shifted uneasily in the bed.

*Suddenly a plain appeared before him, alive with soldiers. Tents, horses, wagons, chariots and men as far as the eye could see. The blood red sky made an imposing curtain to the scene played out on the plain, as the soldiers, all as one, left what they were doing and lined up before him. Their armour and weapons were polished to perfection, their bearing was proud and confident. Their grey and black uniforms were clean and free from patches, their boots shone in the red light. Then in one fluid motion, they simultaneously brought their hands up and saluted. Lykeas felt a slow smile spread on his face.*

*"This is what you want, isn't it?" A low voice whispered into his ear.*

*The presence beside him had appeared from out of nowhere, but to the dark warrior it was as familiar as the beating of his own heart.*

*"You know it is," he turned, black eyes gleaming. "It's what I've always wanted."*

*Blue eyes returned his gaze, "I know."*

"Lykeas wake up! They're expecting you in the armoury."

The knocking on the door paused and the warrior scrambled out of bed.

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

Still half asleep, he stumbled out of his room and down the corridor.

\*\*\*\*\*

Nothing could bring me closer,

Nothing could bring me near.

I suffer the dreams of a world gone mad,

I like it that way and I know it.

I know it well, ugly and sweet,

That temper madness with an even extreme.

I lost myself in sorrow,

I lost myself in pain.

I lost myself in clarity,

Memory, leave, leave.

I´ve longed for this to take me,  
I´ve longed for my release.  
I´ve waited for the calling  
To leave, leave.

## CHAPTER XXIII

"No emperor has the power to dictate to the heart."

- Johann Friedrich Von Schiller, 1759-1805 AD

For the last two days, the view from the castle had been obscured by a never-ending rain, pouring down and instantly soaking anybody who was unfortunate or foolish enough to be outside. It seemed to the people in the castle that they were never really dry. No matter how many fires that were lit and how many windows that were sealed, the heavy, humid air seeped through every crack, every crevice making everything from bedlinen to clothes feel damp and uncomfortable. The rooms were dank and chilly and, unrelenting, following people wherever they went, was the ever present sound of dripping water created by hundreds of drops of water falling from ceilings to floors. It was enough to drive even the most stable person crazy and by the third day, everybody was walking on eggshells around each other.

Walking down an empty corridor in the West wing, Xena contemplated their situation. She doubted that Kassander would try anything as long as the weather was like this. The visibility outside was next to nothing and all the roads had turned into streams of mud days ago. Hopefully, the rain had also helped to lower the morale among Kassander´s soldiers and made them short-tempered and discontented, something that might come in handy later.

A damp breeze against her face brought her out of her reverie, and she looked ahead to see an open window further down the corridor.

*Gee, as if it wasn´t wet enough already. I´d wish people would remember to close the damn windows.*

She purposely walked to the window, but just as she was about to slam it shut, a movement outside caught her attention. She leaned out over the wet window-sill and looked down at the courtyard below her. At least fifty soldiers were heavily engaged in combat drills, oblivious to the pouring rain. She leaned out further, her eyes searching for one specific man. And there he was. Standing in the middle of the yard was Lykeas, watchfully supervising the action around him, black eyes never missing a single movement, a single thrust.

"No no no! Strike, retreat and *then* advance. If you advance directly after the last blow, you leave you entire right side exposed to the enemy. One more time and this time, I want to see it done correctly! You won´t get a second chance with Kassander´s soldiers."

For how long Xena watched the scenario below her, she didn´t know, but gradually the men´s movements became co-ordinated and effective, and by the time it took her to realize she was drenched and move away from the window, they were fighting as

good as any soldiers she had ever had. She rested her back against the wall and closed her eyes, the constant sound of swords meeting swords and Lykeas' curt commands filling her head. Suddenly she became aware of a faint scent of perfume close by, but didn't open her eyes. She heard the low, whispering sound of fabric sliding over the floor, and felt the slight change in the air as a person came to stand beside her.

"He seems to be enjoying himself."

Xena opened her eyes to look at Phillinna, "He is."

"And that worries you?" The Queen said, considering the warrior beside her.

"What makes you think that?"

Phillinna shrugged, "I don't know, call it a hunch."

Xena's face remained impassive, "Lykeas knows what he's doing."

"Oh, I'm sure he does, but do you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The annoyance in Xena's voice was clear.

The Queen seemed to acknowledge the warrior's unspoken warning and refrained from asking further questions. In stead she closed the window and started to walk down the corridor, pausing after a few steps to look back at the dark woman.

"Are you coming?"

Xena let out a small sigh, but nonetheless abandoned her position against the wall and came to walk beside the Queen. They strolled the length of the West wing in silence, and not until they had reached the end and turned around, did Phillinna speak again.

"We received news from Polyidos this morning."

"Oh?" Came the distant reply.

"Apparently the messenger he sent to the Amazon Nation returned last night."

The warrior didn't respond, but the blue eyes had become keenly alert. The Queen looked at Xena as if she expected a reaction, but when it didn't come, she continued.

"The message was from the Amazon Queen herself, and it said that it had been left up to the individual Amazon, whether she wanted to fight this war or not, provided their absence wouldn't compromise the safety of the Nation."

Xena nodded, she had expected that much.

"So it seems like we can be expecting their arrival any day now."

Phillinna shook her head in disbelief.

"Amazons! In my castle! Who should have thought it?"

"Well, they're pretty easy to deal with as long as you show them the proper respect."

"I'll have to begin planning accommodation right away. The rooms must be ready

when they arrive."

"Don't make yourself too much trouble," the warrior grinned. "The Amazons don't require much comfort, after all, they've lived in huts all their lives."

Phillinna looked at her in astonishment, "Even the Queen?"

"Uh huh."

The blond woman looked like somebody had just told her that pigs could fly.

"Well, that may be, but she'll definitely not be living in a hut while she stays here, that's for certain."

The Queen was abruptly turned around and found herself face to face with the warrior.

"What do you mean?"

"Err..." Phillinna looked at Xena in confusion. "What I said, the Amazon Queen won't be living in a hut if I have anything to say about it."

"The Queen is coming *here*?"

"Yes, didn't I mention that?"

"No."

Xena became aware of her firm grip on the blond woman's arms and promptly let go.

"No, you didn't."

"Oh well, now you know."

Phillinna noticed the disturbed look on the warrior's face, but chose not to mention it. Instead she continued her walk down the corridor and like before, paused after a few steps to look back.

"Are you coming?"

"If everything goes well, we should enter King Simmias kingdom by tomorrow evening."

Gabrielle nodded, "Okay, that sounds good."

She smiled at the sight of the totally drenched Amazon before her.

"You better go change before you catch a pneumonia."

"Hum!" Areia snorted. "I'm pretty sure it's too late for that, besides, I doubt there are any dry clothes left."

She gave the Queen a quick smile to take the edge of her words, pushed the tent flap aside and stepped out into the rain again. After the warrior had left, Gabrielle gave her surroundings a sceptical look. She wasn't too sure that the tent wouldn't be washed away by morning. Under any circumstances, the canvas was soaked and water kept seeping through. She doubted there was a dry spot left.

They had been on the road for days and by the third day it had started to rain, and it hadn't stopped since. Even Zelei and Erinya, who prided themselves of being made of tougher material than the rest of the world, were beginning to look forward to a dry room in a dry castle. They had camped for the night in a forest, placing all the tents under the trees to keep them out of the rain as much as possible, but since everything was soaked already from the days before, Gabrielle suspected it wouldn't make much of a difference. She sighed and sat down on the pallet, the skins beneath her uncomfortably damp. She opened a round leather case, and pulled out the scroll to read it once again.

When the message from Lykeas had arrived, she had been torn what to do. She knew that several Amazons would jump at the opportunity to get revenge, and if she had to be absolutely honest with herself, the idea of getting back at the Persians and avenging Ephiny's death appealed to her too. However, she'd been far from convinced it was the right, or for that matter, the smartest thing to do. The Amazons didn't really need another war so soon. The village was just beginning to return to what it had been before the attack, and people had only just begun to come to terms with what they'd lost and move on. She wasn't sure if another confrontation with the Persians would provide some kind of closure or instead rip open old wounds. She hadn't discussed the message with the council, knowing full well how each of them would react. In the end, she'd decided to leave it up to the individual Amazon. She had allowed a total of forty warriors to leave the village if they desired. Who the forty should be, they'd have to decide between themselves. Things had gone pretty smoothly, until she had announced that she'd lead the warriors to Simmias' castle. Both Callias and Zelei had been against it, although for different reasons and Kelifa had also tried to talk her out of it. Gabrielle had patiently listen to each of their arguments, but couldn't be swayed. She had dismissed them by saying it was the Queen's duty to lead her warriors, and by that she'd considered the subject for closed. They had respected her wishes, albeit grudgingly.

Gabrielle sighed and put the scroll back into the case. She knew very well why it was she wanted to lead the warriors. It was what Ephiny would have done, and somehow she couldn't help but feel that she owed the blond Amazon to do it for her. Ephiny had died for her people and Gabrielle wasn't about to expect anything less from herself. There was no way she'd send Amazons into battle and then stay home and twiddle her thumbs. She had made her choice. She would be the Queen her people needed her to be; face the difficulties, make the tough decisions and deal with the consequences. Nothing more, nothing less.

A moist breath of air made her look up and she saw Callias enter the tent., the Amazon Captain looking very much like a drowned rat.

"Oh, is it still raining?"

"Hahaha," the blond woman replied while trying to wring out some of the water from her hair and tunic. "Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humour."

"Come here."

Gabrielle patted the pallet and Callias obligingly came over and sat down. The Queen rummaged through her belongings and pulled out an almost dry towel. She positioned herself on the pallet behind the Captain and began to dry her hair.

"Have everyone been settled for the night?"

"Yes," the Amazon replied, letting out a small contented sigh, "and the guards have been posted."

"They must have been thrilled."

"Oh yeah."

Callias grinned at the memory of the guards' expression.

"I have no doubt that I'll be in their prayers tonight... Although," she continued after a small pause, "I do feel a bit guilty. Some of them looked really miserable and I could have replaced one if I'd wanted to."

Gabrielle stopped her ministrations with the towel for a moment.

"You have nothing to feel guilty about, Callias. You've taken more than your share of watches."

She began to dry the Captain's hair again, but a thought caused her to stop.

"Actually, you've taken an unusual high amount of watches on this trip... Why is that?"

The Amazon didn't reply right away, but then shrugged.

"I guess, I just wanted to keep busy, the rain's been driving me crazy."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

Gabrielle rose from the pallet and kneeled down in front of Callias, trying to catch her eye."

Reluctantly the Captain looked up and their eyes met.

"I may be wrong, Callias, but it seems to me that you taken any opportunity that presented itself to avoid me."

She searched the Amazon's face.

"No, I... It's not that... I...", Callias stumbled over the words. "I haven't been trying to avoid you... I've just..."

"You've just what?" Gabrielle asked softly, putting her hand on the blonde woman's knee. "Tell me."

The Captain looked down at the hand on her knee, "Nothing. I've just wanted to do my share, that's all."

The Queen slowly removed her hand and sat back on her heels.

"Then why not tonight? Why did you decide not to volunteer for guard duty tonight?"

"Because we'll arrive at King Simmias' castle tomorrow."

The words were spoken so low that Gabrielle first wasn't sure the Amazon had spoken at all."

Callias looked up, a bittersweet smile on her lips.

"Things will change from tomorrow."

Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. For a while they just looked into each other's eyes, the rain outside providing a steady rhythm to accompany their thoughts.

"I know that..." The Captain trailed off and the Queen gave her a small encouraging smile, painful realization and remorse written in the green eyes.

The blond Amazon gave her a pale smile in return, then spoke softly, "I...I wanted my last time with you to be special. I wanted always to be able to remember this moment as being perfect."

"Oh..." Gabrielle exhaled.

The Captain broke eye contact and looked down at the ground, and silence once again occupied the tent. A myriad of conflicting emotions were racing through Gabrielle's body. Pictures and images from the last couple of months filled her mind, and she had to look away. Then, simultaneously, the two women looked back at each other. Without a word, Callias slid down from the pallet to the ground and wrapped her arms around the young Queen, who in return put her arms around the Amazon's neck, then, with a maddening slowness their lips gently met.

"Hey, look!" Areia pointed at the sky. "The clouds are spreading."

Rheia looked up, a slow smile appearing on her face, "It's about time. I've missed seeing the stars."

As the two guards rejoiced at the sight of the clearing sky and the ceasing rain, somewhere else a soft voice whispered, "Perfect?"

"Perfect..."

"Not bad, not bad. One more time though, I want to make sure you got it."

The soldiers gave the dark warrior a disbelieving look, but the expression in the black eyes quickly drove all thoughts about arguing away. The relatively short time they had been subjected to Lykeas' gruelling training had already taught them that complaining only made matters worse. The warrior would show an almost uncanny patience when it came to teaching them a new technique, a new tactic, not minding having to act it out for them again and again, but when it came to complaints or provocative behaviour he was ruthless. He tolerated no bad attitudes or challenges of his authority, and he'd only had to make an example once. No one had disobeyed or questioned him since.

They were on a field a few miles from the castle, Lykeas finding the courtyard too confining, had the moment the rain stopped persuaded Nicanor to move the practice

outside. Officially, the General was in charge and the men were under his command, but as he watched the dark warrior with the soldiers, and saw the worshipping looks that followed him around, he knew that without as much as a fight, Lykeas had taken over the army. He might still be their commanding officer, but their loyalties and respect now lay with the dark man, and he had no idea what to do about it. If it hadn't been for the amazing results Lykeas had achieved with the soldiers and the gravity of the situation, Nicanor would have spoken to Queen Phillinna about it. But as the situation was now, he didn't feel he could allow himself to complain, besides he was afraid the Queen would dismiss it as jealousy and rivalry between two warriors, and perhaps begin to doubt his capability as General. So he hadn't voiced his concern or mentioned his dilemma to anybody, also because deep inside he knew that he was jealous, although he swore to himself that that was not the reason for his discomfort.

At first he'd thought he was the only one who was aware of the development, but gradually he'd noticed that the other warrior, Xena, always seemed to be around when Lykeas worked with the soldiers, the blue eyes never wavering from the dark man. On a few occasions, she'd almost given Nicanor a heart attack when she from out of nowhere suddenly had appeared beside him. He had no idea how she did it or how she managed to disappear again without him ever seeing it, but she did and it all contributed to his uneasiness.

He looked around, but didn't see any sight of the warrior now. He knew it was a useless thing to do since if Xena didn't want to be seen, she wouldn't be, but he couldn't help himself. He wondered if Lykeas was aware of all the attention he received, somehow he doubted that anything escaped the dark warrior's notice.

"Nicanor, you're dreaming."

The General jumped as Lykeas suddenly stood beside him.

"Oh, sorry. Did you want anything?"

The warrior tilted his head slightly and studied the redheaded General through half-lidded eyes.

"I want you to go through the drills I've just showed with the men. They know what to do, they just need to practice them a few more times."

"Oh, do you have to be anywhere?" Nicanor asked, praying his voice didn't sound too hopeful.

Lykeas just gave him a sweet smile.

"Yes, I'm going to accompany the Amazons to the castle."

"The Amazons? Which Amazons?"

"Those Amazons."

The General looked in the direction the warrior was pointing, and his jaw fell as he saw a large group of female warriors step out from the forest on the other side of the field.

"I'll see you later, Nicanor. Make sure they know the moves by tonight."

And with that he left the stunned man behind him and walked over to meet the Amazons, a faint smile briefly showing on his face.

"Hey, Gabrielle, it's been a while..."

#### CHAPTER XXIV

"So the moment the roads become reasonably passable again, we'll head out."

Gabrielle nodded and looked at the warrior walking beside her.

"How many soldiers do we have?"

"Hmm, well, with your Amazons we should reach a total of 1300 men."

"And Kassander? How many men does he have?"

Lykeas gave her a small smile, "Do you really wanna know?"

"That bad?"

He nodded, "That bad."

They continued down the road leading to the castle, the forty Amazons behind them, moving practically soundlessly.

"So how have you been?"

"Fine and you?"

The Queen had to smile at Lykeas' usual eloquence.

"Oh, I've been just fine too. The village is starting to return to normal."

"That's nice," the warrior replied noncommittally.

"Yes, yes it is," she paused for a moment then continued in a slightly lower voice. "I think, I've started to really get the hang of it."

"I never doubted you would."

Gabrielle looked at him in surprise, but he was staring straight ahead.

"Do you really mean that?" She asked, half fearing his response.

This time, he turned his head to look at her, an almost puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Uh huh."

She gave him a warm smile which he hesitantly returned, then he looked away again.

"We're here."

The huge oak tree gates opened in front of them with a loud, creaking noise and revealed a courtyard filled with people.

"It take it they're expecting us?"

"Seems like it," Lykeas' brow furrowed. "Nicanor must have cut the training short. I'll have to talk to him about that."

Gabrielle didn't like the look in the dark man's eyes, but pushed it aside as she followed him over to a gracefully looking woman, surrounded by a few guards.

"Your Majesty," the warrior spoke to the blond woman, "may I have the privilege of introducing you to Gabrielle, Queen of the Amazon Nation."

He turned to look at Gabrielle, "And this is Queen Phillinna, wife of the honourable King Simmias."

Phillinna gave him an amused smile, then turned all her attention back to her peer.

"It's so very good to finally meet you, Your Majesty. I've been looking forward to your visit for some time now."

Gabrielle replied with a small nod, then smiled.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you too. On our journey through the kingdom, we've heard nothing but kind words of you and your husband."

The Queen acknowledged the compliment with another smile, before getting back to business.

"Rooms have been prepared for you and your escort, and I hope you'll find them to your satisfaction. Tomorrow, we'll have a small banquet in your honour, but for tonight nothing has been planned. I trust you must be tired after the long travel and in need of rest."

"Yes, I do think we all could need an early night tonight."

"Fine, I'll have you shown to your chambers right away... And before I forget," she added, looking at Lykeas. "The General wishes to speak to you about something."

"Did he mention what?"

The Queen gave him a sheepish smile, "Probably, but I didn't pay much attention. He sort of lost me after 'reverse pincer movement'."

"Fair enough," Lykeas smiled good-humouredly, "I'll go find him."

While they had been talking, Gabrielle's eyes had been searching the courtyard, one by one dismissing every person she saw.

*I know she's here. I can feel it.*

Suddenly, for no apparent reason she looked up and was instantly caught up in an intense blue gaze. The people around her just faded and disappeared as she recognized the figure in the window high above the yard. She couldn't make out the expression on the warrior's face, instead she felt how her body was trapped on the spot, held there by the unblinking stare.

A gentle hand on her arm brought her out of the trance.

"Your Majesty, I'll lead you to your chambers."

"Oh, yes, of course." She absently replied to the servant, glancing back to the window, but there was no sight of the warrior. She allowed herself to be guided away by the servant on one side, and with Queen Phillinna eagerly talking on the other. Lykeas remained in the courtyard for a moment, the black eyes focusing thoughtfully on the empty window above, then he shrugged and went out to find Nicanor.

Gabrielle sighed and shifted once again, but to no avail. Sleep simply wouldn't come. She opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling, willing her mind to unwind and her body to relax, but no matter what, she remained fully awake and restless. For a while she traced the delicate patterns above her, before she with a deep sigh, pushed the covers aside and got out of the bed. She quickly dressed and quietly opened the door out to the corridor.

"Your Majesty? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Areia. I just can't sleep."

"Oh," the Amazon replied. "Do you want me to get you anything?"

Gabrielle shook her head, "No thanks, I think I'll just go for a walk."

She instantly read the expression on the guard's face and hurried to speak, "No, I don't need an escort. I'm sure, I'll be quite safe in here with all the soldiers around."

Areia grinned, "As you wish, My Queen, but you better not tell the Captain."

Gabrielle smiled in return, "Don't worry, my lips are sealed."

She said goodnight to the guard and aimlessly began to stroll down the corridor. As she passed a half open door, a fresh, sweet scent caught her attention, and she pushed the door open and looked outside. In the dim light between dusk and night, she could barely make out a gravel path surrounded by tall hedges on either side, leading away from the door. The scent coming from the garden was both intoxicating and inviting so with no further ado, she leisurely began to walk down the path, enjoying the light breeze and the coolness of the air.

For how long she walked, she didn't know, but at the time she finally reached the end of the path, the sky above her was dark and the stars had appeared. Sleep still hadn't arrived, but she decided to return to her chamber anyway and perhaps get some writing done. She had been terribly negligent when it came to writing during the last couple of weeks, but she really hadn't had the time, and besides, it wasn't like there had been much to write about. She rounded a corner and ran almost headlong into Xena. She gasped and moved a few steps back. The dark woman was almost hidden in the darkness, but Gabrielle thought she saw a flicker of emotion cross Xena's face. As she studied the tall figure before her, she felt her heart rate speed up and unconsciously she moistened her lips.

"Hello, Gabrielle." The low voice spoke.

"Xena," was all she managed to reply.

"You look well."

"Thank you."

*Gods! What in Tartarus is going on here? This is not like I expected it would be. You'd think we weren't more than old acquaintances who happened to meet again.*

With the last thought, Gabrielle felt a silent fury built inside her, but whether it was directed towards Xena, herself or them both, she didn't know.

She could feel the blues eyes run over her face and body as if trying to memorize each detail.

"So... How have you been?"

Gabrielle had to shake her head incredulously.

"How do you think I've been? You left! Without as much as a goodbye."

"I thought it'd be better that way, easier."

The bard immediately recognized the slightly defensive tone of the warrior's voice.

"You thought it'd be easier?"

"Yes."

Gabrielle looked away for a moment, then looked straight back at Xena.

"For whom? You?"

"Maybe."

"Well," the bard replied dryly, "at least you're honest."

The warrior took a step closer, her voice earnest, "I've never lied to you, Gabrielle."

A poignant smile briefly showed on the blond woman's face.

"That may be, Xena, but there are so many things you haven't told me, so many things you keep hidden that it really doesn't make much of a difference."

"I've only tried to protect you."

"No, Xena. It's not me you're protecting, it's you."

The dark woman moved back a little, widening the distance between them, and for a few minutes neither spoke, but just looked into each other's eyes. Then Xena looked down, her voice barely above a whisper. "What is it you want to know?"

"Oh, Xena..." Gabrielle said in disbelief, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "It's not that simple. Do you expect me to..."

She stopped herself when she noticed the warrior's suddenly guarded expression.

"Okay, if you think it's..." She paused again, trying to make eye contact. Reluctantly,

Xena looked up and the bard took a deep breath.

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why did you pull away? Why did you feel you have to leave?"

"I told you back then, it's why I'm here. I had to find out what was going on."

Gabrielle bit her lip, "If you want to do this, Xena, then at least be honest with me. You know that's not what I was asking."

The warrior nodded to herself, then spoke, "Okay... Ask me again."

The bard was about to repeat her question, when another, more insistent one entered her mind. Once again she waited until the blue eyes were looking directly at her.

"You never intended to return, did you?"

Xena opened her mouth as if to protest, but no words came out. Gabrielle greeted the silence with quiet resignation. "I didn't think so... Why?"

"I...I..." The warrior's voice was suddenly shaky and hesitant, "I didn't want you to hate me."

The blond woman regarded her with both confusion and frustration on her face, "Why would I hate you, Xena?"

"It was all...it was all too much."

The words came fast now.

"I couldn't deal with it all. I meant to be there for you, I really did. You needed me and I let you down and what did I do about it? I let you down even more. It's just... I didn't understand... And then everything with Lykeas...I... It brought back so many memories and I had to... And you and Callias seemed so..." She trailed off, breaking eye contact.

Gabrielle looked at the warrior, trying to make some sense out of her ramblings.

"You let me down...?" She asked tentatively. "What do you mean?"

Xena let out a long breath, then straightened up. "I betrayed you."

"Betrayed me?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

The warrior swallowed, "The night with the celebration."

"You mean...you..." Gabrielle said, understanding slowly showing on her face.

"Yes."

Heavy silence lay between them for a long time.

"Why?"

"Gabrielle..."

"Why?"

Xena shrugged uncomfortably, "I was drunk, angry, hurting...miserable. I know it's no excuse, but it's-."

"It doesn't matter." The bard interrupted.

"W-What?"

"It doesn't matter. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

The warrior's eyes narrowed, "I don't understand."

Gabrielle looked at her, feeling both numb and eerily calm inside. She walked past Xena and managed to put a few yards between them, before the warrior's voice stopped her.

"You and Callias?"

Silence, then.

"Yes...I'm..."

Even though she heard no sound, the bard didn't have to turn around to know that Xena was no longer on the path behind her.

Lykeas walked quietly down the corridor, his mind far away. It hadn't taken him long to find Nicanor, but it had taken him considerably longer to make sure that the General didn't ignore or disobey his instructions again. Nicanor's stubbornness annoyed him and Lykeas didn't like to be annoyed, and usually people had always gotten the message pretty fast. Unfortunately, the General did have a few points that the dark warrior couldn't ignore. Lykeas had no actual authority over the soldiers or any real right to give orders, especially not to Nicanor, but those issues were not important in Lykeas' eyes, and inwardly he thought it wouldn't be long before those minor complications had been put right.

*Besides, it takes more than being a General to lead an army. Just being their commanding officer doesn't mean they'll sacrifice their lives for you or follow you to Tartarus and back. They have to love you to do that... Or fear you.*

He came to the end of the corridor and realized that in his musings he'd taken the wrong way. The corridor that was supposed to lead him to his chamber had instead led him to an old wooden door, the oak so old it was almost black. He looked back down the way he'd come, but didn't really feel like walking back, so with a shrug he opened the heavy door. It opened up to reveal a dimly lit room, torches randomly attached to the walls. The room was long and almost empty, a few armchairs and a woven carpet, reaching from where he stood to the door in the other end, being the only furnishing. As he stepped into the room and his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he discovered

which room it was he'd entered. On both walls hung several portraits, some showing more resemblance to King Simmias than others, but to Lykeas all of them, without exception seemed to be staring right at him, reproach and disapproval in their eyes..

*The portrait gallery. How nice...*

He ignored the staring portraits and casually walked down the carpet, trying to repress the feeling of being watched.

"Uncanny, isn't it?"

Lykeas jumped and spun around, black eyes blazing.

"Don't you ever do that again!"

Callias gave him an amused smile, "Feeling a bit jumpy, are we?"

The warrior just scowled, the humiliation of having being caught unaware stung and was starting to make him angry. The Captain read the expression and decided to find a safe topic.

"I hear you've done wonders with both Simmias' and Polyidos' armies."

Lykeas removed a few strands from his eyes.

"It didn't take much. They were all terribly out of shape."

The Amazon nodded, "I know, but still."

He shrugged, somehow unwilling to accept the compliment. For a while they stood uncomfortably in front of each other, not knowing what to say or what to do. Then Callias cleared her throat and gestured at the paintings.

"I feel like they're staring at me, judging me, condemning me. I'll never understand why they have to paint them like that."

Lykeas followed her gaze, "Yeah, I know what you mean." He smiled briefly. "This would be the perfect room to bring people before they were to be tried. If they had anything to feel guilty about, they'd crack in a second."

The Captain grinned, "True, this is exactly a place that'll make people feel guilty, whether they have done anything to deserve that or not."

She paused, and although her eyes were still mischievous, Lykeas was sure he detected a hint of something else in the blue depths.

"So, Lykeas... Do you have anything to feel guilty about?"

A smile curled at the edge of his mouth and he returned her gaze without difficulties.

"No."

The smile broadened.

"But...what about you, Callias? Have you behaved yourself?"

The mischievous glint in the Amazon's eyes disappeared and an almost undetectable look of sorrow took its place, but the dark warrior noticed. Callias saw the smile on Lykeas' face fade away and she saw sympathetic understanding emerge in the black eyes. Angry with herself, Lykeas and the world in general, the Captain looked away.

"So... What's this thing with Zelei?"

"Zelei?" Callias repeated in confusion. "What about her?"

Relieved to have left dangerous ground, Lykeas gladly elaborated.

"Her eye? What happened to her eye?"

"Oh," a proud smile showed distinctly on the Amazon's face, "the Queen beat her."

"What!" The warrior exclaimed in disbelief. "Gabrielle did that? You're kidding me, right?"

The Captain shook her head, Lykeas' amazed, but pleased expression chasing away any anger she might have felt by having her Queen's abilities questioned.

"No, I'm not. Zelei challenged her for the right of queen and of course Her Majesty accepted... And the rest is history."

"I'd wish I'd been there." The warrior replied with a wishful look in the eyes. "I sure would have liked to see that."

"Well, I for one hope, I'll never have to see it again."

Lykeas regarded Callias thoughtfully.

"You probably won't have to. Not now...with Xena around and all."

"I know." The Captain answered quietly.

They didn't speak again as they studied the portraits on the walls, the looming and flicking shadows making the ancient faces seem to glow with both life and soul.

A handle quietly moved and a door soundlessly opened. Blue eyes swept over a darkened room, showing no surprise at the sight of knocked down chairs and roughly treated pillows lying all over the floor. A figure moved inside the room, stopping just a few feet away from the now closed door. The eyes went from the discarded items on the floor to the dying embers, barely noticeable in the fireplace. Then the figure took a single step forward, the eyes now resting on the small form in the bed, half hidden by covers and darkness. For a moment the person lingered, then she took another step towards the bed.

"Why don't you just ask me?"

If the intruder was startled by the sudden voice from the bed she didn't show it.

"What do you mean?"

A soft whispering of cloth was heard as the woman in the bed shifted, "The reason why you're here. Why don't you just ask me?"

For a long time there was only silence, then a low voice finally spoke.

"Did it begin while I was still there?"

"No."

Xena let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding.

"It happened afterwards?"

"Yes." Gabrielle paused for a moment, trying to find the blue eyes in the shadows.  
"When you renounced your Championship."

"And now? Are you...together?"

The warrior's question came so fast that the bard doubted Xena had even heard the last part of her answer.

"No, no we're not."

Xena stepped closer till she was standing at the edge of the bed, and now Gabrielle was able to see the warrior's eyes shining in the darkness.

"Why not?" The voice was fully detached, not a single tone betraying the dark woman's thoughts.

The bard sat up and leaned back against the headboard, her face also unreadable.

"Who knows?"

It was clearly not the answer Xena had expected and she was about to speak again, when Gabrielle interrupted her.

"It was Callias' decision and although I didn't...agree right away, I know now it was the right thing to do... I guess it shows, she knows me better than...than I do myself."

"What do you mean?"

The bard shrugged and a sad smile crossed her face, but the warrior didn't see it.

"She knew I could never love her...not the way I love you."

Xena raised her head abruptly, but didn't speak and Gabrielle continued, her voice tired and wistful.

"Did you really think, I would be able to forget you if you left? Did you think, I would fall in love with somebody else? That anybody could take possession of my heart the way you do by just looking at me?"

The warrior opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. Instead she sat down gingerly on the bed, as far away from the bard as possible.

"I thought it was for the best." Xena finally managed to whisper.

"You were so happy in the village, they accepted you even though you didn't want to fight, they needed you and you them. They would protect you, care for you... I didn't

want to take you away from them again, and then the thing with-."

"I don't want to know her name." Gabrielle interrupted and the warrior gave her a remorseful and ashamed smile.

"I never knew her name. She was killed in the battle the next day."

"Oh..."

Silence fell again, but before it started to become uncomfortable, Xena continued, this time emotion evident in her voice.

"I always hurt you. No matter what, I always end up hurting you."

The bard felt the words deep in her heart and she moved down the bed till she was able to reach the warrior's hand.

"Not more than I hurt you, Xena. Don't you ever forget that. Nobody is ever fully to blame, it's never only one person's fault."

The warrior looked down at the pale hand resting on her own.

"Maybe not, but sometimes, I wonder..."

Gabrielle suddenly felt a small shiver run down her back and with her other hand raised Xena's head so she could see the warrior's face.

"What do you wonder, Xena?" She asked gently.

"I wonder... I mean, we're so different, sometimes I wonder if... With all the pain and...and all the hurt...I wonder if it's all worth it."

Calm green eyes looked into blue, "And which conclusion do you reach?"

Xena sighed, a faint smile appearing, then disappearing again from her face.

"That it doesn't really matter what I think or what I do."

"Why not?" The bard's quiet voice encouraging the warrior to continue.

"Because I can't live without you."

A beautiful smile showed on Gabrielle's face and she leaned closer.

"That's all I wanted to hear. It's the only thing, I'll ever want to hear."

The warrior looked at her uncertainly.

"Are..are we okay?"

"No," the bard shook her head, "but we will be."

## **Part 6**

## CHAPTER XXV

Alexias leaned casually against a pillar as he watched Lykeas go through yet another manoeuvre with his father's and King Simmias' soldiers. Again and again did he guide them through the complicated set of movements, stopping only to point out an error or praise a particularly well executed blow. Whenever a soldier made a mistake and the warrior brought it to his attention, the man looked like a dog chided by his master, and Alexias could swear that one of them had actually blushed from embarrassment. But every time, one of the soldiers did something that earned Lykeas' praise and respect, the man would practically glow and look at the warrior with pride and adoration in his eyes. The young Prince couldn't remember any of the soldiers ever looking at his father or their generals like that, and as he continued to watch the training he began to feel the same pride inside of him that was so clearly showing in the men's eyes, whenever they were acknowledged by Lykeas.

"Alexias, you got a moment?"

"Uh, sure." The Prince answered, hoping he hadn't been caught staring.

"I want you to try and avoid me for as long as possible."

"Avoid you?" Alexias said and stopped in front of the warrior.

"Yes, I want to demonstrate that sheer force doesn't win a fight or a battle for that matter. Speed is essential as well and since you're the youngest and fastest here, I want you to help me."

"Sure." The Prince replied not quite sure whether he should be pleased by Lykeas' words or not.

"Okay, this is what I want you to do. I'll keep attacking you, but you mustn't fight back. Just keep avoiding me, and only if you see an absolutely safe way of disarming me then you can try it."

The warrior paused then continued, his voice lacking any vanity or pride and was simply just relating facts. "It's not likely to happen though, so after a while, I'll make an opening which you then can try to take advantage of. But..." He looked seriously at Alexias, "be careful, don't get carried away. I don't want to hurt you."

The Prince gave him a strained smile, cheeks flushing with both annoyance and embarrassment, "I'll try my best not to."

Lykeas who had been studying something behind him, turned to look at the young man again.

"You better."

Gabrielle stepped out of the shade of the colonnade to get a better look at the activity before her. She wasn't exactly sure of what they were doing, to be honest she thought it looked like some kind of ritual dance, but judging from the look on the soldiers' faces, she could tell it was not. Lykeas kept charging and the young man she had been introduced to the other day, kept avoiding the attacks, staying clear of the sword.

*I suppose it's good for something.*

She looked down at the sandals she was currently wearing to hide a smile, she knew from experience that warriors didn't like to be made fun of.

*But really...sometimes...*

"It may be funny now, but it won't be quite as amusing tomorrow."

Gabrielle turned and looked guiltily into the gentle blue eyes of her Captain.

"What do you mean? What happens tomorrow?"

Callias' brow furrowed, "You mean they haven't told you?"

"What?" The Queen exasperated. "What haven't they told me?"

"We're heading out tomorrow. Our scouts have informed us that King Kassander is on the move, and we can't allow him to be the one who picks the battlefield. He has far too many advantages as it is already."

Gabrielle was silent for a long time, lost in thought and not even the encouraging shouts from the training field behind her or the intense stare of her Captain, managed to make an impact in her mind.

"It suddenly seems so real," she then spoke quietly. "Back in the village and even on the way here, everything seemed so far away, so theoretical and unreal."

Callias scrutinized the woman beside her, "Do you regret coming here?"

"No." The Queen answered without hesitation. "No, I belong here."

She bit her lip thoughtfully, looking at the activity on the training field without really seeing anything. "Callias, I want you to gather all our soldiers within the next hour, I want to speak to them."

An uncertain and slightly uncomfortable expression showed on the Amazon's face.

"What about, Your Majesty?"

Gabrielle frowned, "Why do you ask? I'll tell you together with the rest."

Callias fiddled with her belt, her unease increasing, "It's just...if you're going to make any announcements, I'd like to know about it beforehand."

The Queen crossed her arms, "And what exactly do you mean by that?"

The Captain straightened up and looked Gabrielle directly in the eye, "I mean that I would hate having to argue with the Queen in front of the warriors."

"And why would you want to do anything like that?"

The Queen's voice was controlled, but the Amazon could easily detect the anger behind the words.

"Because the Queen might want to announce that she intends to lead the warriors into

battle herself, and there's no way I'll be able to allow that."

"It's not in your power to allow or deny me anything," Gabrielle spat out. "You're only my Captain and I am your Queen. You have no claim on me."

Callias' entire body visibly stiffened, but she continued to speak in a calm, if slightly tense tone.

"That may be, Your Majesty. But don't you think that your people have a right to see you again, a right to want you safe and alive. They've lost one Regent already, they don't need to lose another... And as to not having any claim on you... Trust me, I'm fully aware of that."

Gabrielle cringed at the last tersely spoken words, her anger disappearing as quickly as it had arrived, but it was too late.

"Do what you have to do, Your Majesty. I'll make sure the warriors are ready for you in an hour."

"Arh... Alexias. Didn't I tell you to be careful? I told you, I didn't want to hurt you."

This time, Lykeas' voice cut through the haze in Gabrielle's mind as she watched Callias walk away.

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"Hey, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle looked back in surprise and found that she'd walked right past Lykeas sitting in a window frame without even noticing him.

"Oh, Lykeas. I didn't see you."

"I noticed." He slid gracefully down to the floor. "You were far away."

"I have a lot on my mind." She looked at him. "Want to walk with me for a while?"

"Sure."

Side by side they walked down the quiet corridor, the only sound being their steps on the hard stone floor.

"I'm going to speak to my warriors today."

"What about?"

Gabrielle smiled to no one in particular, "I'm not so sure anymore."

Lykeas glanced at her, "I'm sure you'll think of something."

They reached the end of the corridor and as if in mutual consent sat down on a bench placed under a window overlooking the garden. The bard sighed quietly and leaned against the wall.

"Remember the last time we sat together like this?"

The warrior scratched his cheek absently, "Yeah, we were waiting for Xena to come back with the water."

"A lot have happened since then."

Lykeas shrugged, "I guess so."

Gabrielle gave him a pleasant, but resigned smile, "Sometimes I wonder if anything matters to you at all, Lykeas. In all the time I've known you nothing seems to be able to get to you or surprise you. You just acknowledge everything that happens with a shrug and go on with your life."

He looked at her with confusion in his eyes.

"What else am I supposed to do? It's not like I can change anything that's happened already, so I might as well just accept it."

"Does nothing ever get to you? Have you never felt regret or wished you had the power to undo certain events?"

He shrugged, as Gabrielle knew he would.

"Haven't we all? But wishing things don't make them come true."

The bard looked at him intensely. "Tell me something, Lykeas. What do you want most in the world? What do you wish for more than anything else?"

He avoided her eyes, "Ohh... I don't know..."

"Come on, I know there must be something."

"Well... There was something once..."

"Yes?"

He looked up and Gabrielle was surprised to see a flicker of sadness in the black eyes.

"It doesn't matter anymore, it'll never happen... At least not the way I wanted it to."

The bard gave him a small smile, "No matter how much I push you, you're not gonna tell me, are you?"

He smiled in return, "No."

She nodded to herself and they both fell silent for a few moments.

"Can I ask you something else?"

He let out a long breath, but didn't seem annoyed. "Sure."

"Has Xena ever surprised you?"

His brow furrowed, "I'm not sure I follow?"

"I mean," Gabrielle elaborated, "has she ever done anything you didn't expect her to?"

"Uhm..." Lykeas thought for a minute or two, "I don't think so. Why?"

"Nothing really, just curious."

"Okay..." The warrior looked at her questioningly, but the bard didn't speak again, and Lykeas decided to continue.

"I've known Xena for a long time and I think I know her pretty well by now. I'm familiar with the two...uh...extremes of her personality. I knew her back in the old days and I can see how she is now, and then I know all the grey zones in between. So no, I don't think, she could do anything that would surprise me."

"Does the same thing go for her when it comes to you?"

"Probably," he replied, the dark eyes seeing right through her. "Sometimes, I think she knows me better than I do myself."

"I know the feeling."

He just smiled and looked out of the window, seeing things with his mind instead of his eyes.

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It wasn't yet dawn, but the castle was humming with activity. Everywhere people were getting ready for leaving or saying goodbye to loved ones, not knowing if they would ever see them again. One by one, battalions stepped forward, and not until they had been thoroughly inspected by Nicanor and Lykeas were they allowed to leave the castle and regroup outside. Xena was sitting on Argo in the courtyard, surrounded by an ocean of people moving back and forth, shouting greetings or talking quietly. A movement caught her eye and she turned in the saddle to see a determined troop of Amazon warriors make their way through the crowd, people quickly stepping aside for the imposing women. Without really looking, Lykeas waved them through the gate, obviously not bothering to inspect them.

"Okay, the cavalry next!" He shouted trying to make himself heard through the noise. "I want all soldiers in the cavalry outside with their horses within the next five minutes!"

If possible, even more activity erupted as men ran for the stables, but amazingly fast the courtyard emptied as the highly professional warriors returned with their horses and rode out of the gate. Nicanor handed a piece of parchment to Lykeas, and then followed the riders outside. The dark warrior let his eyes run over the paper then nodded satisfied to himself. He looked up and caught Xena's eye and with a remote smile, he made his way through the now considerably less crowded yard over to the warrior.

"We're just about ready." He spoke as he came to a halt beside the golden mare. "As soon as the supply wagons have been prepared, we'll be out of here."

Xena's eyes rested briefly on his face then resumed their inspection of the people around her.

"That's fine," she answered absently and Lykeas looked at her curiously.

"What are you looking for? Or should I say...who?"

"I didn't get a chance to speak to her yesterday." The blue eyes anxiously searched the courtyard again. "I thought she'd at least come and say goodbye."

"Oh, you mean..." Lykeas began, then stopped himself. "Ohhhh..."

The warrior abruptly turned her attention back to him, "Ohhh what?"

The dark man returned her gaze, his face suddenly blank. "I thought you knew."

"What?"

"Gabrielle's not staying, she's coming with us."

Xena didn't speak immediately, but Lykeas had no trouble reading her expression.

"With...us?"

"Yes."

"To meet Kassander?"

"Yes."

The hand holding Argo's reins tightened its grip.

"Does she... Does she intend to lead the warriors into battle herself?"

"I don't know," Lykeas answered, the black eyes intensely studying the woman above him. "All I know is that she's coming with us, but what else she might have planned I can't say."

Blue eyes locked with his.

"She's fighting again?"

It wasn't really a question and although the dark man knew an answer wasn't required he nodded, "Yes, I believe so."

Xena looked away, staring towards the horizon where the colourful beginnings of a sunrise could be seen.

"She didn't tell me."

She was silent for a moment, then looked down at the man on the ground.

"Where is she?"

"She went with the advance guard a few hours ago. We'll meet up with them tonight."

Xena's eyes narrowed, "Why didn't you tell me?"

"She asked me not to." Lykeas replied dispassionately. "She knew you'd do anything to make her stay."

"Doesn't she understand, I just want to protect her!" The warrior exclaimed, frustration, anger and something Lykeas couldn't quite put his finger on written all over her face.

The dark man sighed deeply.

"Look, Xena, I know you just want to protect her and so does Gabrielle, but don't you see it's not working? It seems to me that if you had your way, you'd prefer to keep her locked into a room and never let her out again, but what kind of life is that?"

"You don't understand-."

"Oh yes, I do." He interrupted before she could get started. "I know you hate not being in control, not being able to predict or anticipate anything that might happen, but nobody's capable of that. Not even you, Xena."

His voice became more gentle.

"You'll have to accept that sometimes things just happen for no reason, and that over and over again situations will occur that you can't control or change. If Gabrielle wants to follow us to Kassander there's nothing you can do about it. If she decides to lead her warriors it's her decision. If she gets hurt...", he looked straight into the warrior's eyes, "or killed, then it's not your fault."

A sad, pale smile showed on Xena's face.

"It doesn't matter what you say, Lykeas. Even if Gabrielle's killed falling from a horse, and I'm a thousand miles away when it happens, I'll feel like I'm to blame. Nothing will ever change that.... It's both my blessing and my curse."

She looked away again, her eyes focusing on the sunrise, and this time Lykeas didn't have anything to say and even if he'd had, she wouldn't have heard him.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

With an incredible speed, surprising even Xena, the army moved through the countryside. Even though the cavalry wasn't taking it easy, the infantry and the supply wagons had no problems keeping up, and Lykeas smiled inwardly. He'd done a good job. He was riding in front with the cavalry together with Xena and Nicanor. The Amazons were right behind them on foot, all eager to meet up with the advance guard and their Queen. Behind them came the combined infantry of King Simmias and King Polyidos, a force making up almost 800 men of both archers and swordsmen. A short distance after them, the wagons transporting food, water, medicine and people not directly involved with the fighting like healers and craftsmen followed. Also a fair amount of fortune hunters and farmers wanting to fight had joined them on the way,

and after a heated debate, it had been decided to let them come along. Lykeas had been displeased with the decision, not wanting amateurs in the army, but Xena had pulled him aside, quietly pointing out that it wasn't his army, and that General Nicanor and to some extent Alexias were in charge. The warrior had only scowled, already unhappy with Polyidos' decision about letting his son lead his troops, and the King himself remaining in his castle. Xena wasn't too thrilled with that decision either, knowing full well that at some point inevitably either she or Lykeas would have to step in for the inexperienced Prince, and she didn't particularly like that prospect. She wasn't exactly sure what it was she was worried about, she just knew that she was, and the look in Lykeas' eyes whenever he looked back at the endless rows of men following them, did nothing to appease her feeling of foreboding.

*I'll have to talk to him. Soon.*

She slowed Argo down a little till she was riding side by side with the dark warrior. He acknowledged her presence with a brief nod, but then stared straight ahead again. Xena didn't know how to begin the conversation she knew they needed to have, and for the next many miles they rode in silence. When she couldn't stand it no more, she turned to look at him.

"Nice weather today."

He looked at her, a slightly bemused expression on his face. "Yes, very nice."

Xena slapped herself mentally, this could take all day.

"We should reach Kassander's border by nightfall."

Lykeas let a hand run through his damp hair, then nodded. "Yes, I know."

*Okay, enough of the small talk. Get down to business!*

She took a deep breath, and she could see that he was becoming aware of the nature of the conversation, and immediately, the walls she knew so well went up. She guided Argo more to the left, away from the main force and after hesitating shortly, Lykeas followed on Rarjan. For a few more minutes they rode without speaking, instead giving each other an occasional surreptitious glance. Then Xena closed her eyes and let out a small sigh, before opening them again.

"Lykeas..."

"Yes?" He answered casually, but she recognized the guarded tone of his voice.

"If I ask you something, will you give me a straight answer?"

He was silent for a long time, not granting her the eye contact she was trying to make. Then suddenly he spoke, still staring at the horizon.

"You know, I won't lie to you." He slowly turned his head and their eyes met. "But before you ask me anything, let me ask you something first."

She looked at him and was surprised to see a small flicker of...something in the black eyes, before it disappeared and his face yet again became a controlled mask.

"Okay, what do you want to know?"

"If you get the answer you expect, what are you going to do about it?"

His voice was pleasant and calm, but Xena felt a cold shiver run down her back. She tried to speak, but couldn't find the words.

*What exactly am I going to do about it? What can I do? What am I willing to do?*

She could feel his eyes search her face with an almost frantic desire to read her mind, then simultaneously they both looked away.

"Please don't ask me that question." The whispered words reached Xena's ears only.

"I have to." She answered just as quietly.

"But not now." His voice was almost pleading and she swallowed hard.

"Okay, I'll wait... For now."

"That's all I ask."

They didn't talk more that day.

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Gabrielle watched as the open country around her quickly transformed into a disciplined campaign of war. Tents were raised, fires lit and guards posted. Everything was to be ready when the main force arrived and not a single man stood idle around, all were engaged in some kind of activity, some of them more obscure to Gabrielle than others.

"Your Majesty, your tent has been prepared."

"Thank you, Erinya." The Queen smiled at the sole Amazon she'd allowed to accompany her when she left with the advance guard. "When do you think the rest of the army will arrive?"

The weapons master squinted at the hastily reddening sun, "In about an hour or so, I'd say. Depends a bit on their speed, but definitely not more than two."

Her eye caught something at the other end of the camp, "If you'll excuse me, My Queen. I have a few things to attend to."

"Of course," Gabrielle answered readily, "don't let me keep you."

Erinya gave her a small nod and left. As she watched the Amazon's determined stride and the efficiently working men around her, Gabrielle began to wonder if she'd made the right choice.

*I'll probably be more of a burden, an inconvenience than any real help. Why did I think, I needed to be here? Who is it exactly who is supposed to need me?*

She angrily pushed the thought away, this was neither the time nor the place to feel self-conscious and helpless. She would have plenty of time for that later, particularly when Xena arrived.

*Xena...*

She felt guilty not telling the warrior about her intentions, but she knew without a doubt that Xena wouldn't have let her go, and the ugly argument that would have followed was something Gabrielle could do without right now. Something they both could do without. They hadn't really had the possibility to speak again after their conversation that late night, and the few times they'd been in the same room together they had both acted like polite strangers, nervously trying to gauge the other's mood and feelings. She wondered briefly what Xena would say to her when she arrived, if she would say anything at all. Even though Gabrielle feared the harsh words the warrior might have for her, she feared the silence even more. Silence was always a bad sign when it came to Xena, and taking the last couple of months into consideration, Gabrielle wasn't sure she knew what the warrior was thinking or feeling anymore, something she'd always known in the past.

She walked to the corner of the camp where her tent was and stepped inside. It was almost empty with only a pallet, a chair and a table inside, but Gabrielle didn't care. She liked comfort as much as the next person, but it had never been essential to her. If it had, she couldn't have travelled with Xena for as long as she had.

*I wonder if we'll ever travel together again...*

She was about to sit down on the pallet when she heard somebody clear his throat outside.

"Uh... Your Majesty?"

Gabrielle recognized the voice and smiled, "Come in, Alexias."

The young Prince lifted the tent flap and came inside, giving her a shy smile that the Queen found most endearing.

"I just wanted to make sure you'd been settled all right, I know it isn't the most grand of surroundings."

"Don't worry, I'm perfectly fine and probably a lot more comfortable than most of the men outside."

"Well, you should be," Alexias solemnly pointed out. "You're royalty after all."

Gabrielle couldn't help but think that Alexias had to one of the most formal persons she'd ever met, but she supposed it was something that came naturally when brought up as a prince. She sent him another disarming smile and she could see him relax a little.

*Oh, so there is a human being underneath all those layers of propriety.*

"Come sit down," she pointed at the chair. "We might as well spent some time talking, since it's clear that neither of us are needed right now."

He looked at the entrance of the tent for a moment, then sat down in the chair, an almost sheepish expression on his face. "Yeah, I do feel a bit useless right now."

"Don't worry," Gabrielle laughed. "You'll get used to it soon enough."

When she noticed him pale and the angry look in his eyes, she hurried to continue, "That was a joke, Alexias. I was only kidding."

He managed a strained, but heartfelt smile, "I know, I'm sorry. It's just...I'm so used to being questioned and doubted all the time that it only takes an innocent remark like that to trigger all my defence mechanisms...and usually at the most inconvenient of times."

"I know what you mean."

He looked at her thoughtfully, then smiled. "Yeah, I guess you do.... It's not always easy being around self-reliant, reserved and stoic warriors."

Gabrielle laughed out loud, "Tell me about it! Just getting them to speak with you requires more stamina, strength and patience than all the Gods combined could muster."

Alexias laughed as well., "Yes, patience is a good thing to have."

"Yes," she nodded, suddenly serious. "It's essential."

A shout from outside made them both jump up and leave the tent.

"They're coming! The General has arrived!"

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The fading sun had released the shadows of the night as the rest of the army came to a halt just outside the camp. Most of the soldiers would have to sleep under the open sky the first night, as there hadn't been either time or men enough to prepare tents for everyone, but the night was warm and nobody seemed to consider it a problem. Makeshift stables had been prepared for the cavalry's horses, and a couple of hours went by till every soldier had had their horses stabled and cared for, several men lingering a few moments brushing and talking to their faithful animals.

As the peculiar silence created from hundreds of people close together trying to be quiet began to settle over the camp, Xena left the stable. She stood for a while, watching the flickering fires and the occasional brief flash, when flames were reflected in weapons and armour. She heard the low mumbling and the sometimes hastily suppressed laughter. She saw men move about, walking from tents to fires to join in the circles around the light, and small groups of soldiers standing close together talking quietly.

*Gods! How long has it been? Four years? Five? Ten?... Was it ever like this?*

She began to walk slowly through the camp, avoiding the campfires, staying in the shadows. Once in a while, she would come across a soldier who'd give her a small

nod or respectful smile, but nobody ever stopped or tried to strike up a conversation with the warrior.

*Some things never change.*

At one time, she felt sure she was being watched, but as she spun around there was nobody behind her, and her feeling of unease disappeared soon after. As she had walked the perimeter of the camp, she stopped, not knowing exactly what to do next. Hesitantly, not quite willing to acknowledge it, she began to walk towards the Amazon part of the camp. As soon as she came close, she could feel the difference. Instantly the feeling of being watched returned, and this time she knew it wasn't her mind playing tricks on her. Two warriors materialized in the darkness before her and after a wordless exchange, they moved aside and allowed her to step in between the circle of tents. Only a single campfire was lit and not more than a few Amazons seemed to be still up and about, but Xena knew differently. Only a few would be sleeping, the rest would be out somewhere guarding their area or assisting the other soldiers posted at the outskirts of the camp. Keenly aware of the many pairs of eyes following her, Xena came to a halt outside Gabrielle's tent.

*This is stupid, she's probably asleep already or maybe...*

The thought persistently entered the warrior's mind in spite of her efforts trying to ignore it.

*Maybe she isn't alone...*

She began to regret ever getting near the Amazon encampment and wanted to leave, but in a rare case of indecisiveness, the warrior stayed, both willing and unwilling to take the next step. For some reason, she felt that more depended on her next choice of action than anything else ever had. Any other decision she'd ever made in her life seemed to pale and become insignificant in comparison. The fear of what might happen if she entered or didn't enter, settled as a heavy weight upon her shoulders, grounding her to the spot. Minutes slowly ticked by, but Xena didn't notice and neither did she notice one particular pair of eyes that studied her with an intensity outshining anybody else's. Then in one fluent movement, the warrior disappeared inside the tent.

Callias had to blink a few times, before she realized that Xena actually had entered. After the long period of indecision, the warrior's sudden movement had surprised her.

*No, not surprised... I knew she would...eventually.*

The Amazon walked further into the shadows where she'd been standing and sat down on the grass, pulling her knees up to her chin. She knew it would be better if she got up and away from the tents, perhaps replacing one of the guards posted at the outskirts, but somehow she found she was unable to move. She absently watched her hands as they pulled at the grass, almost feeling like they were detached from her body.

*If she hadn't... What would I've done? Stopped her? Gone to sleep, pretending never to have seen her or...entered the tent myself?*

Callias was suddenly startled to feel a warm moisture fill her eyes, blurring her vision

and she blinked angrily a few times.

*It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all.*

She got to her feet and walked out of the Amazon's encampment.

*Except to me... .*

For the briefest of moments, clear blue eyes lingered, then the Captain disappeared into the darkness.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

A strange, but somehow familiar sensation awoke Gabrielle from her sleep. She opened her eyes and wasn't the least bit surprised to see the warrior, sleeping soundly in the chair a few feet away from the pallet. Her head was leaning on her left shoulder and the part of her face that wasn't hidden by the dark hair was faintly illuminated by the early morning light. The odd contrast of dark and light caused Gabrielle to remain still under the covers, not wanting to wake Xena before she had memorized every feature, every line of the for once so peaceful and relaxed face.

*I'd wish she would look like this more often... When she's awake...*

The warrior stirred and Gabrielle knew Xena had sensed her gaze even in sleep. Eyelids fluttered and surprisingly alert blue eyes met green.

"Morning." Gabrielle smiled reassuringly, noticing the look of panic crossing the warrior's face and the eyes darting to the entrance of the tent.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-."

"It's all right," the bard smiled again, holding up a hand to silence her. "I don't mind... Actually, I'm glad you're here."

Xena gave her a tentative smile in return, started to say something, but stopped and looked down at the ground instead. Gabrielle searched her mind for something to say. It wasn't that she couldn't think of anything, quite the contrary, there was so much she wanted to say, but she wasn't sure whether it was the right time to do so or if it would be appreciated if she did.

"Are you angry with me?"

Blue eyes found hers again and the warrior shook her head slowly. "I was, but not anymore."

The bard's brow furrowed, it wasn't quite the answer she'd expected. It wasn't worse...just different.

"Not anymore?"

Xena smiled weakly. "What's the point? I've no right to tell you what to do...or not

do, for that matter. If you feel you have to be here, if you think it's right for you, then who am I to argue?"

She paused, taking a deep breath before continuing. "I know at times, I've been... Well, acted like a jerk, treating you like you were a little girl or...something...something in danger of breaking at the smallest touch. I know that and I'm sorry, but..."

She stopped again, a pained expression on her face.

"It's just so hard... I never want to see you hurt. I'm terrified by the thought... That I might..."

"Might what?" Gabrielle spoke softly.

"That I might...might lose you."

The bard pushed the covers aside and rose from the pallet, before kneeling down next to the chair, gently covering Xena's motionless hands with her own.

"I know, Xena. I know. I'd wish there was something I could tell, something that would ease that fear, but there isn't. Neither of us control our own destinies and if something happens then..."

She squeezed the warrior's hands, wondering if it was a tremor she just felt.

"All I can say is that, if the Gods are willing, in fifty years when I look back at my life with you, there won't be a single moment of regret. In spite of all the pain and hurt we've experienced, and all the obstacles we undoubtedly will encounter in the future, I will never, ever regret loving you and I'll always be grateful for your love in return." She turned Xena's hand and placed a soft kiss in the palm. "Don't you ever forget that."

She could feel the warrior's burning gaze and looked back up.

"Whatever I do, wherever I go, I do it willingly and because I choose to. It might not always be the right choice or the wisest, but I still have to... It's impossible for me not to... Do you understand?"

Xena nodded almost imperceptibly, one hand reaching out to caress Gabrielle's hair lightly.

"I do understand, I think I always have...but that doesn't make it any easier."

The bard smiled sadly, surprised by the electrifying impulses the warrior's gentle touch sent through her body.

"Do you think it's easy for me to see you fend off thugs everyday? Fighting other people's battles to keep them safe, risking your own life in the process? Always sacrificing yourself, not only for me, but also complete strangers. Trust me, Xena... I know all about that fear. I live with it too. It's with me when I'm awake and when I'm asleep. Sometimes it's so close, I feel like I'm going to suffocate, other times it's so distant I can pretend it doesn't exist."

She smiled again, but this time the sadness was gone.

"But it's my choice... It always was and always will be."

The hand in her hair stilled, then a hoarse voice whispered. "Your choice..."

The bard felt how she was drawn into the intense blue eyes, clouded with unspoken emotion.

"Yes, Xena...my choice."

She leaned up and pressed her lips briefly against the warrior's before sitting back on her heels.

"You are my choice."

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The air in the tent was tense, hot and stuffy, but whether it originated from the harsh sun burning through the canvass or the angry stares exchanged between the people inside, Gabrielle wasn't sure. She sighed quietly and leaned back in the uncomfortable chair. She was sweaty and miserable and felt the first warning signs of a headache just behind her left temple. It had been a long morning and apparently it was turning into a long afternoon as well. At first the war council had gone smoothly. Responsibilities had been delegated, a hierarchy established that everybody seemed to be able to live with, although the bard had noticed a few dark expressions. Then different defence tactics had been discussed and even that the various warriors and soldiers had been able to agree upon, but then a seemingly innocent remark by Callias had caused the fragile unanimity to crumble.

"Okay, since the basics have been decided let's get serious. Do we wait here for Kassander to attack or do we go out to meet him? Both options have, in my opinion, their cons and pros, but we have to make up our minds now and start preparations for whatever we agree upon. We all know we're running out of time and I don't want to be caught unaware."

The Captain's words had lingered in the air for a moment, nobody willing to speak as all had sensed that this matter wouldn't be as easy to settle as the rest. Then the red-headed General had spoken, his eyes going from Xena to Lykeas then Gabrielle before repeating the motion.

"I think, we should wait for him here. We know this area and won't be exhausted after days of marching like his troops will be when they arrive. We should stay."

He'd crossed his arms over his chest as if daring somebody to contradict him, but the nervous moistening of his lips betrayed the tough countenance. Xena had shot Lykeas a glance, but he seemed not even to have heard Nicanor speak, the black eyes tracing the random flight of a bee trapped inside the tent. So she cleared her throat and without looking at anyone in particular said, "I disagree, I think we should move further North. This plain is too easy to surround. We'll be sitting ducks."

Gabrielle sighed again, remembering the warrior's words. Needless to say, things had

gone downhill from there. They had all had their turn, each arguing for their specific point of view or agreeing with somebody else's. The bard knew that the rest of the occupants in the tent probably didn't consider her to be fully objective or independent, but to her, Xena's words had made sense and when it had been her turn to speak, she'd supported the warrior's suggestion, ignoring Nicanor's badly veiled disdain. The only one who had yet to voice his opinion on the matter was Lykeas. During the argument, Xena's eyes had continuously come to rest on the dark man, her expression questioning, pondering, but Lykeas hadn't once indicated he was aware of the attention bestowed on him.

As the heat in the tent increased and exhaustion and resignation began to show on all faces, the discussion quieted down until it completely ceased, leaving people to study each other in silence. Xena felt a drop of sweat begin to roll down her throat and she angrily wiped it away, this was getting them nowhere and they were wasting precious time. Time they couldn't afford to waste.

"As much fun as this has been, I think it's time to make a decision and any decision will be better than sitting around doing nothing."

Heads nodded and a low mumble of consent was heard. The warrior took this as a good sign and continued. "I know, I have no direct authority over you, Nicanor. I can't order you to do as I say and I've no intention of doing so either."

The General seemed to breathe a little easier.

"But I do think, I'm right when it comes to this. After all..." She paused, making eye contact with the reluctant soldier. "I do have a bit of...of experience when it comes to warfare."

Although the words were spoken quietly, to Gabrielle they seemed to drown out any other noise. She felt Xena's eyes upon her and looked up just in time to see a brief expression of uncertainty cross the bronze features. The bard gave her a small, private smile meant for the warrior only and for the briefest of seconds something resembling gratitude appeared in Xena's eyes before she turned her attention back to the General.

"I'm aware of your...your reputation." Nicanor spoke slowly, his face showing no emotion. Then he straightened up, "But I'm still in command and I think that-."

"I'm sure that if the situation was properly explained to Queen Phillinna, she would side with Xena in this matter," a soft voice spoke.

Their eyes turned to Lykeas who was still looking at the far corner of the tent, tracing the path of the bee. Xena's eyes bored into him till he finally relented and met her gaze. Unspoken questions and answers were passed between the two warriors in that brief moment, the exact meaning of the exchange reserved for them only, then Xena nodded to herself.

"I do believe you're right, Lykeas."

Her voice was free from any emotion whatsoever, but the General's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Are you saying you'd question my command and judgement in front of the Queen?"

"If necessary."

"What makes you think she'd listen?" Nicanor's voice was strained and he cleared his throat a few times.

The warrior shrugged, "A hunch."

For a minute the General said motionless, then he abruptly stood up, causing his chair to fall over in the process.

"I see I've been outnumbered, I'll do as you wish... But under protest and I intend to voice that protest to Her Majesty when we return."

"That's your prerogative," Xena replied calmly, watching Nicanor make his way out of the tent. "If we return..."

His back stiffened and he paused shortly before disappearing out of the tent.

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As Lykeas slipped out of the tent, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Lykeas, wait a minute..."

"Sorry, Xena." He smiled apologetically. "I don't have time right now. I have to make sure that my part of the infantry is getting ready. We're moving on tonight, remember?"

Xena didn't let go of his shoulder. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about..."

"Later, Xena." He gently, but firmly removed her hand. "Later."

She watched him walk towards the part of the camp where the infantry was and her brow furrowed slightly. She noticed a movement to her left and saw Zelei and Alexias exit the tent, followed shortly by Gabrielle and Callias. She saw the Queen reach out to halt the Captain and they exchanged a few words which Xena couldn't make out. She tried to appear indifferent, but felt how her eyes seemed to lock onto the two women before her, trying to interpret both conscious and subconscious body language.

*Okay, I really don't need this.*

With renewed determination, she looked away and began to walk in the direction of the stables. She had to prepare Argo.

"Xena?!" Gabrielle calling her name made her first pause, then slowly turn around to face her.

"Yes?"

"Will you be busy with preparations all day?"

The warrior's eyes rested on the impassive face of the Amazon Captain, before focusing on the Queen.

"I don't know, probably. Why?"

Gabrielle stepped closer and lowered her voice, "I thought we might meet up somewhere and..."

"And what?"

The Queen gave her a small smile, "And talk."

Xena sighed, "Gabrielle, haven't we talked enough these last couple of days to last us a lifetime?"

She instantly regretted the words as she saw the light in the green eyes fade.

"Gabrielle, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," she answered dismissively, already starting to walk away. "I guess, I'll see you later then."

Xena followed the slender form with her eyes and more than anything wanted to run after her and take her into her arms, but she remained motionless. When Gabrielle disappeared out of her sight, she involuntarily looked away and found herself caught up in a gaze of blue steel. The Captain tilted her head as if studying an interesting phenomenon and Xena felt her anger rise.

"Got something on your mind?"

Callias wasn't the least intimidated. "You're such a jerk sometimes."

The warrior grimaced, swallowing a few angry words she knew she'd regret later.

"I don't think this is any of your business." She then spoke tersely and started to leave.

"I love her."

Xena abruptly turned around, seeing both defiance and sadness on the Amazon's face.

"If it wasn't because I know her heart will always belong to you, I'd fight for her and her love."

The warrior felt her anger gradually disappear as she looked into the calm blue eyes. "I know that." She trailed off, feeling she should say more. "What...what do you want me to say?"

"Nothing." Callias replied, "I guess, I just wanted you to know."

"To keep me on my toes?" Xena said, managing a weak smile.

"Maybe..." The Captain answered, briefly returning the smile before turning serious again, "Maybe."

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

Kassander was furious and his otherwise brave Counsellor took a few steps back which turned out to be a wise decision as a mug promptly crashed against the stone wall where seconds before the Counsellor's head had been.

"Say that again! I'm sure, I didn't hear you correctly the first time."

"Uh," Pindar swallowed, "I'm afraid you did hear me right the first time."

The King stalked around the table until he was standing directly before his Counsellor, then leaned closer, hovering over him by almost a foot.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. We won't be able to cross the river for at least another two days. The rain has made it far too powerful. We'd be certain to lose men."

"We don't have two days!" The huge man shouted angrily and Pindar closed his eyes. "The longer we wait, the more we allow Polyidos and Phillinna to take control and adjust to the situation. I won't have it!"

The Counsellor felt the King move away and decided that a small peek would be safe.

"I understand your concern, My Lord, but we still outnumber their forces by three to one. Even if they had all the time of the world, they wouldn't be able to defeat us."

"Numbers aren't everything." Kassander replied thoughtfully and Pindar felt the hair at the back of his head rise. The King's expression wasn't one he felt comfortable with.

"Besides," Kassander continued, fingering with his grey beard, "I've heard certain rumours that I want to have verified."

"Oh, what have you heard, My Lord?"

Steel grey eyes bored into the Counsellor and Pindar shifted uneasily. The fire in his King's eye was a fire he'd seen far too frequent lately, but he knew better than to address it.

"I've heard," Kassander spoke rigidly, the grey eyes now distant, but the fire remained. "I've heard that Xena is riding with their army."

"That Xena?"

"Yes," the King spat out, "the one and only."

He walked over to the window and looked out at the fields belonging to the farmer in whose house, they were currently staying. Kassander wasn't too fond of sleeping in tents and when his army had camped late last night, he'd sent a few soldiers out to find an appropriate place for him to spend the night. They had come back bearing news of this farm and the King had decided to honour the farmer with his presence, whether the farmer wanted it or not.

"I always knew this day would come."

"What day? Which day?" Pindar asked tentatively, hoping he hadn't missed any of the King's words. Kassander wasn't fond of repeating himself either.

"The day," the muscular man licked his lips, "the day where I get to kill the Warrior Princess."

"Oh... I thought she had stopped that, I'd heard she had changed."

"Hah! Nobody changes that much! I'm sure the moment she feels the rush of battle and tastes the blood of her enemies, she'll shift right back into destroyer mode." He smiled dangerously, "And I'll be there, waiting for her."

He turned back to the window, "She owes me, Pindar. She owes me so much."

The King was quiet for a while, then in one swift motion turned to look at his Counsellor.

"How many?"

"W-What?" The now totally confused servant asked, "I'm afraid, I don't follow."

"How many men?" Kassander continued impatiently, "How many men do you think we'd lose if we tried to cross the river today?"

"Uhm, uh..." Pindar opened and closed his mouths a few times. "Why do you ask?"

"Why do you think?"

Realization hit and the Counsellor spoke earnestly, "Persia won't allow it."

"Bah Persia! Persia is very far away, Pindar. The High King has no way of stopping me if I decide to do it."

"Then the Persian generals, the Persian soldiers or you own men for that matter. They'll follow you into battle, but not into a senseless death, drowning in a river."

"We'll see about that," The King said confidently. "The Persians are so worked up on honour that if I challenge them, they might just do it to prove they're not cowards. Those idiots!" The disdain in the voice was clear. "And when it comes to my own men..."

"Yes?" The thin Counsellor's face was suddenly pale.

"Who says they'll have a choice in this matter? Either they cross the river with me or they'll wish they did."

Pindar looked confused, "You mean, you'll allow them to stay?"

"No, what I mean is that I'll personally skin everyone of them who refuses to come with me. *Farmer!*"

The King's sudden cry made the Counsellor jump.

"Is there more ale? I want more ale!"

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The forced tempo down the narrow road, reminded Alexias vividly of the last time he had travelled that route, but this time there was an even more frantic feel to it all. It was one thing for two riders to follow the road cutting through the thick forest, it was quite another for a whole army to do so. Every man and woman in the army moved forward with a determination and haste that by far surpassed anything the young Prince had ever witnessed before, but then again, he knew the reason for it. If they were trapped on the road, if Kassander surrounded the forest, they would be slaughtered. There was no way the cavalry or the archers could be optimally used on the narrow road, and even the infantry would be hindered by the sheer lack of space. It was more than likely that in the confusion that would undoubtedly follow, they'd end up hurting each other instead of the enemy soldiers. That was why they hurried and that was why no one ever complained of exhaustion or requested a rest. Their goal was a plain on the other side of the forest almost halfway inside of King Kassander's kingdom. From the plain the land slightly lowered so the King would have to fight uphill which was one of the reasons for Xena wanting to have the battle there. The chosen battlefield was only three days away from Kassander's castle, but when moving with an army it might take the King almost a week to get there, and the warrior knew that he'd also have to cross a river on the way, and she hoped it might delay him further. Although personally she doubted the King would wait. She hadn't known him to be a patient man back in the old days, and she didn't think that had changed much. She wondered if her presence would benefit or complicate the matter for her friends. She knew they needed her help in the upcoming battle, but she also knew that Kassander might be even more eager to destroy them when he heard she was fighting for his enemy, that is if he didn't know already. News travelled quickly, too quickly for her liking and she had started to...

"Hey, Xena."

Her thoughts were interrupted by Lykeas who'd suddenly appeared at her side.

He noticed her expression and gave her a knowing smile, "You think too much."

"What!" She shouted through the deafening noise of horse hooves and clanking metal.

"You think too much." He repeated, this time loud enough for her to hear.

She shrugged, "Can't help it."

"I know."

"What!" She shouted again, but he just shook his head and kned Rarjan forward to catch up with the cavalry which was leading the army. Xena saw him disappear in the dust clouds before her and took a deep breath that almost caused her to choke from the sand and dirt in the air. Her eyes had already been watering steadily for the last hour and her tongue felt like a piece of parchment, but she didn't allow herself one sip of water, acutely aware they might need it more later. They needed all their strength when facing Kassander and still that might not be enough. She pushed the thought away, deciding there would be enough time to worry about that later, besides there

were other things that occupied her mind.

*Gabrielle...*

It was always Gabrielle. A bittersweet smile crossed her face, but none of the riders around her noticed. Right now, Gabrielle was further behind, travelling with the Amazons and the part of the infantry that was under Alexias' command. The warrior could easily picture the bard walking erect and proud, the staff held tightly in one hand while the other might be supporting one of her warriors, offering them a drink from the water skin or perhaps telling a story or two. Her face would be flushed from the exertion and dirty from the dust and her hair would be damp with sweat, but her eyes would be shining with an even brighter intensity than usual. She would moisten her lips subconsciously several times, a small innocent gesture that had always caused Xena's knees to weaken.

*I wonder when I'll see that again.*

She sighed and turned her concentration back to the road ahead of her. They should be able to see the plain soon.

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A few hours after midnight the new camp had been established and the familiar, tense silence fell over the area. Xena was standing at the North end of the camp, looking down at the dark country before her. She had volunteered for midnight duty, although she didn't have to, but she knew her mind and body hadn't had the time to unwind after the hard ride, and sleep wouldn't come to her for at least a couple of hours. She felt edgy and restless, almost hoping Kassander's army would appear since the endless waiting had started to get to her. Everything would be better once he showed up and she had something solid to work with. Something that would also provide her exhausted mind with some much needed rest from all the speculation and wondering she'd done lately.

"Who's there?"

The warrior's quiet, but sudden command startled the stranger who'd been approaching almost soundlessly, but only for a minute.

"It's me."

"What do you want, Callias?" She asked in a tired, but calm voice.

The Amazon stepped out of the shadows and blinked a few times to accommodate for the bright light from the campfire.

"I'm here to relieve you."

"That won't be necessary. I'm fully capable of taking a few more hours."

"I know you are," the Captain tried to see the warrior's face in the darkness, "but there is no reason for you to do so."

Their eyes finally met and Callias continued, "This isn't your fight only, Xena. We're all here to do our share."

For a moment Xena thought about arguing, but decided against it. Her relationship with the Captain was awkward enough as it was, there was no reason to aggravate it further by getting into a pointless argument.

"You're right, thank you."

If the Amazon was surprised by the warrior's acquiescence she didn't show it, but only nodded briefly in acknowledgement. Xena began to walk away when a thought caused her to turn around and face the Captain, who looked at her questioningly.

"Callias..."

"Yes?"

The warrior wasn't quite sure how she should phrase the question or if she should voice it at all.

"Do you know what Gabrielle's intentions are?"

Callias moved a lock of blond hair behind an ear, "What do you mean?"

"Do you know if she intends to lead the Amazons into battle?"

"I take it you don't."

Xena bit back a sharp remark and counted to ten before continuing, "I wouldn't ask you if I did, would I?"

The Amazon didn't reply right away, her face impossible to read.

"No, I don't know what the Queen's plans are. She hasn't told anybody about them," she paused for a second, "or at least she hasn't told me."

"Are you sure?"

A somewhat amused smile flickered across the Captain's face, "Yes, Xena. I'm sure."

The warrior nodded and started to leave again, but was held back by Callias' voice.

"Why don't you just ask her?"

Without an answer, Xena walked back to the camp. She quickly came to her tent, but stopped outside. She really didn't feel like going to bed. She threw a glance at the tent placed a couple of feet away from hers. She was tempted to go inside, but the tent was dark and not a sound was heard. She doubted that Lykeas was sleeping, but in case he was, she wouldn't take the risk of waking him. He needed all the rest he could get and she knew from experience that the smallest sound or movement would wake him up, so with a sigh she abandoned the idea of any further conversation that night and stepped inside her own tent. In spite of the darkness, she immediately realized she wasn't alone and it only took her a second to find out who it was that occupied the chair in the middle of the tent.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard rose from the chair and closed the distance between them.

"Are you busy?"

"No."

"Do you have to be anywhere?"

"No." Xena replied uncertainly, not quite knowing where Gabrielle was heading.

"Do you plan to run out on me any time soon?"

"No!" The warrior's voice was irritated now. "Gabrielle, where's all this leading."

The bard reached out and took the dark woman's hand, "I'll show you." And with that she led the dazed warrior to the skin covered pallet and pushed her down into a sitting position.

"Gabrielle...?"

The bard felt the familiar shiver she always felt when Xena spoke her name and gently put a finger on the warrior's lips.

"Say my name."

"Gabrielle?" This time the question was more outspoken and the blond woman shook her head.

"No, say it properly."

With the tip of her tongue, the warrior brushed the soft skin of the bard's finger, then she looked up and deep blue met smoky green.

"Gabrielle."

They both smiled, one feeling it against her finger, the other seeing it with wistful eyes, and then Xena pulled the bard down onto her lap.

"You're not going anywhere?"

The warrior shook her head, her mouth suddenly too dry to speak.

"You'll be here when I wake up?"

Xena nodded, but Gabrielle smiled and shook her head. "No, say it."

"I'll be here, I promise," the warrior rasped, trying to swallow.

The bard slid her arms around the dark woman's neck and felt Xena's go round her waist.

"I love you, Gabrielle."

The words halted the young woman's approach and she leaned back slightly to study

the warrior's face. A smile mixed with both pain and joy appeared on the bard's face, before she moved forward, resting her head on Xena's shoulder.

"Don't you ever forget that."

Later, neither could remember who it was who had spoken those words, but at that time, it didn't matter.

## Part 7

### CHAPTER XXIX

Two days later, a messenger from King Kassander arrived. The message was short and clear: Surrender or die. Their reply was just as short and straight forward: We'll die before we surrender. The fifth day, Kassander's army came into view below them. Immediately all troops were put into alert and the soldiers hurried to get their horses from the stables or meet up with their commanding officer for further instructions. However, those instructions were long underway because the people instructing the officers, once again had difficulties reaching an agreement..

"It can't be done, it's never been done before!"

"Just because it hasn't been done before doesn't mean it's impossible." Xena's fingers gently caressed the hard form of her chakram, "Besides the Amazons are used to warfare like that, their experience will help us."

"But nobody's done it before, not with a large battle like this. It's...it's not right!"

The warrior looked sceptically at the red-headed General.

"I wasn't aware there was a *right* way and a *wrong* way fighting a battle." She leaned back in the chair, "It's the result that counts, nothing else."

"But attacking them at night!" Nicanor tried again, knowing he was fighting a losing battle. "Nobody's ever attacked anybody at night before. At dawn yes, but not at night not with-."

"-With an army as large as ours." Xena interrupted, "I know, General, you've told me already." She looked curiously at him, "I'm aware, you've your head full of ideals and traditions of how to fight. Two armies meeting on a plain in broad daylight, during the summer of course, no fighting during harvest season, fighting man to man, honourably and skilfully, until one of them is either defeated or surrenders, but..." The warrior's tone hardened, "This is not the time for heroics, this is the time for survival and don't you lose sight of that, Nicanor. We don't have the luxury of choice in this matter. The darkness gives us an advantage, hopefully both of surprise and speed, and I'll be damned if we're not gonna take it." She cast a glance at Alexias, who nodded slowly.

"I think she's right. It may be unconventional and probably not the way my father would want to do it," he smiled sadly, "but to me it sounds like a good plan, the plan most likely to give us a fair chance of defeating them."

"We'll have to do it tomorrow night or the night after at the latest, that is if Kassander hasn't attacked us by then."

Xena nodded. "Lykeas is right. Kassander won't attack today and most likely not tomorrow either. He'll have to rest his troops after the long march and, if I'm not quite mistaken, do some rearranging as well. I'm pretty sure, he must have lost soldiers crossing the river."

"What makes you think he crossed the river?" Zelei inquired.

"He's here, that's why. It's the fastest way. If he hadn't, he'd still be at least a day's or two days' march away."

Expecting further questions, the warrior kept her gaze on the Amazon, but to her surprise, the Captain only crossed her arms and leaned back, as if indicating she was finished.

"I assume the warriors are familiar with fighting in the dark?" Xena asked, turning to look at Callias. The blonde Amazon nodded, "Yes, they are."

"I'll appreciate it if you and the other warriors would go through some techniques of communication and orientation when fighting nights with the soldiers. They'll need it."

"Of course," the Captain replied, "but we're only forty and there isn't much time."

"I know, just do your best and Lykeas will work with his part of the infantry." She glanced at the dark man, "He's familiar with the techniques already."

The dark warrior looked at her briefly, then stared back at the table.

"Any questions?" Xena waited a few seconds, but nobody reacted, "Good, then let's get out of here, there's much to do."

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"They're fantastic!"

"Yes, I know," Gabrielle replied with pride in her voice, "even the most well-trained soldier will have to fear them."

"I never knew..." Alexias trailed off and watched with amazement as one of his father's soldiers was easily defeated by an Amazon warrior.

"Not a lot do," the Queen answered, also looking intensely at the practice. "Men tend to underestimate the Amazons," she smiled as Erinya forced another swordsman to his knees. "Not for long though."

The Prince turned to look at her, "Have you often been attacked by outsiders?"

Gabrielle shrugged lightly, not wanting to think about the last time they'd been attacked. "It happens, but usually it's not that serious. The occasional warlord or groups of thugs thinking we're an easy target."

"But you're not?"

The Queen smiled again, "No."

They continued to watch the training, both marvelling at the skills the Amazon warriors and some of the soldiers showed.

"King Simmias' men fight extremely well," Alexias said. "If I didn't know better, I'd say they have started to fight like Amazons."

Gabrielle laughed quietly. "Maybe you're right, Lykeas did train them after all and he'd know what to show them."

The young man looked away from the men and women fighting, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"What do you mean, he'd know what to show them? I've never seen Lykeas spend much time with any of your Amazons."

"Well," the Queen began, "it's a long story that I won't tell you now, all I'll say is that Lykeas was raised in an Amazon village and learned to fight there."

"Oh..." Alexias said softly, letting his eyes run over the camp, trying to catch a glimpse of the dark warrior, "I see."

He looked at Gabrielle again, "I take it his childhood wasn't much...fun?"

The Queen hesitated, not sure what or how much she wanted to say. During her last months in the village, she'd learned that the subject of Lemea was still something most Amazons avoided, and aside from her short conversation with Ephiny about it, nobody else had seemed willing to talk. The young Prince had no trouble understanding Gabrielle's silence.

"Found a sore spot, did I?" He asked in an inquiring, but friendly voice.

The Queen nodded, "Yeah, you could say that."

Alexias eyes searched the camp again, "I guess that explains a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh nothing," he shook his head. "Just thinking."

Gabrielle watched him curiously, experiencing a strange sense of *deja vu*, but before she could speak, she saw Xena coming out from the stables, squinting a few times against the fading light of the sun, before noticing the green eyes watching her. A smile appeared on the warrior's face and she began to make her way towards them, but halfway there, the smile abruptly disappeared. Gabrielle looked in bewilderment as Xena's gaze suddenly darted away and her face turned from friendly and affectionate into an expression of uncertainty and turmoil. It took her only a second to realize what it was the warrior had seen. Overlooking the enemy camp below him was Lykeas, a cold and calculating expression clearly showing in the black eyes. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword as he turned to speak a few words to the group of soldiers standing beside him. The men eagerly saluted and then hurried away to carry out whatever it was they had been ordered to do. The dark warrior looked towards the horizon for a few moments more, before he turned away again and in the split second

his gaze met Gabrielle's, she could swear she saw a longing in his eyes, a longing that was more powerful and more real than any other emotion she'd ever seen on his face. Then he noticed Xena and instantly the expression was gone. Alexias and Gabrielle saw the two warriors slowly close the distance between them, coming to a halt only inches away from each other. It was impossible to hear the few words exchanged and only the bard's intimate knowledge of Xena's silent way of communicating with looks and almost imperceptible movements, told her that whatever it was that was discussed, it was of a great importance to them both. Suddenly Lykeas reached out and put his hand under Xena's chin, forcing her to look him directly into the eyes. His next words to the warrior caused her demeanour to change from hunter to hunted and her entire body stiffened, but she didn't pull away. They stood like this for a long time, then Lykeas released her, his hand brushing her face gently in the process. He began to walk away and Gabrielle assumed the confrontation was over, but a couple of yards away he turned around to face the warrior again, whose eyes hadn't left him for a second. The dark man smiled sadly, apparently unaware of all the eyes now watching him.

"Things may turn out entirely different, Xena. I know what you fear, but have you considered the fact you might not have a reason to feel that way at all?"

He didn't expect an answer and started to walk away again.

"But you can't promise me, Lykeas, can you?"

Xena's surprisingly strained voice didn't stop him as he continued towards the centre of the camp.

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The bard wasn't surprised to see Xena pacing back and forth in her tent when she arrived later that evening after having had a short meeting with her Captains. The warrior acknowledged her presence with a nod and stopped to sit down in the chair, only to jump up seconds later and resume her pacing. Gabrielle sighed inaudibly and sat down on the pallet, drawing her knees up to rest her chin upon them.

"Are you gonna tell me what's bothering you?"

Xena answered with an unintelligible grunt and raised her hands dismissively.

"Is something wrong with Lykeas? Did you have a fight?"

The warrior paused to look at the bard for a moment, but Gabrielle had an uncanny feeling that she was looking right through her.

"No."

The blond woman sighed and raised a tired hand to rub her left temple where a headache was starting to form.

"What is it then?"

Xena sat down in the chair again, but still wasn't able to remain seated and quickly

got back on her feet.

"It's just..." She paused, angrily biting her lip, "It's just something Lykeas and I have to work out, it's no big deal."

Gabrielle could see that the warrior was about to begin pacing again and quickly stood up to take her hand. She gently, but determinedly led the agitated, but willing woman back to the pallet and they both sat down, facing each other.

"No big deal, you say..."

Xena shrugged, "I'm probably..." She sighed and looked down at her hands in her lap, "It's just... I'd wish, I wouldn't have to face this now." She looked up again, a bittersweet smile flickering across her face, "The timing's lousy, but then again, Lykeas and I were never good at that."

The bard was beginning to feel frustrated, but managed to make her voice sound neutral.

"Xena, what are you talking about? What is it you have to face and what do you mean by the timing being lousy? I don't understand a word of what you're saying."

The warrior reached out and took one of Gabrielle's hands into her own, mindlessly drawing small patterns in the bard's palm.

"Don't worry about it, Gabrielle. I'll find a way to work it all out."

Abruptly the bard pulled her hand away and Xena looked up in surprise.

"What?"

"You're doing it again!"

"What?!"

"Keeping things from me! I thought, we'd come to an understanding about that. You don't keep anything important from me and I don't keep anything important from you. Didn't we agree upon that?"

The warrior squirmed uncomfortably under Gabrielle's angry stare.

"Well yes, but this...this is...different."

She looked at the bard as if that explained everything.

"In what way, Xena? In what way is this different?"

Xena broke eye contact and looked down at her hands again, muttering something Gabrielle couldn't make out.

"Look at me, please."

The warrior reluctantly raised her head.

"Xena, I know that whatever it is there's going on with you and Lykeas it's something you're very concerned about, and I really want to help you, but I can't... Not if you

won't tell me about it."

The warrior grimaced uncertainly, the blue eyes full of doubt.

"Don't you trust me enough to tell me?"

"Of course I do!" Xena hurried to answer, claiming the bard's hand again to squeeze it reassuringly. "It's just... it's just, I don't know if there's anything to tell at all, maybe I'm just overreacting or something, but..."

"But what," Gabrielle asked softly.

"But I know him so well."

She smiled sadly and lifted the blond woman's hand briefly to her lips. "I'd like to tell you what's worrying me, but I can't...not now. I'd feel like...like I was betraying his trust or something like that. Please don't ask me to do that."

Gabrielle was silent for a long time, trying to piece all the fragments of information she'd received together in her head, then she gave the hand holding hers a gentle squeeze.

"I'd never ask you to do anything like that... I just hate seeing you like this, it makes me feel so helpless...useless."

"You're never useless," the warrior said vehemently. "Never."

"But when-."

Xena raised her hand, silencing the bard and then stood up.

"I have to go now, there's still much to do before the attack tomorrow night."

She saw Gabrielle's crestfallen expression and pulled the bard up and into her arms.

"I will tell you. Soon. But until then, I'll have to ask you to trust me. I'm dealing with this the only way I can. I owe him that."

"I do trust you," the bard whispered, "but I don't understand... Do I...do I have reason to be afraid?"

"Not about me," the warrior replied just as quietly, before kissing Gabrielle softly on the mouth. "Not about me."

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"I'm looking for Arichoros, do you know where I can find him?"

The soldiers' quiet chatter faded and they looked up from the fire to see their commanding officer standing in the dancing shadows created by the flames.

"Lykeas!" One of the soldiers, a young bearded man exclaimed, "Why don't you join us? We were just discussing the upcoming battle."

"Yeah," another man continued, "we have both food and wine," he gestured at the items to emphasize his point. "After all the work you've done with us, you deserve a break."

Several of the other soldiers nodded in agreement, most of them looking at the dark warrior with open admiration in their eyes.

"Yes," the young man who had spoken first continued, "please join us, it'll be fun."

Lykeas smiled briefly, but shook his head, "I'm sorry, I can't, not tonight anyway."

His eyes went from one soldier's face to the next, imprinting every detail, then he looked back at the bearded man.

"Lyssander, I'm looking for Arichoros, where do you think he is?"

The soldier beamed at the use of his name and pointed towards the stables. "I think, he went in there... To find a bit of privacy, if you know what I mean..." Lyssander trailed off suddenly as he noticed the expression on Lykeas' face harden.

"Yeah, I know... Don't drink too much, if I come back I find any of you drunk, you'll all be punished."

The men nodded eagerly and he turned and started to walk away.

"What's with him?" One of the soldiers mumbled to his friend, who only shrugged.

"He's probably got a lot on his mind."

The soldiers looked at each other, then continued their earlier conversation, all making sure that nobody drank too much.

Lykeas entered the stable quietly and paused to listen. A loud snoring filled the air, mingling with the muffled sounds of the horses breathing and hooves shifting. He had no problems locating the sleeping man, who was lying spread-eagled in the last stall in the back of the stable. He was only half dressed, his shirt, weapons and boots lying discarded all over the straw covered ground. It was obvious that the soldier hadn't entered the stable alone, but whoever had been with him was gone now and Lykeas doubted that much had taken place. Even from where he was standing the smell of alcohol was strong and unpleasant. He stepped closer till he was standing directly above the almost unconscious man, wrinkling his nose at the stale smell emanating from Arichoros' body. Then he stepped back slightly and kicked the man forcefully in the ribs. A deep groan followed the low thud where Lykeas' boot connected with the soldier's body, but the drunken man didn't wake up. The dark warrior tilted his head and studied the slumped form below him and then he smiled. In a few long strides he was out of the stable and at the watering trough outside. He filled the bucket standing beside it and went back inside.

"Phefff... What the fuck is..." Arichoros angrily wiped his face and spat a few times. "What in Tartarus do you think you're doing? You're gonna fucking pay for this!"

"Really?"

The soldier stiffened as he recognized the voice and began frantically to rub his eyes.

"Sir? Lykeas? Is that you?"

He looked up at the shadow looming over him and his heart sank when he saw the piercing black eyes. He tried to get to his feet, but fell back down on one knee, still feeling the after effects of all the wine he'd consumed earlier. Sitting on both knees, he looked up again, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. I know, I shouldn't have drunk that much."

He winced and touched his left side gingerly, confused by the agonizing pain in his ribs.

"I promise, it'll never happen again."

Lykeas let out a deep breath as if he was being burdened with an unpleasant, but necessary task.

"That's not the problem, Arichoros." He spoke softly, "Not this time."

The soldier smiled with relief and was about to try another attempt at getting up, when the warrior's voice stopped him.

"It's much worse than that."

Arichoros sank back down, trying to avoid the contemplating gaze.

"Sir...?"

"I thought, I'd made myself perfectly clear on this matter."

He raised a hand and absently traced an eyebrow with his finger. "But as I learned earlier tonight, apparently not clear enough."

The soldier swallowed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

"What do you mean, sir? I said, I was sorry about the drinking. I'll take whatever punishment you find appropriate."

Lykeas smiled and the man on the ground suddenly felt cold.

"I took a tour of the camp tonight."

The soldier didn't know if he was supposed to respond and decided to remain silent. Whatever it was the warrior was displeased with, he was sure they'd get there soon enough.

"I even went as far as the followers' camp. You know, the place where all the craftsmen, healers and whores hang out."

Arichoros nodded slowly, his confused brain trying to guess where his officer was heading.

"And I heard an interesting rumour."

"Yes...?" He asked hesitantly, getting the distinct feeling he wasn't going to like the next part of the story.

"It was about a woman, a prostitute to be exact."

His knees were starting to hurt and Arichoros desperately wished that the warrior would hurry up and finish, but he didn't dare rush him. He'd learned soon enough during the long practice sessions back in Simmias' castle that nobody rushed Lykeas.

"She'd been raped."

The soldier paled instantly.

"By a man who didn't even bother to pay her afterwards."

He studied the man below him, the black eyes eerily distanced. "And the funny thing is, she claimed he came from my part of the infantry."

He leaned down to stare into Arichoros' wide open eyes.

"But you know... That can't really be, can it? Because I distinctly remember forbidding all the men under my command to even think the thought of taking advantage of any woman or man they might encounter."

He leaned back again.

"So she must be lying, mustn't she, Arichoros?"

As the soldier looked into the cold, black eyes, the thought of denying it all quickly left his mind. When Lykeas didn't get an answer he continued, his voice maintaining its calm, clinical tone.

"So of course, I didn't believe her, but..." He shook his head as if being very disappointed by the actions of a naughty child. "But she even claimed to know his name, and she also claimed that he had a leaf shaped scar on his left shoulder."

The dark warrior leaned down again.

"Well, what do you know... It looks like you have a scar like that, what a coincidence."

Arichoros felt his knees weaken and his eyes darted nervously from Lykeas' face to the stable door and back.

"She was just a whore, a slut," he whispered, pressing his sweaty palms against his still aching ribs. "She wasn't important."

Lykeas didn't answer.

"Everybody does it! It happens all the time, it's war for crying out loud!" The soldier's voice was both defiant and defensive. "I know what you said, but why do you have to get so upset about this? There's really no reason to, it's no big deal."

Arichoros screamed as a boot kicked him squarely in the ribs and he tumbled backwards, his head hitting the ground hard. Another kick followed and the soldier tried to curl up to protect his ribs, only accomplishing the next kick to be in his head.

"How *dare* you defy my orders?" A voice suddenly whispered into his ear.

"I'll never do it again! Never, I swear-." Arichoros cried out, his last words cut short by a fist slamming into his mouth.

As the punches kept coming, the soldier closed his eyes tightly to lock out the image of the dark man and the disinterested and blank expression on his face.

"Please, I won't... Never..." He whimpered almost inaudibly and just before everything went black he heard a voice, seemingly coming from far, far away.

"I know."

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### CHAPTER XXX

Together with a faint grey light, the early dawn brought the cold. A dry, but chilling wind swept across the landscape driving away the last traces of the morning mist, and the Amazon guards shivered and pulled their coats tighter around them. They were posted at the far end of the plain, directly overlooking the hundreds of enemy tents further below. Erinya shuddered again as the wind managed to find a way under her coat and lightly brush her numb body, she had been on guard for the last five hours and was looking forward to be relieved. She heard soft footsteps behind her and saw Zelei approach, trying to stifle a yawn.

"You look like Tartarus."

"Well, thank you," Zelei replied sarcastically, "that damn wind's howling kept me awake all night."

She shook her head and blinked a few times, "Anything interesting to report?"

"Nah," the weapons master answered, rubbing her palms together to bring a bit of warm back to her hands. "Everything's been peaceful except for a few drunken Persians who wanted to come straight up here and fight last night. Fortunately their more sober friends managed to restrain them."

"Fortunately." Zelei repeated.

"Yeah, fortunately."

The two Amazons looked at each other and then they exclaimed at the same time, "For them!"

"What's so funny?"

Slowly they managed to get their laughing under control and turned to meet the inquiring gaze of their Queen.

"Oh nothing, Your Majesty." Zelei began before a coughing fit interrupted her words.

"Nothing important," Erinya continued and smiled at the blond woman, "but what are you doing here, my Queen, it's still early. You should be sleeping while there's still

time."

Gabrielle shrugged, "I know, but the wind's keeping me awake and after Xena left to check on Argo, it was too cold to remain still."

Unreadable green eyes darted to the Captain's face and the black eye patch, before returning to the weapons master.

"So I thought, I might as well see how my tough warriors were doing. Any cold feet?" The last remark was accompanied by a warm smile and both Amazons smiled in return.

"You've no idea," Erinya replied, looking down at her boots, "I think, I stopped feeling my feet two hours ago."

"Well, your shift is over now, isn't it? So why don't you get out of here and heat up some water for your feet, we're gonna need all of you for the attack tonight."

"I think, I might just do that." The weapons master looked at Zelei. "Okay, you're in charge now, have fun."

"Hahaha," the Captain answered and gave the Amazon a friendly slap on the butt. "Get out of here before I change my mind."

Erinya started to walk away and an awkward silence settled between the two remaining women. Gabrielle shifted her weight from one foot to the other, searching her mind for something to say.

"I'll be right back, Your Majesty," Zelei then said before the Queen had the chance to open her mouth. "I'll just make sure the fire doesn't die."

Gabrielle nodded and watched as the Amazon walked the short distance to the glowing embers that was all there was left of the night's fire. Zelei put her axe on the ground and began to blow on the embers while adding a couple of the branches lying nearby. Suddenly a faint sound made her look up and past the Queen. Her eye narrowed and Gabrielle turned in confusion to see what it was the Captain had noticed. A single horseman was thundering up towards them. The bard's eyes were drawn to the single rider and she saw his ruddy face contort into a savage grin as he stood up in the saddle, and pulled an arrow from the quiver attached to his back. Angry shouts sounded from the enemy camp below and Zelei realized that whatever it was the soldier intended to do, it was something he'd thought of himself. As the horse sped up, she saw the man almost lose his balance and only with a firm grip on the reins, did he manage to stay in the saddle.

*Aha, he's drunk. Must be one of them Erinya mentioned earlier.*

He was close now and Gabrielle could feel the ground shake under her feet. Feeling strangely detached, she watched the soldier place the arrow on the bow, raise it and aim. She looked down at the staff in her hands and saw to her surprise that her knuckles were white from gripping it so tightly. She looked back up and focused on the Persian's bloodshot eyes, hardly hearing the frantic shouts from the weapons master as the Amazon stormed back towards them, while trying to prepare her own bow. Zelei's eye went from the approaching Amazon to the even faster approaching soldier. She looked at the staff in the Queen's hands and then back at the man who

was now close enough to shoot.

"Gabrielle!" Erinya shouted desperately, "Get down!"

The Captain grabbed her axe and got up from her kneeling position by the fire.

*She won't make it. He's too close. You're not fast enough, Erinya.*

Gabrielle widened her stance, hoping against hope she'd somehow be able to deflect the arrow.

"Zelei!"

The Amazon heard the weapons master shout her name and turned briefly to meet her eyes, then in one fluid motion she threw her axe a few feet up in the air, caught it again and hurled it past the Queen. Gabrielle shrank back as she heard the whistling sound and saw the axe embed itself deeply into the Persian's chest, instantly spraying his face with blood. He fell forwards, down the horse, but his right foot got caught in the stirrup and he was dragged behind the panicking horse, who reared before running back down the slope.

"Oh thank Gods!" Erinya managed to squeeze out between wheezing breaths when she finally reached her Queen. "That could have been..." She stopped, drawing another deep breath.

Gabrielle touched the Amazon's shoulder reassuringly, but her eyes were on the Captain, standing with her back to them, still looking in the direction of the soldier.

"Zelei?"

The brown-haired woman turned around, an annoyed expression on her face.

"He's got my axe. The bastard stole my axe!"

The Queen had to smile at the Amazon's words. "Well, he might not see it that way." She stepped closer and hesitated only briefly before offering her hand.

"Thank you, Zelei."

The Captain barely took her hand before releasing it again, "No problem."

She looked down at the enemy camp again and sighed.

"I'd just wish, I still had my axe. It was my favourite."

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Xena forcefully pushed her way through the crowd, not caring about the angry protests from the warriors she nearly knocked over.

"Gabrielle! Are you all right?"

Without waiting for an answer, the warrior put her hands on the bard's shoulders and worried blue eyes subjected the slender body to a thorough study. Gabrielle blushed

faintly as she saw the friendly, but amused smiles from the Amazons around them. She gently put her own hands on the warrior's.

"Xena, I'm fine. I wasn't hurt."

The tall woman leaned back a bit, searching Gabrielle's body one more time for any sign of injury, before slowly releasing her grip on the bard's shoulders.

"You sure?"

Gabrielle nodded, "Yes, he never got a chance. Zelei took care of that."

"Zelei?" The warrior grimaced. "She killed him?"

"Yes," the bard nodded again, a smile appearing on her face, "and lost a damn good axe in the process."

Xena stepped back slightly, "Oh..."

She suddenly became aware of all the eyes resting upon them and looked around.

"Don't you got anywhere to be?"

To her annoyance she heard several chuckles from the warriors that didn't seem to be the least bit intimidated by her menacing glare, but at least they all went and left them alone. Gently, but firmly she took the bard by the arm and led her into the nearest tent.

"Xena," Gabrielle protested, "this is not-."

Her words were cut short by a warm, demanding mouth and she willingly let all her protests slide. After all, there were more important matters to attend to. Long minutes later, Xena finally released the bard's lips, but continued to hold the young woman in her arms. Gabrielle moved a hand away from the warrior's neck and affectionately brushed a few dark strands away.

"Feeling better now?"

Xena's eyes widened in surprise, "You're asking me?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't the one who was nearly killed."

The bard smiled, "I know, but I'm still asking."

The warrior opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it again and was silent for a few moments. Then a warm smile slowly drove the worry from her face.

"You're amazing, you know that?"

Gabrielle laughed quietly and leaned in to rest her head against Xena's chest, wrapping her arms around the warrior's waist.

"Only with you, love. Only with you."

She felt Xena's arms tighten around her and sighed contentedly. If it were up to her,

she'd be happy to stay in the warrior's arms for the rest of her life.

"Oh, sorry... I didn't know there was anybody in here."

They both looked up and saw Alexias stand in the opening of the tent, looking totally embarrassed.

Gabrielle smiled at the young man, "Is it your tent?"

"Err...yes, but you're welcome to use it... That is, I mean..if...what I'm saying is...you..."

The bard could feel silent laughter rumble in the warrior's chest and fought to remain serious, there was no reason to make the Prince more uncomfortable than he already was.

"Is okay, Alexias. We were...we were just leaving."

She slipped out of Xena's arms and patted him on the shoulder, "I'll see you later."

She lifted the tent flap and disappeared and the warrior started to follow, but was stopped by the young man's voice.

"Uh...Xena?"

She turned around, "Yes?"

The Prince swallowed nervously, "I was wondering..."

"Yes?" She said again, trying not to sound too impatient.

Alexias steeled himself, "I was wondering if you had any advice to give me."

"Advice?"

"Yes, about the attack tonight. You know, I'm going to lead my father's part of the cavalry instead of the infantry, and I thought that maybe you could give me a few hints or something..." He faltered, before starting again. "I know this must seem tedious to you, but I really want to do a good job, my father...my father is counting on me. If my brothers were still alive it wouldn't have been a problem, but since they're not I have to...I have to..." He smiled sadly, "I musn't fail."

Xena studied the young man in front of her, considering her options. She knew that what he needed the most was experience and that wasn't something she could help him with, but she also knew that he was in need of some kind of reassurance otherwise he wouldn't have come to her. She crossed her arms and looked at him sternly.

"Do your men respect you?"

"Yes, they do, but what-."

"Do they know what to do?"

He nodded.

"Do you feel capable of leading them?"

He was silent for a few moments, "Yes, yes I think so."

"You think so...?"

He raised his head and met her eyes, "I *know*, I am."

He was surprised by a sudden smile from the warrior.

"Well in that case, what do you have to worry about?"

Alexias looked away briefly, then back at Xena, a smile of his own showing on the beautiful face.

"When you put it like that, nothing I guess..."

"You always have to see things in the right perspective," the warrior said, feeling surprisingly good about herself. "I'm sure you'll do both your brothers and your father honour, in fact... I know you will."

Deciding that was enough moral support for one day, Xena started to walk towards the tent flap again.

"Thanks."

She raised her hand half-heartedly, "Don't mention it."

The Prince stood alone in the tent for a couple of minutes, then his eyes fell on the object he'd come for, he grabbed the axe and went outside.

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"Have you seen, Zelei?"

Lykeas took the water skin from his lips and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No."

Then he took another sip.

"Oh..." Alexias looked around, "I wanted to give her my spare axe, I heard, she's lost hers."

"Try the forest, that's usually a good place to start when looking for Amazons."

"That one?" The Prince asked, pointing in the direction of the dark forest they had been travelling through a couple of days ago.

"Uh huh," Lykeas replied disinterestedly, his eyes lingering on the axe in the young man's hand. "That's a nice piece you got there."

Alexias nodded, "It was Polyidos' axe."

The dark warrior's brow furrowed, "He was your brother, right?"

The Prince nodded again.

"You sure, you want to give it to her?" Lykeas continued, still eyeing the obviously very valuable weapon. "You might not get it back again."

"Oh well," the young man shrugged, "I'm sure, I'll manage somehow."

"Okay," the warrior said and gave the axe one last appreciative look before heading back to the camp.

Alexias walked the few miles to the forest, glad to be away from the noise and the smell of hundreds of men living close together. As he entered the forest, he started to wonder if he shouldn't have asked one of the Amazons about Zelei's whereabouts instead of Lykeas, but as he inhaled the fresh, earthy scent of the trees around him, he didn't care. Even if he didn't find the Amazon Captain, he was happy just to be in the forest and take a break from war councils, arguments and the tense atmosphere that continuously lingered in the air, refusing to leave the area. He moved in and out between the trees, not caring about the branches scratching his arms and legs. After about an hour's walk, he came across a huge oak tree and leaned against it, closing his eyes. For no reason at all, he smiled as all the sounds of the forest washed over him. He took a deep breath and listened to the birds in the trees above him and to the small animals in the underbrush, either hunting or being hunted themselves. Then suddenly, through the rattling of leaves, carried with the wind, he heard the sound of quiet voices talking together.

*What the...*

He opened his eyes and listened intensely. The voices seemed to come from behind a thick scrub further inside the forest, and he stealthily stepped closer, careful not to make a sound. Thorns tore his close and branches got caught in his hair as he pushed himself through the green wall, but the Prince didn't stop. A couple of feet inside, he reached out and pushed a few branches aside, peering carefully out at the clearing on the other side. His breath caught in his throat and his heart began to pound furiously as he saw the owners of the two voices. Out there in the clearing, only a couple of yards away, was Zelei talking to a huge, muscular man with piercing grey eyes. Alexias' brain refused to believe what his eyes were telling him, but when the man opened his mouth and started to speak again, all doubt left his mind.

*Kassander! Zelei's talking to Kassander! But... But why, it doesn't make sense, I don't understand...*

"And what do you have to gain from this?"

The King's deep voice penetrated the Prince's disbelieving mind, and he shivered involuntarily as he saw a malicious grin appear on the Captain's face.

"I get to see the Queen dead."

Kassander let a single finger run through his grey beard, "If that's all you want, why didn't you just let my man kill her this morning. There was no reason for you to intervene."

"Arh," Zelei shrugged, "I would if I could have gotten away with it, but as it was, there were too many people around and questions would have been asked if I hadn't tried to protect her, questions I can't afford."

"Oh...?" The King arched an eyebrow, "Why's that."

"Because I want to be the next queen and that'll be impossible if people suspect I had something to do with her death."

The pale brown eye blazed with a wild fire.

"I can't kill her myself and with that bodyguard of hers, it's too dangerous to arrange an accident."

"So that's why you want me to do it?"

"Yes," the Amazon's voice was eager now. "In exchange for our battle plans, you make sure the Queen dies on the battlefield and in case she isn't there, you'll have to enter our camp and finish the job there. When you know our tactics, your victory will be painless and quick and the only thing you have to promise is that afterwards, when you take on the rest of Greece, you leave the Amazon Nation alone. I don't give a damn about what you do with the rest of the country, but the Nation has to be safe."

The King took his bottom lip between thumb and index finger and pulled at it thoughtfully.

"In case I agree, I'm not saying I'm going to, but just in case... What makes you think, I'll keep my promise to you afterwards?"

Zelei smiled, "You've lost to us twice already and although I know that in the end, we won't be able to hinder you take our lands, I also know that we'll be able to give you more trouble than those couple of trees and fields are worth."

Her smile grew even sweeter.

"The Amazons will be able to delay and complicate your conquest of Greece to the extent that the High King of Persia might change his mind about the whole thing, and withdraw his troops and what then Kassander? You know, you're not capable of defeating the entire country alone. You'd have to go back home, that is, if you still have one, and all those years of planning and preparing would've been for nothing. Is that what you want?"

Kassander's grey eyes narrowed, but his body didn't break the relaxed pose.

"You sure know how to build your case."

The Captain dismissed the compliment with a quick shrug.

"So what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

Alexias slowly eased himself back out of the scrub, he'd heard enough. His entire body shook with rage and he had to resist the urge to rush back and strangle the Amazon with his bare hands. As fast and quietly as possible, he began to walk back the way he'd come, not daring to break into a run before he was further away. He

almost jumped when a fox suddenly ran past him and he felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. He nervously looked around, but didn't see or hear anything. Subconsciously he picked up a faster pace, trying to ignore the feeling of eyes watching him from behind. Soon he couldn't take it any longer and he started to run, only to feel his legs forcefully being pulled away from underneath him. He fell down on the soft, leaf covered earth, the impact knocking all air from his lungs.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Alexias twisted his body around and stared directly into a single cold brown eye.

"If it isn't the young Prince out for a stroll."

A sinister smile showed on Zelei's face.

"Don't you know it can be dangerous for little boys to run around alone...very dangerous."

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## CHAPTER XXXI

"I know it's a risk, but it's a risk we have to take. The infantry has to come before the cavalry, there's no way to silence the horses enough not to be discovered the moment we get close. Only when the infantry's taken care of the first part, then we'll set in the cavalry."

"And what if the infantry's discovered before they reach King Kassander's camp?"

Xena shrugged and blue emotionless eyes looked directly at Nicanor.

"Then I'd say, we have a problem."

"That's all you got to say?" The General asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

The red-headed man let out a low curse and briskly walked away, leaving Xena and Lykeas alone outside the tent used for council meetings.

Lykeas scratched the back of his head and turned to look at Xena, "I'm not sure, I like Nicanor's attitude." A grin crossed his face, "He has no faith."

"No, I'm surprised he's lasted as long as he had," she returned his grin, but then turned serious again. "Has everything been prepared? Is the infantry ready?"

The warrior nodded, "Yeah, both my part and Nicanor's are ready to head out, and so are the Amazons if I'm not quite mistaken, but what about you?"

Xena cringed and looked away briefly. "Well, they're ready, but I'm still not sure it's a good idea."

"Ah, come on, Xena." Lykeas began, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Since Alexias is going to lead the cavalry, somebody else has to lead the part of the infantry that's

under his command, and we both know there's nobody better qualified than you."

"And that's supposed to be a compliment?" Xena smiled wryly.

"Yes, in my opinion, absolutely." He looked at her seriously, black eyes searching her face. "It'd be like the old days, before everything went.-"

"No!" She interrupted with more force than she'd intended, causing him to remove his hand from her shoulder. "It'll not be like before, Lykeas! Nothing will ever be like that again. Is that clear?"

His eyes narrowed and his face darkened briefly, before it was replaced by a look of indifference.

"Sure, Xena, I know that. I didn't mean anything by it."

She eyed him sceptically, but decided to let it go.

"Okay, I'm sorry I jumped on you like that, must be nerves."

To her relief, he smiled.

"Nerves? Xena, you really *are* getting old."

"Watch it! Or I'll have to show you just how *old* I am, and trust me, I'll take great delight in doing so."

She rested her hand casually on the chakram and Lykeas raised his hands in mock surrender.

"That won't be necessary... I know how good you are."

For a while a loaded, but not awkward silence hung between them, then Xena reached out and brushed his cheek with her finger.

"You be careful tonight, okay?"

He nodded, "You too."

Then they abruptly turned and headed off in different directions, neither looking back.

"Lykeas!"

Lost in thought, the dark warrior didn't respond immediately.

"Lykeas! Wait up!"

He stopped and looked up to see Gabrielle run towards him.

"Hey, Gabrielle. Something wrong?"

The bard came to a halt in front of him and took a few breaths before speaking.

"Well, yes or maybe not. It might not mean anything."

"Yes...?" He urged her on, wishing she'd come to the point.

"Well, apparently Alexias has gone missing."

"Missing?" Lykeas frowned. "What do you mean, missing?"

"They can't find him," Gabrielle gestured in direction of the stables. "He was supposed to meet with his officers an hour ago and he hasn't showed up yet."

"Hmm, that's not like him." The warrior bit the inside of his cheek, "That's gonna complicate matters."

The bard looked at him incredulously.

"Complicate matters? Gee, Lykeas! Is that all you have to say?"

"We don't have much time to rearrange the cavalry, it'll be dark in two hours and then everything has to be ready." Lykeas speculated out loud, not paying any attention to Gabrielle.

"This is highly inconvenient."

"Inconvenient!" The bard spluttered. "Have you considered that something might have happened to him, that maybe he's hurt or in trouble."

"Or maybe, he's just chickened out," the dark warrior's face was hard and merciless. "Maybe he decided, he wasn't up to the challenge after all, maybe he woke up this morning and decided to run all the way back to daddy... Although..."

The cruel expression changed into one of puzzlement.

"What?" Gabrielle inquired more calmly, noticing the warrior's change of moods.

"Nothing, it's just..." He shook his head. "It doesn't matter... When was he last seen?"

"Uhh, this morning, I believe it was. Callias mentioned she saw him talking to you."

"That's right, but that's hours ago," his brow furrowed. "Strange..."

"What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" Lykeas replied, looking slightly bewildered.

"There's no time to go out searching for him now, no matter how much we'd like to. We're less than three hours away from an all-important battle. We can't go out looking for lost princes now."

"But...but something might have happened to him." The bard said imploringly, "He's such a nice young man, by Zeus, he's practically a boy!"

For some reason, Lykeas thought the last remark very sweet coming from Gabrielle and he had to hide a smile.

"Okay, I'll get some of the people from the followers' camp to go look for him, but that's all I can do right now. If he truly is missing and stays that way, then we'll have to find somebody else to lead the cavalry."

His eyes took on a distant expression, "Someone capable."

The bard saw he was lost to the world again, shook her head and went back to the stable to convey Lykeas' words to Alexias' officers.

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Frustrated the bard tried to tie the laces at the back of her skirt again, but no matter how much she craned her neck, she couldn't see enough to do it properly. She then tried to turn the skirt around to tie it in front of her, but then it proved impossible to move the fabric back in place again.

*There's no way, I'm going outside with a skirt turned the wrong way round.*

She sighed and began to untie the knots once again. She really liked wearing most of her Amazon gear, but sometimes it was more trouble getting into than it was worth. She stepped over to the tent flap and lifted it a little to peek outside, perhaps one of her subjects was nearby, ready to aid her Queen in this serious matter. She had to smile at the thought, but as long as the Amazons insisted that their Queen wore her sometimes less than practical outfits, then the least they could do was to help her get into them without getting injured in the process.

*Maybe Xena's somewhere nearby...*

Green eyes searched the area outside the tent, but as she had suspected neither the warrior or any of the Amazons were around. They had been busy all day, preparing for battle and Gabrielle doubted they would return anytime soon. Just as she was about to give up the idea of wearing any clean clothes that day, she saw a slender figure come running from the direction of the main camp and enter the area that was reserved for the Amazons. The blond woman ran resolutely to a tent a couple of yards away from the Queen's and entered. Gabrielle bit her lip, she could get help with her skirt now if she wanted, but... In that same instant, the tent flap was roughly pushed aside and the Amazon appeared again, this time carrying a bow and a quiver under her right arm. Gabrielle took a quick decision.

"Callias!"

The Captain, who'd already started to run back towards the main camp, stopped dead in her tracks and turned around.

"Yes...?"

The Queen smiled sheepishly, "Could you help me for a moment?"

Callias looked in the direction of the other camp and then back at Gabrielle.

"Well, is it important? I don't really have the time right now, they're expecting me."

"It won't take long." The bard replied and disappeared into her tent and after a moment of hesitation, the Captain followed.

"It's a bit embarrassing, but I can't tie the laces on my skirt, so if you'd be so kind..."

She paused, her smile slightly nervous. "I'd really appreciate it."

The blond Amazon looked at her in confusion, "Your skirt?"

Gabrielle smiled again and turned around so Callias would get the idea, "Yes, my skirt."

"Uh, sure..."

She knelt down behind the Queen and quickly tied the appropriate knots and bows before getting back up.

"Okay, that's been taken care of, anything else?"

Gabrielle turned around to face the Amazon, "No that's all and thanks, those knots can be a real pain."

A faint, almost mischievous smile showed on the Captain's face, "I know, but in my experience, I think they're more difficult to untie than the other way round"

The Queen blushed slightly and cleared her throat, "Well...yes, you may have a point there."

Callias started to laugh quietly and soon Gabrielle joined her, both feeling the tension between them disappear. When they'd calmed down again, the bard sat down on her pallet, gesturing to the Amazon to take the chair.

"I really don't have much time, Your Majesty. I should go."

"I know, but I'm sure they'll be able to do without you for five more minutes, I want to talk to you." She pointed sternly at the chair again, a warm smile belying the formal nature of her gesture. "And It's still Gabrielle, not Your Majesty."

The Captain hesitated only briefly before sitting down, placing the bow and quiver beside her on the ground.

"I wasn't sure if..."

"What?" The Queen asked earnestly, "You wasn't sure if...?"

Callias looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"I wasn't sure if you still wanted me to call you by your first name, I...I wasn't sure it was all right."

"It'll always be all right, Callias. Nothing can ever change that." Gabrielle said, feeling a sudden ache inside her. "What do you take me for?"

The Amazon shrugged, avoiding her eyes. "I'm sorry...I don't... I guess..." She faltered and they both felt how the previous tension between them returned.

Gabrielle felt like kicking herself, hard. If anybody had anything to apologize for it was her and not Callias.

"I'm sorry."

The Captain looked up abruptly.

"What?"

"I'm sorry about...about..."

No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find the right words to express her feelings. To her surprise the blue eyes watching her turned almost hostile.

"What? What are you sorry about? That you got involved with me in the first place or that you dumped me the moment you saw your change to get back with Xena?"

The Queen's face turned pale, but her voice remained calm.

"I'm sorry, Callias. I should never have..." She trailed off again, then almost whispered, "I'm sorry for hurting you. I never meant to, I just..."

She couldn't hold the Amazon's gaze and looked down at the ground.

"I know, you must think that I used you, that it didn't matter to me, that you didn't matter to me, but it's not true. It wasn't...it wasn't like that. I don't know why I..." She took a deep breath and looked up again. "I care about you a lot, Callias. I really do, you must believe me."

"But you don't love me."

Gabrielle looked into resigned, but calm blue eyes.

"I don't know what-."

Callias raised her hand, "You don't have to say anything, Gabrielle. I'm a big girl," she smiled sadly, "and you don't have to apologize. I knew exactly what I was in for when I first followed you that night. It's just as much my responsibility as it's yours. We both knew it wasn't going to last forever."

"I don't want you to think it didn't mean anything to me."

The Captain sighed and removed a few blond strands from her eyes, "I know it meant something...maybe not as much as I'd have liked it to, but I know it did, and I'm sorry about what I said before, you didn't dump me. If anything, I dumped you."

A pained smile showed on the Queen's face, "I...I really don't know what to say. I'd wish...I'd wish..."

"I know," Callias replied quietly and rose from the chair. She bent down to pick up the bow and quiver and then, without hesitation, she leaned forward and kissed Gabrielle gently on the cheek before walking out of the tent.

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Lykeas found Gabrielle sitting alone at a campfire, absently poking the flames with a stick. She didn't notice him right away and he hesitated for a moment, unsure of what he wanted to do, before he sat down beside her. She looked up and gave him a small

smile then continued to stare into the fire.

"You all right?"

She took a deep breath and nodded, "Yeah, just thinking." Then suddenly remembering, she looked back at him, "Have you found Alexias?"

He shook his head, "They haven't returned yet, so I don't think so... There isn't much time left."

They both looked toward the setting sun, bathing their faces in a dark red glow and making Gabrielle's hair seem more red than blond whereas Lykeas' hair just seemed to absorb the light and quench it.

"Beautiful."

He nodded, "Yes."

The bard looked at him in surprise, but didn't say anything. Suddenly the sound of several horses thundering by only a short distance away caused them both to turn their heads.

"Xena's preparing the cavalry."

"Yes," Gabrielle looked back to the fire. "I know."

Lykeas chuckled quietly, "She's not too happy about it, though."

The bard began poking the fire again, "Do you think she's afraid that she'll...that she'll lose control?"

He looked at her, but she didn't meet his eyes.

"No, I don't think so. I think she might be afraid that she'll enjoy herself too much, but not that she'll lose control."

Gabrielle nodded to herself, then after a short pause spoke again, "And what about you, Lykeas? Are you going to enjoy yourself?"

"If we win." He tried to make light out of the question, but didn't quite succeed and they both knew it.

Gabrielle looked into the dark eyes, ignoring the guarded expression she saw there.

"Why are you here?"

The warrior smiled, "It seems to me you've asked me that once already."

"I know," she returned his smile briefly, "and you didn't answer me then either... What is it you want? What are you hoping to achieve?"

He scratched his chin for a moment before answering, "I want to win, I want to defeat Kassander and the Persians."

The bard began to tap her fingers against the ground, "You know that's not what I mean. There's no obvious reason why you should choose to fight this battle. Why do

you care?"

"Maybe I just want to make a name for myself," he grinned disarmingly. "Maybe I just want to be remembered."

Gabrielle smiled, letting go of her frustration with the warrior for now.

"Trust me, Lykeas. I'll never forget you."

"Well, mission accomplished, then." His tone was light, but his eyes were serious as he looked away. "That's nice to hear," he continued quietly.

The bard looked at him in confusion, trying to understand what had just happened, if anything.

"Everybody deserves to be remembered," she began tentatively, fully expecting him to lash out at her or get up and leave at any second, but the dark-haired man remained where he was.

"Maybe." He fidgeted with his sword, still not looking at her. "When...when I was younger, I used to picture my own funeral and...and all those people would be there, talking about me, remembering me...crying."

He raised his head and looked at her embarrassed, "Pretty silly, huh?"

Gabrielle's mind was working overtime, desperately trying to deal with this sudden revelation and the warrior's unexpected openness. The last thing she wanted now was to say something that would make him jump back into his shell, where he very likely would never emerge from again.

"I'll cry for you, Lykeas."

She instantly slapped herself mentally, that was not the understanding, mature and wise thing, she'd wanted to say, but to her surprise he didn't laugh.

"Well, then...what more could I ask for.... Thank you."

She searched his face, looking for signs that he was making fun of her, but didn't find any. The silence stretched between them for a long time, then simultaneously they both got to their feet.

"We should get ready."

"Yes," the bard agreed, but neither made a move to walk away.

"Gabrielle...?"

"Yes?"

"I was wondering... Have you decided whether you're going to stay here or lead the Amazons into battle?"

She gave him a pale smile, "I think, we both know the answer to that."

He nodded to himself, "I'm glad to hear that... I don't want you to get hurt."

And then he turned and practically ran towards his tent.

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"Hey..." Xena spoke softly without turning around, continuing to tighten the straps on Argo's saddle.

Gabrielle had long ago stopped being surprised by the warrior's never failing ability to recognize her steps from anybody else's and just smiled to herself, coming to a halt just behind Xena.

"Hi."

Finishing her task, Xena gave Argo an affectionate pat on the rump, before turning around to face the bard.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Gabrielle asked curiously.

"For staying in the camp...Lykeas told me."

"Oh..." The bard reached out and tentatively stroked Argo a few times, "I didn't know that, I was going to tell you now."

The warrior followed the movements of Gabrielle's hand for a brief moment, then looked back at the blond woman.

"I wouldn't have stopped you, you know. I wouldn't have liked it, but if you'd really decided to lead them, I wouldn't have stopped you."

"I know," the bard said quietly and looked directly into beautiful blue eyes. "Thank you."

Xena shrugged and smiled a little, "No problem."

Suddenly at a loss for words, Gabrielle absently let her eyes roam the stable, noticing that Argo was the only horse left.

"The cavalry is ready?"

"Yeah, I'm the only one left," the warrior paused, "we're leaving soon."

Instead of saying anything, the bard moved forward and wrapped her arms around the taller woman's waist, burying her head in her shoulder. Slightly startled, Xena put her arms around Gabrielle, feeling the bard tighten her embrace in return.

"Are you all right?"

She felt Gabrielle nod against her chest, but a light tremor betrayed the bard's feelings and the warrior gently raised the young woman's chin to look into moist green eyes.

"Hey...what's wrong?"

The bard just shook her head and smiled through tears, before resting her head on Xena's shoulder. Confused and worried, the warrior pulled Gabrielle tighter and gently kissed the blond hair, feeling how the bard slowly began to relax against her. After a few more moments, Xena leaned back a little and hesitantly waited for Gabrielle to look up. With one finger, she carefully wiped the tears away.

"What was all that about?"

The bard shook her head, "I...I don't know. I just..." She looked like she was about to cry again, "I just never want to be without you again."

The warrior felt a lump in her throat and swallowed, "I don't want to be without you either."

Xena desperately wanted to hold the young woman even tighter, to have her as close as possible, but knew that if she did that, Gabrielle would be crushed, so she settled for a kiss instead. Slowly and almost searching their lips moved against each other, communicating more than words ever could. Reluctantly they broke apart, but the moment their eyes met, they leaned forward to kiss again, this time with greater force and urgency.

"We have to leave now."

It took them a second to realize that somebody had spoken and they both looked up to see Lykeas stand in the stable door, looking at them with an almost apologetic expression. He smiled briefly at Gabrielle, then looked at Xena.

"I'll see you outside."

They watched him leave, but neither loosened the embrace or attempted to move away.

"You have to go."

The warrior could think of a millions reason why she should stay, but sighed quietly instead, "Yes."

However, she still didn't move, so the bard gently, but firmly eased herself away and leaned against Argo's stall.

"They're waiting."

Xena studied her for a second, then smiled and grabbed Argo's reins. She gave Gabrielle a quick kiss, before leading the horse towards the door, stopping just in front of it as she heard the bard speak quietly.

"Make sure you come back to me."

The warrior didn't trust her voice and waited a moment before looking back, "I will."

As if cold, the blond woman hugged herself, a rueful smile on her lips, "I'll be waiting."

Xena bit her lip, then left the stable.

## Part 8

### CHAPTER XXXII

Nicanor felt how his foot slipped on a small stone and the brief scraping sound that followed rang out loudly in the night. His heart which had already been working overtime for the last ten minutes, picked up an even faster pace and he had to stop. He inhaled softly, almost not daring to let the air out of his lungs again, afraid that it might sound too loud. He glanced around him and more felt than saw the countless shadows moving silently down the slope, seeming almost like one huge predatory being. A cold breath of wind blew the hair from his face and he shivered lightly, this night was the coldest yet. Reluctantly, he put one foot ahead of the other and started to descend the slope again, all the time praying he wouldn't step on a stone or some gravel that would cause him to fall. A sound now would be catastrophically, they were close enough to see the faint light of the few campfires still burning at the outskirts of the enemy camp, and although Nicanor knew it wasn't possible, that it was all in his imagination, he'd swear, he could see the shadows of the guards moving around, patrolling the area. He felt like a thousand pairs of eyes were staring at him, like a thousands breaths were held back, waiting...waiting. He shook his head angrily and began to move faster so not to break the line. Suddenly, as if an unspoken order had been issued, all movement stopped. The General could feel his pulse race in his ears as he tried to see through the darkness, frantically trying to guess what it was that had happened. And then he saw it, their shadows on the ground became darker and started to float gently over the land. With wide open eyes he lifted his head and stared up at the sky.

No... The moon.

The dark clouds above seemed to dissolve and to fade as the bright light of the moon penetrated the night.

*Not now... Please Zeus! Not now!*

He almost didn't dare to look away, knowing full well what he would see once he did. He would see everything. He would see the endless lines of soldiers, covering every inch of the grassy slope on their way down, their faces and any other bare skin painted black, making their eyes shine with a supernatural light. And if he looked back towards their camp, he'd see what looked like a dark forest looming at the edge, as if ready to move, swallowing everything on its way. Of course it wasn't a forest, it was rows and rows of horses and riders, all waiting, deadly silent for the signal to attack. He tore his gaze away from the sky and looked ahead, seeing how the pale light of the moon swept over the plain towards them. Slowly, but relentlessly it came closer and closer, already bathing the enemy camp in its light and then it disappeared. Nicanor looked up and although he couldn't see it, knew that all over the plain hundreds of heads were doing the same. The sky was dark, the moon having succumbed to the thickness of the clouds once again. Instantly they moved forward, this time in a faster pace. If the moon had appeared once, there was no telling when it would appear again.

*Almost there, almost there, almost there...*

Suddenly a roaring laughter filled the air and Nicanor heard the entire army take a

collective breath and then the world around him caught fire. Simultaneously all over the plain, powerful explosions were heard and enormous bonfires lit of the night, the flames hungrily reaching for the sky. The General spun around and felt how his heart almost stopped beating; they were trapped. The entire infantry was trapped inside a deadly ring of fire where the walls were made up from roaring flames almost six feet high. A dark, suffocating smoke filled his nostrils and his eyes immediately began to water. From everywhere around him, he heard people coughing and gasping for air, some slowly dropping to the ground while others started to run around, desperately searching for a way through the fire.

*Even if they manage to get out... It won't do them any good... Kassander's waiting on the other side.*

He felt his throat constrict as he tried to take another breath and almost cried out from the excruciating pain in his lungs. He sank down on one knee, fighting the dizziness in his head and then, above the raging flames and the screams of the trapped soldiers he heard a voice call out, a voice that seemed to be carried by the wind, penetrating the air.

"Xena, will you get your arse down here! Now!"

It was Lykeas' voice.

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Xena heard the words loud and clear and a feral grin showed on her face.

*Oh, he sure knows how to put it.*

Dark waves of smoke rose from the plain below her and the warrior saw how the horses around her began to dance nervously, thrusting their heads up and down.

"Okay, listen! We have to get Kassander's army away from the fire, so our soldiers have a chance of passing the flames! There's no use in them getting free of the fire, only to be cut down afterwards. Is that clear?!"

Without waiting for an answer of any kind, she forcefully kneed Argo forward and was instantly followed by the first row of the cavalry. The heat from the fire burned her skin and the roaring flames almost drown out the noise of hundreds of thundering hooves. Xena drew her sword and leaned forward, practically lying down on Argo as rider and horse dived into the inferno.

Lykeas' eyes darted frantically, but controlled from left to right, searching for just the smallest opening in the wall of fire. Every breath felt like he was inhaling the flames themselves and a steady stream of tears was running down his cheeks. The smoke made it almost impossibly to see and he kept stumbling over men lying on the ground, some of them breathing and something of them not. Suddenly, his ears picked up the sound of horses approaching, soon followed by the sound of metal meeting metal.

*Ah good, the cavalry's arrived.*

He smiled to himself and went down on all fours and began to feel his way through

the smoke.

"Get up! You can do it! Get up or I'll kill you myself!"

The soldier groaned, but managed to get to his feet.

"I want you to help me find all the men who're still well enough to fight. Tell them to head North, in the direction of Kassander's camp and wait for me there. If everything goes the way it's supposed to, the Persians should be driven away from the fire soon and that'll give us an opportunity to pass the flames."

"But we'll burn if we try that," the swaying soldier croaked out, rubbing his irritated eyes.

"We'll burn either way," Lykeas stated flatly. "Get to it! You got five minutes."

The man fell to his knees again and started to crawl away, feeling in front of him with his hands. Soon all the soldiers who were capable were on their knees, searching for their comrades. Lykeas noticed some men stop and try to shake a couple of motionless bodies back to life.

"Stop that!" He cried out and immediately started to cough violently, "Le-leav...leave the dead and unconscious alone, we only have time to find the living."

After what felt like an eternity, the warrior made his way towards North and was soon met with the sight of a small group of soldiers, huddled close together.

"Is that it?" He whispered in disbelief, then raised his voice. "Are you all that's left?"

A young man, whose face was red and sporting several blisters nodded, "The rest didn't move."

*Fuck!*

Lykeas turned his head and squinted against the orange flames that seemed to moved closer and closer.

*It's up to you now, Xena.*

Again, Xena tried to drive Argo in between the soldiers and the flames, but again the horse reared and danced backwards.

"Whoa girl! I know it's hot, but we have to get the men away," Xena whispered, knowing full well that her horse couldn't hear her through the noise. Suddenly she saw the soldiers closest to the fire spin around and their formation fell apart as familiar battle cries cut through the night.

*Ah, I see the Amazons haven't lost their touch.*

With brutal and merciless efficiency, the warriors sliced their way through the first row of soldiers. The heat was scorching their backs, their arms were hurting from the strain and every time an enemy soldier went down, another one came from out of nowhere to take his place, but not once did they falter, not once did they retreat. The insane and all consuming craving for revenge blazed in their eyes and drove them forward, and soon the Persians began to move away from their position at the fire,

leaving the immediate area around it unguarded. Xena didn't wait to see if the infantry emerged from the flames, but forced Argo around and rode directly into the nearest group of soldiers, scattering the men all over.

"Now!"

Lykeas dived into the fire, instantly feeling the flames burn his skin and the small hairs on his arms wither from the heat. He closed his eyes and just kept running, praying he didn't lose sense of the direction.

Much sooner than he'd expected, he was through. He almost lost his balance as the great force of the heat suddenly lessened and he fell forward, just managing to support himself with one hand. He was in a lot of pain, feeling like the outer layer of his skin had been violently torn from his body and his lungs were burning, but he was alive. He unsheathed his sword, cursing silently as the hilt burned his hand and looked around. He could see the main battle was taking place further away and was about to run towards it, when a horrible scream nailed him to the spot. He turned around, hardly noticing the gasping soldiers who'd managed to run through the fire with him and looked at the flames. A man was running around madly in the midst of the fire, desperately searching for a way through.

"Just run." Lykeas tried to shout, but all that came out was a hoarse whisper. "Don't wait, just run."

The soldier screamed again as his hair started to burn and several of his fellow soldiers averted their eyes, incapable of watching any more. The man, now screaming constantly, fell to the ground and started to roll around, but he only managed to spread the fire to his clothes. As the scream lost all semblance of a human sound, Lykeas swallowed and looked away. The harsh smell of burning flesh entered his nostrils and suddenly the image of Ephiny's funeral pyre filled his mind.

"Come on, move it! We still have a battle to fight!"

Without looking back, the soldiers started to run toward the battle raging ahead of them. As they got closer, it became easier to see what was going on, but it still took a while before the warrior registered the sight that greeted him, his foggy brain trying to cope with and sort out all the information at once. The Persians were retreating. It didn't happen fast and it was taking the cavalry and the Amazons everything they had and more, but the Persians were retreating. A thought managed to penetrate the confusion in Lykeas' mind.

*"We're winning..."*

Then the earth shook beneath his feet and he turned around and bloodshot, watering eyes widened as they took in the sight of more than three hundred well armed men, marching toward him. The soldiers came from the camp, from Kassander's camp and the warrior instantly recognized the stately figure riding in front, leading the army behind him. It would only take them a few minutes to walk around the fire and come to the aid of their kinsmen and then... Lykeas looked at the sword in his sooty hands and then looked back up at the approaching army. He let out a small sigh and as he started to move towards it, a peaceful smile appeared on his face.

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Out of the corner of her eye, Xena saw the approaching army and the lone figure walking out to meet them.

*Gods! He's finally lost it!*

"Lykeas! Wait, you can't-."

The sudden appearance of a Persian on a horse cut short her words, and for a minute she lost the warrior from her sight as she angrily thrust her sword deep into the rider's chest. Without giving the Persian a second look, she yanked her sword free and turned Argo around, but before she managed to find Lykeas again, a small wave of soldiers suddenly broke through the Amazon ranks.

*Damn! We don't have the time for this.*

"Callias! Erinya! You're on your own now, we have to regroup! Kassander's coming!" She stood up in the saddle, trying to get the attention of the men around her, "The left wing stays here, the rest of you come with me!"

She was pleasantly surprised to see the centre and the right wing of the cavalry immediately break away and begin to follow her toward the approaching army. Riding ahead of the cavalry, Xena felt the heat carried with the wind against her face, promptly followed by the smell of smoke and blood. She bared her teeth in a savage grin and tightened the grip around her sword.

*Here I come, Kassander. Have you missed me?*

She felt the adrenaline course through her body and let out a chilling cry, hearing how the riders behind her picked it up and multiplied it.

She laughed out loud, "That's right men! Let's show those bastards who they're up against!"

Lykeas abruptly stopped and was quickly overtaken by what was left of the infantry. Unseeing eyes stared at the passing soldiers' backs as every thought of moving forward left the warrior's mind.

*That cry...*

He felt an old familiar tremor run through his body as pictures and images from many years ago raced through his mind.

*She's back... She's come back, she's with me again.*

He turned around and stared directly into blazing blue eyes that seemed to scorch and burn everything that got in their way. He took in the sight of the impressive warrior thundering towards him, closely followed by more than two hundred men on horses and then he smiled. The smile on the dark warrior's face, instantly cleared the haze in Xena's head and an expression of horror showed on her face.

*No, Lykeas... No.*

Argo felt her mistress slack the reins and uncertainly slowed down a little, before Xena regained her equilibrium and picked up the pace again. She saw Lykeas' brow furrow and then, for the shortest of seconds, a deep sadness filled the black eyes before it disappeared and he turned away.

Feeling strangely detached, Lykeas felt and heard the cavalry beginning to close in on him and he looked ahead to see that Kassander had almost rounded the fire and was about to head directly towards the ridiculous small part of the infantry that was left. Then, from out of nowhere, enormous clouds of smoke abruptly swallowed up Kassander and his army and Lykeas lost them from his sight. The smoke was followed by a new wall of fire as hungry flames fed from the sudden increase in the force of the wind.

*The wind...?*

Lykeas felt the cold wind sweep down from the plain behind him.

*The wind has...*

He closed his eyes as hundreds of horses finally overtook him and didn't open them till the earth had stopped moving beneath his feet.

*I think the wind...*

Even from a distance, he could see the flames rise higher and higher and still there was no sight of Kassander's army.

*I think the wind has changed.*

He took a deep breath and realized the air was clean and free from smoke.

*Yes, the wind has indeed changed.*

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## CHAPTER XXXIII

"No!"

Kassander desperately tried to turn his horse around, but the mare was in the final stages of panic and acted more like a wild beast than a well-trained horse. All around him, he heard his men shouting and screaming, some cursing their horses, others crying out in pain when they were swallowed up by the flames. Suddenly a huge cloud of smoke engulfed them and the King's horse reared, and Kassander had to press his knees hard against her flanks and hold on to the reins tightly not to be thrown off. Feeling how breathing became more difficult, the King forcefully kicked his heels into the horse and finally managed to turn her around, but instead of seeing the clear route back to the camp, he stared directly into another wall of fire. He was surrounded. The mare was now shaking violently and her body was covered in sweat as she danced nervously from side to side, the brown eyes rolled back in terror.

"You stupid horse!"

Kassander kicked her again and tried to push her forward closer to the flames, but the horse only backed further away.

"Fucking beast! Move damn it! Move!"

His eyes were watering constantly now and the heat was scorching his skin, but still he kept a clear head.

*I can manage this. I just need to break through the ring of fire, it can't be that wide. I can do this! There's no reason to panic, I can do this!*

The sound of renewed fighting coming from somewhere behind him told him that those of his men who'd managed to escape the fire were now heavily engaged with defending themselves against the cavalry.

*That bitch! I was so close, I was almost there.*

He started to cough violently and the horse used that single moment of distraction to rear again, and with a surprised shout Kassander felt himself lose hold of the reins and fall backwards, landing on the grass with an unpleasant sound of cracking bones. A sharp pain starting in his right knee coursed through his body and dark spots danced before his eyes as he tried to get back to his feet, but somehow his right leg didn't seem to be functioning properly and he lost his balance and sank helplessly to the ground again. For a second he stared up into the dark sky obscured by smoke and fire, then he rolled himself over and started to crawl towards his horse, trying to ignore the horrible pain in his knee every time it made contact with the ground. The loop of fire around him had tightened considerably and he knew he had to get out now, already each hissing breath was followed by violent coughing fits and he was starting to feel dizzy and had problems thinking straight.

*I just have to get back in the saddle, then everything will be okay. I just have to get back in the saddle...*

As he was within two feet of the horse, the terrified animal was suddenly hit by a couple of flying sparks and she abruptly changed direction and without any regard for her master ran headlong into him, knocking the King to the ground. The horse frantically tried to find a way out, but the flames were too close and all she accomplished was running around in smaller and smaller circles. As Kassander opened his eyes and stared up at the sky, he knew his neck was broken. As he smelled the hairs on his head beginning to burn, he knew he wouldn't escape the flames. As he watched his horse make a last desperate attempt to get out, fail and then turn around and run directly towards him, he knew he was going to die. Almost the moment the flames spread to his clothes, the horse trampled over his broken body and as his vision faded and the pain disappeared, Kassander considered himself lucky.

*At least, she didn't kill me.*

The flames swept over the plain with no abandon, swallowing anybody who came within their reach. The Persian soldiers trapped by the fire on one side and by enemy soldiers on the other, died before they had a chance to lay down their weapons and surrender and the rest soon turned and ran, only to be mercilessly hunted down by Greek soldiers. Hours later, the only thing that was left of Kassander's camp were ashes, but that too was soon blown away by the still increasing wind, and as Xena

made her way back up the slope followed by the survivors of the infantry and the cavalry, the smell of burnt flesh had almost disappeared as well or, as she thought to herself, maybe they had just gotten used to it by now.

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"You'd think that the battle had taken place here and not down there," Lykeas commented quietly, absorbing the carnage around him. "Why did they have to bring all the dead here? They should be kept away from the wounded."

Callias nodded and looked at her bandaged arm while adjusting the sling at her neck.

"I know, but they were in a hurry and..." She paused briefly and looked away from the bodies placed on blankets on the ground. "Some of them were hard to identify and they didn't want to make any mistakes and... I suppose some one them were alive when they were first brought here."

They stepped aside as another stretcher was brought inside the large tent reserved for people hurt in the fire. On the stretcher was a badly burned soldier, his skin black and charred.

The Captain swallowed, "I think that was General Nicanor."

Lykeas wrinkled his nose, "I think so too. Let's get out of here."

They walked out of the tent and found themselves surrounded by chaos. Everywhere people were running back and forth, carrying stretchers or supporting those who were capable of walking on their own. Almost everybody were sporting more or less bloodied bandages, leaning on crutches or running around aimlessly searching for friends. Lykeas squinted towards the rising sun and let out a deep breath. Apart from a few scratches, sore muscles and the fact that he was feeling like he'd be roasted over a slow fire, he was unharmed.

"How's the arm?"

Callias raised her well arm in resignation, "Fine, except that it itches like Tartarus."

"You were lucky, if the arrow had hit your shoulder, the joint might never have functioned properly again."

The Amazon nodded, barely managing to get out of the way of another stretcher. "Yes, I know." She cast a glance ahead of her. "I better go report to the Queen now, it seems like most of the dead have been accounted for."

She started to walk away, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"How many did you lose?"

"Seventeen and five are critical."

"They did well."

"Of course, they did," Callias spoke quietly. "They were Amazons."

Lykeas watched the blond woman leave and then turned to walk in the other direction.

"Sir?"

He stopped and waited for the soldier to reach him.

"Yes?"

A young man from his part of the infantry came to a halt before him and saluted. Lykeas awkwardly raised his hand.

"Don't... What can I do for you, Lyssander?"

The soldier pointed to a nervously looking man standing a few yards away, "He says you asked for him, so I decided to bring him to you." The young man shifted from the left foot to the right. "I wasn't sure if he spoke the truth and I didn't want to risk anything."

The warrior glanced at the farmer who'd taken off his hat and was gingerly looking around with wide open eyes, all colour having left his cheeks as he noticed the bodies lying close by.

"You did well, Lyssander. I'll take it from here."

The soldier saluted again and this time Lykeas returned it, hiding a wry smile.

"Oh yes, sir, before I forget. Xena's looking for you."

"She is?" The warrior licked his dry lips. "Okay, I'll go find her afterwards."

The young man nodded and hurried away and Lykeas turned his attention back to the farmer, indicating with a finger for the man to come closer.

"Yes?"

"We found him, sir."

"And?"

The farmer shook his head, "There was nothing we could do."

"I see." The dark warrior rummaged through his pockets and handed a couple of dinars to the man. "Go get yourself something to eat."

The farmer's eyes lit up as he studied the coins in his hand. "Thank you, sir. If you ever require my services again, I'll be-."

"Yeah, yeah," Lykeas dismissed the man. "Get out of here."

He sighed and started to walk back to the camp, his features hardening. There was something he had to do.

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Xena washed the blood of her hands and looked around for something to dry them in, but all she found was a torn and bloodied piece of cloth.

*That looks like an Amazon tunic.*

She let her eyes run over the many bodies in the tent, but didn't find what she was looking for.

"Xena?"

She turned her head to look at an elderly man kneeling on the ground beside a soldier.

"Yes?"

"I've heard you're skilled in the art of using pressure points, is that true?"

She stepped closer and looked down at the mutilated body beside the old man, "Yes."

"Can you do something for him?" The healer gestured helplessly at the soldier. "I'd like to give him some herbs for the pain, but I..." He exhaled slowly, "But I need to save them for those who have a chance of surviving..."

"He's still alive?" The warrior asked incredulously, taking a closer look. From the look of it, the man couldn't possibly be alive, but then she noticed a faint hissing sound and realized it was air fussing out from the holes in the soldier's lungs.

"Barely," the old man replied and wiped his forehead, smearing blood all over. "Is there something you can do?"

Xena knelt down beside him, trying not to look at the soldier's frozen stare.

"Yes, but it'll probably kill him."

The healer smiled bitterly, "Does it matter? He's dead already." He rose to his feet. "Do what you think is right, I've other patients to attend to."

The warrior stared at the soldier on the ground. His face was contorted into an inhuman mask of pain and horror and his right arm was severely burned, tiny flakes of charred flesh falling to the ground, creating a small pile of black ashes.

Xena's gaze left the man's arm and strayed to a spot on his neck, then she leaned forward to gain better access. A minute later, the soldier had drawn his last laboured breath. She remained in a kneeling position for a few minutes, staring ahead of her without really seeing anything, then she felt somebody watch her from behind and she turned her head.

"You wanted to see me?"

She rose to her feet and stepped over the bodies on the ground until she was right beside the warrior.

"Yes, I need to talk to you about something."

"Then let's go outside, I can't breathe in here."

She followed Lykeas outside and was surprised to see it was a few hours past noon, she'd been tending to the wounded for more than ten hours. The chaos that had followed immediately after their return to the camp had lessened considerably and a more controlled and disciplined atmosphere filled the air.

"You look tired."

Xena rolled her head to loosen up her stiff muscles, "I am."

"How are things?"

"Unpleasant," she gave him pale smile. "The fire claimed many lives this morning and will continue to do so for at least a couple of more days."

He nodded, "But it saved us too. It took care of half of the Persian army...and Kassander."

"Have they found his body?"

"What's left of it, they have."

The warrior studied the man before, first now noticing the drawn lines around his eyes and the constant moistening of his lips.

"You got pretty close to the flames too."

Lykeas smiled briefly, "I've no eyebrows left."

Xena returned his smile and raised her hand, but then left it fall back down. She looked into his eyes and was painfully aware of the fact that he had to look away for a second before he could return her gaze.

*Not now... I have to see to other matters first, but then...*

"Otherwise you're okay?"

"Yes...and you?"

"A few scratches," Xena gestured absently to her left side, "nothing serious."

"I went to see Gabrielle," Lykeas continued tonelessly. "I know you've been tied up with the wounded and she with the Amazons, so I thought I'd tell her everything was fine."

"Thank you." The warrior smiled warmly. She'd wanted to go see Gabrielle the entire day, but simply hadn't had the time. "I really appreciate that."

He shrugged, "No problem, I don't have your healing skills and after I'd finished bringing in the dead and wounded, there wasn't anything else to do."

Lykeas straightened up and their eyes met again.

"We have a traitor in our midst," he stated flatly.

"I know...that's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about."

"Alexias' body was found earlier this morning, his throat had been slit."

"Damn," Xena cursed quietly. "That poor kid, he didn't deserve that."

"No, he didn't," Lykeas replied calmly, then looked towards the tent. "You better go back in there, they need you."

"What about Alexias and the traitor?"

After a moment's hesitation, the dark warrior spoke, "I'll take care of that."

Then he turned and started to walk away.

"Lykeas, only bring them in. Don't take the matter into your own hands."

He looked back at her and gave her a somewhat sarcastic grin.

"Ah, Xena... Would I do that...?"

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#### CHAPTER XXXIV

"He what!?"

"He left about two hours ago, I thought you knew."

Xena shook her head in disbelief, "No, no I didn't."

*Damn! Damn you, Lykeas!*

Erinya sceptically eyed the distraught warrior before her, she didn't quite understand the dark woman's strong reaction.

"He probably won't be gone for long, it shouldn't take too long to secure Kassander's castle."

Xena looked away from the Amazon for a moment, absently studying the coarse canvas of the tent before continuing, "How many men did he take with him?"

The weapons master scratched her chin, "About a hundred or something like that, I told him he couldn't bring more or the camp would be left defenceless."

"He wanted to take more with him?"

"Yeah, but I said he had to settle for what was left of his part of the infantry, besides that should be enough. The castle must be practically abandoned and even if there are some Persians left, the soldiers are more than capable to deal with them, After all, Lykeas did train them well."

Xena smiled bitterly, "Yes, he did, didn't he?"

The Amazon's eyes narrowed slightly, "Is there a problem?"

The warrior only shook her head, "Did he leave a message?"

"Well, he didn't say anything to me," Erinya spoke slowly, her eyes searching the tall woman's face, "but he might have left something in your tent, I saw him leave it earlier today, just before they headed out."

"Okay, thanks, I'll check it out."

She cast a last glance around the tent, her gaze resting briefly on all the bodies lying on makeshift pallets or on the ground, then she walked out closely followed by the weapons master.

Outside dusk had started to drive away the already feeble autumn warmth and Xena shivered involuntarily. The camp was eerily quiet. Usually after a hard fought battle, soldiers liked to unwind, throwing away all caution and restraint, vigorously celebrating the victory and the fact that they were still alive, but tonight was different and the warrior didn't like it. As much as she found some of the men's behaviour after a battle repulsive or straight out silly, she preferred it to the heavy, despondent silence that hung in the air, smothering all attempts at merriment.

"It was a hard fight," the Amazon spoke quietly as if reading Xena's thoughts. "One thing is to have your friends killed in battle, another is to watch them burn alive."

"I know."

"Eventually, they will celebrate and drink themselves into oblivion, but it'll take a day or two."

"Yeah," the warrior fell silent. "I guess so."

Erinya gave her a gentle pat on the back and started to walk towards the Amazon camp.

"Are you coming? I know Her Majesty has been looking for you."

"Yes, in a minute. I just have to do something first."

"Okay, I'll tel her you're on your way. Goodnight, Xena."

"Goodnight," the warrior replied distantly, lost in thought.

*You promised me, Lykeas. You swore, you weren't planning anything. You promised me...*

As she stopped in front of her tent, she closed her eyes briefly and an unbidden voice filled her head.

*You broke a promise too once, remember? And he let you, didn't he? He never called you on it... And now, after all these years, what will you do if he does?*

She opened her eyes and looked up at the dark sky, surprised that she had to blink a few times to see clearly.

*Please Lykeas... Don't put me in a situation where I have no choice. You deserve better than that, we both do...*

She swallowed and stepped inside her tent, stopping dead in her tracks. Tied to a chair and fully gagged, one pale brown eye staring furiously at her was Zelei.

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"Xena?"

Gabrielle looked inside the warrior's tent only to find it empty and bathed in darkness. She frowned and started to walk towards the stables, although she had searched the place only ten minutes ago, but she couldn't help herself. She hadn't seen Xena the entire day. At first they had both been fully occupied with the wounded and after the worst had been taken care of, Gabrielle had spent the remains of the day with the surviving Amazons, holding a quiet and private memorial service for those lost in battle. That was an hour ago and ever since she had been out looking for the warrior after she had failed showing up in spite of the message she'd had delivered through Erinya.

The bard quickly looked through the stables, already knowing that Xena wouldn't be there, but she didn't know where else to look. The moment she'd heard that Lykeas had left, she'd raced to the stables and although she wouldn't quite admit it to herself, had been more than a little relieved to see that Argo was still there. Then she'd checked all the tents with wounded and even went as far as to the followers' camp, but the warrior hadn't been anywhere to be found and nobody had been able to tell her where she might be. Gabrielle paused before the Amazon camp and looked back down the lines and lines of tents and the countless campfires where small groups of soldiers sat eating or sharpening their weapons in a deadly silence. No laughter, no voices were heard and the bard sighed. More than anything she wanted to be away from the sights and sounds of war. She wanted to leave the all-consuming violence and what it did to people behind her and just keep on walking until the memories of the dead and wounded had been erased from her mind. But most of all... She shivered and pulled her coat tighter around her, most of all she wanted to forget the screams of the terrified soldiers trapped in the flames and the sickening smell of burnt flesh. She pulled herself together and walked the rest of the way to her tent and stepped inside, and was only a little surprised to find the warrior sleeping on the pallet, still dressed in her bloodied and dirty leathers. A single oil lamp was lit and the small flickering flame caused the dark shadows in the corners where the light couldn't reach to seem even darker. The bard quietly pulled a chair closer and watched the pale light teasingly move over Xena's features, making it appear like the warrior was awake and moving, the bronze skin almost glowing, and then without warning, she started to cry. Silently at first, but then the sobs became louder and blue eyes snapped open. The warrior blinked a few times, momentarily confused before her exhausted mind took in the sight of the crying woman next to her, and she groggily sat up and pulled Gabrielle onto her lap, wrapping her arms around her. For a long time they sat like that, the silence only broken by occasional sobs from the young woman and Xena's softly whispered words, more meant to comfort than to make sense. Finally, she felt the tension starting to leave Gabrielle's body and she placed a kiss on the tousled blonde hair.

"Wanna tell me what that was all about?"

She heard the bard sigh and felt the arms around her neck tighten and then Gabrielle looked up to gaze into concerned blue eyes.

"It's a bit embarrassing actually," she began, trying a half-hearted smile, "I really don't know."

The warrior gently wiped the remains of the tears away with her thumb, patiently waiting for the bard to elaborate, but when nothing came she stopped and searched the face before her.

"You sure? Did anything happen to upset you?"

"You mean besides the fact that I've just witnessed the most bloody battle in my life, lost nineteen of my warriors and watched men being brought in, who, if the Gods had any mercy, should have died from their burns on the battlefield? No, Xena, aside from that nothing has happened to upset me."

She gave the warrior another pale smile to take the edge of her words, but still felt the arms around her stiffen.

"You shouldn't have been here, I should have-."

"Shhh," Gabrielle put a finger on the warrior's lips, "don't say it. It was my choice, remember?"

She snuggled a bit closer.

"And I'm going to be okay, really I am," she continued as she noticed Xena's doubtful expression. "Tomorrow, I'll be as strong and as efficient as I need to be, but right now..."

She leaned up to kiss the chapped, but still amazingly soft lips, "Right now, I just want you to hold me, if that's okay."

The warrior's only response was to pull the young woman closer, burying her face in the silky hair.

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The Counsellor scrambled nervously away from the dark man hovering over him. Lykeas grinned, revealing white teeth before sitting back down in the chair. He reached down and took the goblet standing on the ground beside the chair and took a few gulps, black eyes studying the shivering man over the brim of the glass.

"So..." The warrior let the wine swirl in his mouth for a moment. "Are you going to tell me what I want to know or do you want another round?"

Pindar looked down at his singed and drenched clothes and then shot a nervous glance at the dark flowing river a few yards away. His burned hands nervously clenched and unclenched the wet mud on the river bank and he closed his eyes, trying to shut out the image of the reclining predator in front of him. He more sensed than heard a movement and instantly a hand closed around his throat.

"Don't close your eyes on me!"

The Counsellor tried to swallow, but the grip around his throat was too tight and instead he opened his eyes to stare into the dark face above him.

"Did I tell you to close your eyes?"

Pindar managed to shake his head and a smile slowly spread on Lykeas' face then he let go and went back to sit in the chair, gesturing to the soldiers who had rushed forward in case their leader needed any help with the interrogation, to step back again.

"Look, Pindar... It's Pindar, isn't it?"

The Counsellor nodded affirmatively, afraid that his voice might betray him.

"All I want to know is how many soldiers, Persians or otherwise, Kassander left to guard his castle when he left. You see," he pointed mindlessly over his shoulder at the tents placed further away from the river, "I have about a hundred men with me and all taken into consideration that should be enough, but..."

He took another sip from the goblet and stood up.

"But it's best to be careful, isn't it?"

He stepped over to the man still lying on the ground and knelt down beside him, ignoring the foul smelling mud smearing his knees. "So you must understand how pleased I was to hear that Counsellor Pindar, Kassander's most trusted servant, had been handed over to my men by a group of farmers."

He smiled coldly.

"Really, Pindar. Did you expect you could just hide in a barn like that? Did you really think that any of your precious King's subjects would have anything to do with you, much less protect you? They can't avenge themselves on Kassander because he's dead, but you...you are the next best thing."

The smile broadened.

"You must know that every man and every woman in this kingdom hate Kassander from the bottom of their hearts, and that everywhere we have passed so far, we've been treated like saviours instead of conquerors."

He leaned closer and whispered into the Counsellor's ear, "They cheer for us, they offer us food and gifts even though they hardly have anything themselves...due to your King's taxes of course...but they don't seem to care... We are heroes to them."

Lykeas rose and looked past the river, staring out into the dark night, an almost astonished expression on his face, then it disappeared and he gazed back down at the quivering man below him.

"So tell me, Pindar. What do we have to expect when we reach Kassander's castle?"

"Not much," the Counsellor said, unable to hide the bitterness in his voice. "Those who haven't run off already are sure to do so the moment they hear you're coming." He paused for a second, "The King has inspired a lot of things in people over the

years, but loyalty has never been one of them."

The dark warrior nodded to himself, "And what about the Persians?"

Pindar shrugged, "They're most likely gone. The High King must have heard of the defeat by now and has probably withdrawn the remains of his troops to avoid having his part in the war exposed and thus spare himself the humiliation of becoming the laughing-stock of every Greek city state... Persians don't like to be laughed at," he added silently, more to himself than to Lykeas.

"See," the warrior roughly patted the Counsellor on his bald head. "If only you'd told me that right away, we wouldn't have had to go through that nasty thing with the oil and the fire."

He smeared a line of mud down Pindar's cheek, "I bet you were happy the river was so close by."

The man ignored the comment and feeling strangely calm and peaceful looked up into the black eyes.

"What are you going to do with me?"

Lykeas tilted his head slightly, pursing his lips.

"Hmm, that's a good question..."

He was silent for a few minutes, then turned around to face the few soldiers standing behind him.

"The farmers who brought him here, are they still around?"

A young soldier eagerly stepped forward, "Yes, sir. I think so."

"Ah good," the warrior looked down at the man at his feet.

"Tell them, I have a present for them... Something to show them how much I value their services."

He poked Pindar in the ribs with his foot.

"I'm sure they'll know how to...to...appreciate this small token of gratitude."

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## CHAPTER XXXV

Gabrielle lifted her head from the warrior's shoulder and looked into tired, but awake blue eyes.

"Can't you sleep?"

"Nah, I guess I'm too exhausted to sleep."

"Maybe it would help if you actually closed your eyes."

"You think so?" Xena chuckled quietly and pulled the bard closer.

"Yes." Gabrielle slid her hand under the thin cotton shift and gently caressed the warrior's stomach.

"Uh, I'm not so sure that'll make it easier for me to fall asleep."

The young woman smiled and stilled the movements of her hand for a short moment, then continued.

"Why don't you tell me what's bothering you? If you do that might help you sleep."

She felt Xena take a deep breath as her eyes left the bard's face to stare out into the darkness of the tent. Gabrielle propped herself up on her left elbow, continuing the soothing motions on the warrior's stomach with her other hand.

"Is it about Zelei?"

Surprised blue eyes returned to her face, "I didn't know you knew about that."

The bard smiled sadly, "It's hard to keep a secret in a camp, particularly when at least a dozen of people saw her be carried all tied up out of your tent, kicking and screaming."

"Yeah, she did deliver some good kicks," Xena gingerly touched a dark bruise on her thigh, "but the screaming part isn't true, Lykeas had gagged her as well."

The warrior didn't find it necessary to mention that she'd actually removed the cloth from Zelei's mouth for a few seconds, but the raging obscenities coming from the Amazon, had quickly instigated her to gag her again, if only for the Captain's own safety, since most of the curses uttered by Zelei had been about Gabrielle and Xena hadn't been in a one of her most indulging moods.

"Do you believe she betrayed us?"

The bard's quiet words pulled the warrior out of her reverie and she sighed, "Lykeas seems to think so. He left me a message in my tent with his reasons for apprehending Zelei." She reached out and started to play with Gabrielle's hair with her left hand.

"They seem pretty convincing to me, besides, Alexias' axe was found in her tent and she hasn't been able to come up with a plausible explanation for the period of time she was gone from the camp the day of the battle, which happens to be around the same time Alexias disappeared so... Of course, I'll have to question her some more and other factors may appear, but yes, I do think she did it. After all, she had both motive and opportunity."

She felt the bard's hand on her stomach stop.

"I feel so sorry for Alexias, he was such a sweet boy. He didn't deserve to be murdered like that he..." Her voice broke and she cleared her throat. "It makes no sense, Xena why would she... She saved my life! If it hadn't been for her that Persian might have succeeded in kill-."

"Hey!" The warrior interrupted firmly, rolling onto her side to face the young woman.

"Don't say that, I'm sure that wouldn't have happened. You would have found a way." She removed a few blond strands from Gabrielle's eyes. "I know you would," she finished more gently. "You always do."

"I just don't understand why she hates me so much." The pain in the bard's voice was clear. "I've never wanted to hurt her."

"Hate defies reason," Xena spoke softly. "As does love."

For a moment the two women looked into each other's eyes, then they both smiled.

"I love you, Xena."

The warrior reached out and pulled the bard even closer.

"I love you too, Gabrielle."

They lay like that for a long time and Xena felt herself starting to relax as Gabrielle's hand resumed caressing her stomach and she closed her eyes.

"So if it isn't Zelei that's bothering you, what is it? Is it Lykeas? Are you worried about him?"

The warrior slowly opened her eyes again and turned her head to look at the woman beside her. Gabrielle gave her a little smile.

"Why don't you tell me, Xena? Why don't you tell me everything that happened back then."

The warrior turned her head away. "There isn't much to tell."

Gabrielle reached out and gently turned Xena's face back to her.

"Why don't you tell me anyway."

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"I'm not a bard, Gabrielle. I don't know how to tell a story."

Gabrielle smiled inwardly at hearing Xena's statement echoing words uttered by another dark warrior in what seemed to be a very long time ago.

"I don't want you to tell me a story." She reached out to trace a cheekbone with her finger, "Just...just tell me about you and Lykeas... Tell me whatever you think is important."

The warrior rolled onto her back and stared up at the coarse canvas above her, only half acknowledging the faint sound of rain drops starting to fall.

"When I first met Lykeas he was just a kid, I mean, I was hardly more than a kid myself, but Lykeas... Lykeas was just a...."

"A boy?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Xena pushed the covers down to her waist and absently started to rub the material between her fingers.

"I still remember walking through the forest on our way from Amphipolis, we were heading towards Athens to..." The warrior trailed off for her moment, her eyes staring right through the canvas. "Anyway, it was late afternoon and we'd just entering a small clearing when...well, I felt something and I looked to the other side and there he was, standing partly hidden behind the trees, looking directly at me."

The hand playing with the covers stopped, then resumed its twitching motions.

"We just looked at each other, I don't know for how long, but it must have been for quite a while though because at some time the people with me started to become impatient, anxious...they wanted to move on."

"What happened then?"

A strange, almost curious look showed on Xena's face.

"I don't know what it was he saw in my eyes or what he thought he saw, but then he...he smiled."

"Smiled?"

"Yes, he smiled and then he walked out from the trees and stopped right in front of me."

*"Who are you?"*

*"My name's Lykeas... And you are?"*

*"Not that's it's any of your business, but... I'm Xena."*

*"And where are you going with all these...fierce warriors behind you?"*

*"Athens."*

*"I see...Athens... Mind if I join you?"*

"I didn't want him to come along, he was too young and I didn't have the time nor the patience to become his babysitter."

"Why did you let him then?"

"I soon realized that Lykeas didn't need a babysitter."

The warrior lifted her left arm and tucked it behind her head using it as a pillow.

"The fact that he'd been raised in an Amazon village had ensured that he was very skilled in the use of arms and at that time...well...at that time my so-called army could need all the practice it could get so..."

"So you allowed him to join you?"

"Yes." A faint smile played on the dark woman's lips. "After a brief demonstration..."

Gabrielle tried to become more comfortable, but her elbow was starting to hurt so she sat up on the pallet instead, looking down at the warrior lying beside her.

"Did you become friends right away?"

Lurid blue eyes found green and a look of puzzlement crossed Xena's face.

"I...I don't know when we became friends... We...we just did. He understood what it was I was trying to do, what it was I wanted, even before I knew it myself. I think he just waited for the day when I'd realize that I wanted more...more than... He never said to me that something couldn't be done or...or that it shouldn't be done. He always..." The warrior stopped, apparently not quite sure of what she was trying to say.

The rain outside became stronger and the sound of heavy drops hitting the canvas chased away the silence momentarily occupying the tent. Gabrielle exhaled slowly.

"And when you the day arrived, when you realized you wanted more, what then?"

"He was there...by my side. He told me he was glad he wouldn't have to wait any longer."

"What was it he wanted?"

Xena turned her head away and stared back out into the darkness.

"Everything...just like me. He wanted everything."

"And..." The bard hesitated slightly, trying to formulate the right words. "And you think he still does?"

A deep sadness filled the blue eyes.

"Yes. And I...I can't let him."

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*She sensed his approach and moved around the campfire so she could see him. He stopped a few steps away, an unreadable gaze searching her face for a moment before he closed the distance to the fire and sat down.*

*"Thanks for coming."*

*He shrugged, staring into the flames that only partly managed to illuminate the dark face.*

*"You knew I would."*

*She gave him small smile, but as he raised his head to look her into the eyes, his expression was contemplating, waiting and not friendly.*

*"I'm sorry about the things I said... I shouldn't have, it's just...you really pissed me off."*

*This time something resembling a smile showed briefly on his face.*

*"It's okay. I said some pretty stupid things myself."*

*He fell silent and she knew he was waiting for her to continue, to tell him why it was she'd wanted to meet him in the middle of the night, far away from their camp, but the well rehearsed speech she'd been saving for this particular occasion, had abandoned her mind the moment the warrior had sat down on the opposite side of the fire, and she could only look into those emotionless black eyes...No, they weren't quite emotionless, she could see that much, there was something there, but what...?*

*"I'm getting cold, Xena. If I'd known this was going to be an all night conversation, I'd have brought a blanket."*

*She took the not so subtle hint and licked her lips a few times.*

*"I can't do this anymore, I won't. I don't want to-."*

*"I know," he interrupted flatly. "It's been pretty obvious that your heart hasn't been into it lately."*

*The warrior smiled, but the smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "Some people would say I don't have a heart."*

*"Well, they'd be wrong, wouldn't they?"*

*He looked away to avoid her eyes before continuing, "What are you gonna do? You can't just leave like that, they won't let you."*

*"I'll think of something."*

*She saw a brief flash of white as he grinned to himself, "Yeah, you usually do."*

*"Lykeas?"*

*He slowly turned his gaze back to her, a question in his eyes.*

*"I'm...I'm sorry things didn't work out the way we'd planned. I know it meant a lot to you."*

*"Not more than it did to you."*

*Xena looked down at her hands in her lap.*

*"True, at the time it was everything to me."*

*"But now?"*

*"I'm tired, Lykeas, I'm so terribly tired. I just want it all to end, I want to get it over with."*

*"You're not going to do anything stupid, are you?" The alarm in the warrior's voice*

*was painfully clear.*

*She shook her head sadly, "No, at least not that. I don't have the guts."*

*For a long time the quiet crackle of the fire was all that was heard.*

*"I guess, I'll be leaving then."*

*"You don't have to, Lykeas. They all respect you, most of them fear you. If you want to, you can take over, have it all for yourself."*

*"I don't want it all for myself, I want you there with me." For a moment his voice sounded almost like a sulking child, then he continued in a slightly more collected, but nonetheless bitter tone. "You said you would, you said we'd have it all."*

*"You sound like I promised you the world."*

*He looked her square in the eye.*

*"Well, you did, didn't you?"*

Lykeas watched the dark water flow by and blinked a few times to lose the rain drops that clung to his eyelashes. The rain had soaked through his clothes hours ago and his body shivered every time the cold wind swept over the plain. He pulled his knees up and rested his chin on them, trying to control the chattering of his teeth. The night was silent except from the heavy drops of rain and the occasional sound of waves brushing against the bank. He raised his head and closed his eyes, feeling how tiny streams of water started to run down his face and down the hollow of his throat, only stopping when they reached the smooth material of his tunic. He lowered his head again and moist, unblinking eyes stared out into the darkness. A slight tremor ran through his body and gooseflesh appeared on his arms, but the cause wasn't the rain or the cold, it was the images that filled his mind.

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## **Part 9**

### **CHAPTER XXXVI**

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh... Are you sure you wanna find out?"

"Gabrielle would never forgive you if you did!"

"Who says she'll ever know."

The two women stared at each other in silence. Zelei's single pale eye shone with a fury that nonetheless didn't quite manage to hide the uncertainty she was feeling. Xena crossed her arms and casually let her eyes run over the cramped area, before returning to the Amazon who was tied to a chair in the middle of the tent.

"So, what will it be? Are you gonna answer my questions or do I have to become more...persuasive?"

The Captain blinked a few times. "I'm an Amazon, if anybody is going to judge me then it's the Queen and not some brute who gets a kick out of hurting people!"

A smile sweet as honey appeared on the warrior's face and she leaned closer, her lips practically touching Zelei's ear.

"Have you stopped to consider why you're still alive?"

She leaned back again and watched the conflicting emotions on the Amazon's face.

"After all, you're very much in demand, Zelei. There's isn't a single soldier out there who wouldn't risk a disciplinary punishment to get his hands on you, since there's isn't one of them who wasn't lost a friend or a brother in the fire. Also we have all the soldiers loyal to Alexias, they want to avenge his death. Speaking of which, King Polyidos is on his way here and I'm sure he'd like to have a word with you as well, and last but not least, let's not forget the Amazons. Do you really think they'll forgive you your betrayal? Nineteen of your sisters died on the battlefield and it wasn't combat, but flames that killed them and one or two are still critical, and although you saved Gabrielle's life a few days ago, your hatred for the Queen isn't exactly a secret."

Xena's eyes became cold and her expression hardened.

"And then of course there's me."

"You?"

"Yes... You see, one of the prisoners told me an interesting tale today, but since I'm not much of a storyteller, I'll just tell you the most fascinating bits. It was about a king meeting a warrior, an Amazon warrior to be exact and they agreed that in exchange for the warrior supplying the king with information, the king would make sure that a certain blond queen was killed, so the before mentioned warrior could seize the throne. Does any of this ring a bell?"

Zelei just stared and blue eyes turned even colder.

"I want you to know one thing, Zelei. If this little tale turns out to be true, the soldiers outside and your Amazon friends will be the least of your worries."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No, I'm predicting your future."

For a moment it looked like the Captain was about to speak, but nothing came. The warrior sighed and pulled out a dagger, a feral smile showing on her lips as she saw the Amazon pale. She let the tip of the dagger gently run down Zelei's throat and further down her chest before she stopped and pulled the blade away. The Captain let out a deep breath, only to see Xena raise the dagger again and step behind her.

"What are you gonna do!"

"This."

The Amazon closed her eye, preparing for the inevitable and then she felt the warrior cut through the ropes, freeing first her hands and then her entire body from the chair.

"W-what are you doing?"

Xena stepped back to stand in front of Zelei, putting her dagger away in the process.

"I'm letting you go."

"What!"

"I am..." The warrior said, pronouncing every syllable, "Let-ting you go. You are free to go, Zelei. Free."

The Captain looked at her in disbelief, "Why? I mean you think I'm guilty, why are you doing this?"

"Oh well," Xena replied disinterestedly, studying her fingernails, "I don't see a reason for you stay here till Polyidos arrives, you might as well go outside and make yourself useful."

"But...but I can't go outside!"

"Oh...and why not?"

"You said it yourself! They'll kill me! The moment I step outside this tent, I'll be fair game to them, I'll be hunted down."

"You don't say." The warrior gave the Amazon an innocent look and Zelei shook her head.

"I'm not going outside."

"Oh yes, you are." Xena's entire demeanour changed and the Captain took a few steps back. "Even if I have to carry you, you're coming outside with me."

"I'll run."

The warrior licked her lips. "Try."

"Okay." Zelei sat back down on the chair, a defeated look on her face. "What do I have to do to stay inside the tent?"

"Well... You could always try to...confess. Then I might consider having some guards posted here and you can stay inside until the King arrives."

"This is blackmail!"

Xena's face remained emotionless. "It's your choice."

"Is this your usual 'talk or you'll die' routine, Xena?" The Amazon spat out. "Is this some leftover from your glorious past? I'm pretty sure our little Queen doesn't know about this, does she? If she did, she would be very disappointed, wouldn't she? You might fool her and you might fool the rest of the world, Warrior Princess, but you don't fool me..."

She focused one brown eye on Xena's face.

"And come to think of it, I don't think you fool yourself either, do you? You haven't changed all that much, the wrapping might have changed, but the content is the same. You know it and I know, the questions is, does Gabrielle know it, too?"

The warrior's expression didn't change as she picked up the pieces of rope from the ground, and tied Zelei to the chair again before walking out of the tent.

"Don't worry, Xena! Your little secret's safe with me! For now!"

The Captain's word didn't seem to make an impact on the warrior as she strode away, ignoring the questioning looks from the soldiers around her.

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"Wanna come for a walk?"

"Oh, Xena, you startled me."

"Sorry, didn't mean to." The warrior raised the tent flap as Gabrielle put her scrolls away and stepped out of the tent, claiming Xena's hand with her own.

"Where to?"

The warrior shrugged, "Just away from here. I don't care."

"The forest?"

Xena shrugged again, "Sure."

Hand in hand they walked through the camp staying clear of the most populated areas, and soon the sounds and smells of people and horses were behind them and they entered the quiet forest. Gabrielle shivered as the chill air engulfed her body and Xena put her arm around the bard's shoulder and drew her closer.

"The sun will be gone soon, perhaps we should go back."

"No," Gabrielle shook her head. "Not yet, the cold doesn't really bother me, and truth be told, I think I need to get away from it all, if only for a while, just as much as you do."

The warrior nodded and they continued to walk through the forest in silence, both enjoying the feeling of closeness and peace they always experienced when travelling together alone. Gabrielle could feel the body next to hers begin to relax and smiled inwardly as she heard Xena let out a deep sigh.

"Feeling better?"

"Oh yeah."

They walked for a few more moments in silence before they came to a huge oak tree, where the warrior sat down with her back against the trunk and beckoned the young

woman to join her. With a small satisfied sigh, Gabrielle settled herself between Xena's legs and leaned back against the warrior's chest, who immediately wrapped her arms around the bard's waist.

"Ah, this is nice..."

"Hmm," Xena replied absently, leaning her head against the trunk and looked up at the many coloured leaves above her, swaying gently in the small breeze.

"So...did Zelei confess?"

Instantly, she felt the tension return to the warrior's body, but when Xena spoke her voice was calm and controlled.

"Yes, yes she did."

"What's going to happen to her?"

"It depends," Xena began to relax again. "I know your Amazons probably want to try her for treason, but I think King Polyidos would like to be the one, who decides her fate. After all, she did kill his only child."

Gabrielle shuddered and covered the warrior's hands around her waist with her own.

"Yes, he should be the one to judge her, it's his right," she paused for a moment before continuing. "I only hope he'll give her a fair trial and not let his sorrow and anger overwhelm him."

The tall woman behind her was quiet for a long time, then she spoke quietly. "I hope so too, Gabrielle. I really do, but sometimes when the pain is too much, when it's too powerful then you do-."

"Shh," the bard turned her head and planted a soft kiss on the warrior's collarbone. "I know."

"I know you do, Gabrielle," Xena continued seriously. "I just don't want you to think anything less of...Polyidos...if he...if he isn't capable of dealing with the lost rationally. I don't want you to lose faith in him if one day...if one day you find out that he isn't perfect, if he doesn't turn out to be the person you think he is."

The blond woman shifted so she came face to face with the warrior, the green eyes shining with such love that Xena felt her throat constrict.

"I could never, never lose faith in...Polyidos." She smiled briefly and reached out to caress a smooth bronze cheek with her thumb. "And as to perfection... I don't want that. I want flaws and shortcomings, I want insecurities and..." Her smile broadened, "A bad attitude, stubbornness, a foul temper and a fiercely overprotective nature that'll drive me crazy from time to time, but..."

She paused for a second as she watched an elegant eyebrow arch dramatically.

"But most of all I want to be loved by someone who loves me as much as I love her."

Before Gabrielle had the chance to continue she found herself in a fierce embrace, her body pressed tight against the warrior's.

"You have all that, Gabrielle," a hoarse voice whispered in the bard's ear. "All that and more."

The young woman managed to lean back a little so she could see Xena's face, "So much more, Xena."

Their eyes locked for a long moment before the warrior gently lowered the woman in her arms down to the ground, abandoning all further conversation and letting their bodies communicate the love in their hearts instead.

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Four days later, King Polyidos arrived in the company of Queen Phillinna and ten guards, the small escort showing only too clearly how few soldiers there were left to guard the two kingdoms. After a short meeting where the King and the Queen were brought up to date, Polyidos excused himself and left for the tent where his son's body was on display. Queen Phillinna sighed quietly and tired green eyes took in the sight of the warrior and bard on the other side of the table.

"I don't think he spoke more than ten sentences on the way here, I'm worried about him."

"Perhaps it'll get better once Alexias has been buried and he's had the time to say goodbye," Gabrielle spoke softly. "Right now, the feelings are still too raw, too fresh."

"Maybe," Phillinna answered. "I hope so, but I don't know... When Polyidos and Natolemos, his two eldest sons, were killed, the only thing that kept him from losing it all was Alexias. For almost a year he didn't go out of the castle, he hardly ate and hardly spoke to anybody."

The Queen shuddered by the memory of the haunted face and blank stare, she had witnessed on the day of the princes' funerals.

"It's my opinion that Alexias kept him sane, that he was the only person who managed to bring Polyidos back to the world of the living, and now with Alexias gone as well..."

Phillinna shook her head sadly, "I fear for the subjects of his kingdom..."

"Do you think he'll do anything...inappropriate, something rash," Xena asked delicately, not wanting to offend the Queen, but Phillinna only shook her head again.

"No, he won't hurt them or punish them in anyway. He just won't be there anymore. I..." She faltered then continued. "I was with him when they brought him the message, I saw the light go out in his eyes and I don't know if I'll ever see it return."

The three women fell silent, two of them not knowing what to say and the other lost in memories. Then suddenly it looked like the Queen reached some kind of decision and she straightened up in the chair.

"When will I be able to return home with my soldiers? I don't want to leave the castle

and Simmias unguarded for any longer that I have to."

Gabrielle looked at Xena who chewed on her lip for a minute before answering.

"Soon. Kassander's dead and it doesn't seem like Persia is up for another try at conquering Greece. At least not for the time being," she smiled bitterly. "As soon as I know what's going on in Kassander's castle and that everything's under control, and we have figured out what to do with his lands, then I don't see why we shouldn't discharge the army and all head home."

The last remark was followed by a glance at the bard who smiled slightly in return.

"And when will you know that?"

The warrior returned her gaze to the slender Queen.

"As soon as I receive words from Lykeas."

"Oh, I see... He's away, securing the castle?"

"Yes," Xena replied tersely, not quite liking Phillinna's tone of voice.

"And how long has he been away?"

"Ten days or so."

"It takes that long to secure a practically abandoned castle?"

The warrior crossed her arms and Gabrielle felt how the temperature in the tent dropped by several degrees.

"What exactly are you implying?"

The Queen raised her hands and gave Xena an apologetic smile. "Nothing, nothing at all. I was just curious." She stood up and gave them both a small nod, "Will you excuse me? I will go see Polyidos."

The bard watched Phillinna disappear out of the tent before she returned her gaze to the warrior who was staring down at the table.

"What was all that about?"

"Nothing," Xena answered without raising her head, her voice sounding both tired and resigned.

"You're worried too, aren't you?"

For a moment, Gabrielle thought she wouldn't get an answer, but then the warrior finally raised her head to meet the bard's eyes.

"He should've been back by now."

"Do you think something has happened to him?"

The blue eyes became distant and the bard saw Xena's facial expression change ever so slightly as long gone memories washed over her, her right hand absently drawing

small circles on the hard wooden table.

"I think," she then spoke softly, almost too low for Gabrielle to hear. "I think he's finally decided not to wait any more."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"Me."

The warrior broke eye contact and stared down at the restless hand on the table without really seeing it.

"I think he's stopped waiting for the Warrior Princess to return."

Then without another word, she abruptly stood up and left the tent. The bard remained in her chair for a few minutes, rubbing her aching temples before she slowly got up and followed Xena out of the tent.

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## **CHAPTER XXXVII**

A cold clear day gave way to a chilly clear night as Xena slowly dismounted Argo, her stiff muscles crying out in protest after the long ride. She remained still for a moment, listening intently, but heard nothing that didn't belong to the usual sounds of the night and gradually her body started to relax. She considered for a moment whether to remove Argo's saddle or not, but decided against it. She wasn't planning on staying long. Quickly she gathered some wood and soon a small fire was burning and the warrior dragged a log close and sat down, reaching her open palms out toward the flames. As the warmth slowly spread in her body, she looked around studying her surroundings. A few trees and bushes were scattered around the land, but otherwise the area was clear, leaving an open view of the dark castle below her.

Suddenly, her keen ears picked up the sound she'd been waiting for, the sound of quiet footsteps coming her way. She wrapped her arms around herself, stared into the fire and waited. The steps came closer and closer, then they stopped and for awhile everything was quiet.

"I've been expecting you."

Xena didn't look up, "I know."

She didn't hear the footsteps again, but as she finally raised her head, she looked up to see Lykeas standing on the opposite side of the fire. Something resembling a smile crossed his face and he sat down on the ground, crossing his legs

"It's cold."

"Yes."

For almost half an hour neither of them spoke as they both looked into the fire, carefully avoiding each other's eyes. Then Xena exhaled slowly and looked up. A calm black gaze met hers and for the first time in a very long time, she didn't see the

usual guarded and distanced expression in his eyes.

"I want you to come back with me to the camp."

"I can't."

Lykeas' voice was quiet and serene and the dark woman swallowed hard before looking away.

"Xena...?"

Almost reluctantly, she returned her gaze to the warrior before her.

"Why don't you stay here?"

"I can't do that." Xena's voice was devoid any emotion, but as she saw the expression on his face change, she knew she wasn't fooling him.

"The men are loyal to me now, Xena."

The tone of Lykeas' voice had become more urgent, more seductive and she closed her eyes against it.

"They'll follow me wherever I go...wherever we go. They are all excellent soldiers and they are disciplined and strong. There isn't a thing we can't do with them behind us, nobody will be able to stand in our way. It could be like we always wanted it to be, the way we always dreamt it would be."

Xena opened her eyes, "It's not my dream any more, Lykeas, and it hasn't been for a very long time."

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't speak and the warrior smiled sadly.

"You don't believe me, do you? Just like you didn't believe me back then."

She stood up, feeling a sudden chill invade her body.

"I meant every single thing I said and still do, even more so. I've found another purpose of life, another way and I'm not going back, I won't...I can't."

For a moment the controlled mask that was Lykeas' face cracked and she saw a brief glimpse of pain in his eyes, then it was gone.

"But, Xena..."

The words were almost pleading as he stood up and walked over to stand before her.

"Don't you see, it won't be like it was back then. It's different now, we don't have to raid or plunder any villages, we don't have to kill innocent people or take away their livelihood, that's not what I want. I'm not interested in that. What I want is Thessaly and Epiros, Attica and Thrace, that's what I want, Xena. We can get Phillinna and Polyidos to join forces with us and then we'll go after those petty kingdoms where the monarch is hardly more than a thief and a murderer. We'll offer the soldiers their lives if they'll pledge their loyalty to us."

His eyes were blazing with a fire, Xena recognized all too well.

"Nobody will be able to stop us once we've taken control of Northern Greece and once Corinth and Thebes have fallen, Athens will as well. And then..."

He put his hands on the warrior's shoulders.

"And then, Xena. Then we'll unite the country, create a solidarity that this miserable country has never seen before. We'll watch Greece grow in strength and numbers until nobody and nothing will be able to stand in our way. Not even Persia! Not even Caesar!"

Xena knew he saw it coming by the way his jaw clenched, but whether he intended to block it or not didn't matter as he simply didn't have the time. She backhanded him hard across the right cheek and almost shouted, "Snap out of it, Lykeas! What in Tartarus do you think you're doing! Have you lost your mind?!"

He stepped back, anger mingled with disbelief written all over his face as he gingerly touched his flushing cheek. They were both breathing hard and small clouds of steam appeared and disappeared rapidly before their faces. Piercing blue eyes stared into black without blinking and Xena took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down.

"Listen very carefully to what I'm gonna say now, Lykeas. I will never take up arms like that again! I will never ride out to conquer and kill again! I renounced that part of my life almost five years ago, and I've have no intention of ever, ever returning to the person I once was! Do you understand, Lykeas!" She closed the distance between them till their bodies were almost touching. "Do you understand!"

The look exchanged between the two warriors was almost painful, but then the fire in the dark eyes disappeared and left nothing in its wake.

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Lykeas' right hand was absently playing with a small knife while his left tossed another piece of wood on the fire. Xena slid down from the log to the ground to lean her back against it, silently watching the dark man before her. She let her gaze slowly drift over the beautiful, but haunted face and further down to rest on the hand clenching and unclenching the knife. She sensed him looking at her and she raised her head to meet eerily calm and resigned black eyes. She tried a smile and he returned it wanly before staring back at the flames.

"Why don't you come back with me, Lykeas? You don't have..." She took a deep breath and then continued. "There's no reason for you to stay here, it's over. We can all go home now."

He looked up and again she saw pain in his eyes only this time it didn't disappear.

"I can't, Xena. I... I have to try."

"But Lykeas-."

He raised his hand to silence her and for a moment nobody spoke.

"It's all I've left, Xena," he then said softly. "There's nothing else for me."

"Lykeas-."

"No, Xena." His calm voice stopped her protests. "It's what I've always wanted, if I don't...if I don't try then... What else is there for me?"

"Don't say that!" She rose and stepped over to sit down beside him. "I know, you think that it's something you have to do, but...but..."

She bit her lip in frustration about not being able to find the right words and suddenly she felt a warm hand cover her own. She looked up and he smiled briefly and although her heart was aching, she returned it.

"I'm not like you, Xena. I can't change the way you have. I...I won't be able to find a purpose with my life like that and...and..." He looked away. "I'm tired of just...just going on. When I thought there was a chance you might change your mind and come back it was okay. I knew it was small, but I was willing to wait." Black eyes sought out blue again. "I was willing to wait as long as it would take, months, years, it didn't matter...but now..."

The knife slipped from motionless fingers, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I know you're not coming back now. I guess I knew it all along. I just hoped that maybe..." He reached out and gently brushed her cheek with his thumb. "I'm happy for you and I'm happy that you've found this new way of living and with someone who loves you, but... It's not for me... I don't know how to live a life like that...I never have."

"Lykeas..."

He smiled, but shook his head and moved away a little, looking back into the fire.

"Lykeas please... If I can so can you."

"No," he whispered quietly. "It's not for me, it never was."

"It's that all you have to say?"

They both heard the pain and resignation in her voice and Lykeas nodded slowly.

"Yes."

Xena stood up and took a few steps back.

"You know I can't let you do it. If you raise an army and..." She faltered and exhaled slowly. "I will try to stop you...no matter what it takes."

"I know."

She looked down at the dark man on the ground and swallowed. His head was turned away, hidden in shadows and she couldn't see his face.

"I take it the soldiers won't come if I tell them to?"

"No," he spoke so softly she almost didn't hear him. "They're loyal to me now."

For a while she didn't move, but just looked at him, her calm appearance hiding the turmoil inside her. Then she slowly turned away and walked over to Argo. She mounted and shifted slightly in the saddle before looking at him again. He turned his head and their eyes met and for a long moment they only looked at each other in silence. A pale, almost invisible smile showed on his lips and Xena closed her eyes briefly.

"I want you to know that whatever happens...you've...you've always been very important to me, Lykeas."

A slightly more genuine smile appeared on his face then it disappeared.

"You don't have to tell me that."

She searched his face, trying to determine if her words had been understood.

"You were there for me when I needed it...you... I could always count on you...you..." She bit her lip again. "I trusted you with my life... I still do."

"But not with your soul..."

He stood up and looked at her one last time before turning to walk back to the castle. She stared at his retreating back for a few moments then looked away only to see a brief flash of light coming from the ground near the dying fire. She dismounted and slowly reached down to pick up the shiny object. It was Lykeas' knife. She looked in the direction where the dark warrior had disappeared.

"Lykeas...?"

There was no real force in her voice and nobody but herself her the word. She held the knife away from her body as if afraid of touching it, and stared at it for a few seconds, then she walked back to Argo and slipped the knife into her saddlebag.

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A sharp, piercing pain caused Zelei's eye to snap open and she stared directly into the face of man whose features were contorted by grief. As the last traces of sleep left her, she realized that she was bleeding from a shallow, but long cut just below her chin. She blinked a few times and tried to touch the wound only to be reminded that she was still tied to a chair. Angrily she turned her attention back to the black-haired man.

"Who the fuck are you? And what in Tartarus do you think you're doing!?"

The man didn't answer, but just reached out and let the blade of the knife he was holding slide down the Amazon's right arm, drawing a thin line of blood from shoulder to wrist. The Captain tried to moved away, but the ropes kept her firmly in place.

"What are you doing!?! Get away from me you bastard!"

When her angry words didn't seem to make an impact on the silent man, a small, but insistent feeling entered Zelei's mind; fear.

"Guards! Guards! Come in here and get this psycho away from me! Guards!"

"They won't come."

The man's soft, strangely detached words startled the Amazon and her gaze flew away from the tent flap and back to the man's face.

"Who are you?"

Brown eyes filled with anguish stared back at her.

"I'm Alexias' father."

The Captain's mouth opened then closed.

"They won't come." The King continued as if he hadn't noticed her reaction. "The Guards. They loved my son just as much as I did." A pained expression showed on Polyidos' face. "No, not as I did. I won't speak in past tense about Alexias. I still love him, I always will. He and his brothers were all I had and now...now I have nothing."

The eyes who had become distant with memories returned to the present and focused on Zelei again.

"You took him away from me." The last sentence was both a statement and an accusation and the Amazon swallowed nervously.

"Guards!"

"I told you," the King leaned down, "they won't come. I sent them away." He looked down at the bloody knife in his hand as if seeing it for the first time. "You're all mine now."

He raised his arm and stared at the blade in the orange glow of the oil lamp standing on the ground a few feet away, then he returned his gaze to the Captain.

"Did you make him suffer or did you take mercy on him and make it quick? Did he beg for his life?" Polyidos carefully pressed the blade against the soft skin just below the Amazon's ear. "Did he fight?" He made a swift, causal movement with his wrist and Zelei felt a single drop of blood run down her throat. "Was he afraid or did he curse you, telling you to go to Tartarus?"

During the entire session, the King's voice had been insistent, but calm and the Captain craned her neck, trying to see the man who had moved to stand behind her.

"You can't do this!"

She felt the pressure of the knife ease slightly, but it didn't move away.

"Oh? And why not?"

"Because...because... It... It'd be murder! I'm defenceless, tied to a chair! If you kill me it'll be murder."

"Well, you didn't seem to have had a problem with murder before." She felt the pressure against her throat increase. "But then again, I suppose it's different when you're on the receiving end or am I wrong?"

She didn't realize she was expected to answer until a sharp pain made her eye water.

"Or am I wrong!"

The knife moved again and a steady stream of blood began to flow down her throat.

"Am I wrong, Amazon! Tell me if I'm wrong!"

"No!" Zelei cried out. "You're not wrong!"

"Polyidos! Get away from her!"

Two heads turned abruptly to see Gabrielle stand in the entrance of the tent, her jaw set and green eyes determined.

"Step away from her, Polyidos," she spoke in a low, but commanding voice. "This is not the way to do it."

"But she killed my son!"

"I know," the bard stepped closer, reaching out for the knife. "And she will get her punishment, but not this way, not like this."

"She deserves to die," the King spoke slowly as he watched a small hand gently pry the knife from his cold fingers. "She took him away from me... I don't have anything left."

"I know, I know," Gabrielle spoke softly as if soothing a frightened child. "But killing Zelei won't bring Alexias back and it won't make you feel better either."

She gently, but firmly put her arm around the man's slumped shoulders and started to lead him out of the tent. Just before they exited, she threw one look over her shoulder at the Captain who looked at her with obvious confusion written all over her face.

"Why did you do that? Why did you stop him?" A look of disdain and contempt appeared on Zelei's face. "Is this some kind of mercy act to show how good you are? Am I supposed to be grateful and thank you?"

The bard shook her head and something resembling pity briefly showed in the green eyes.

"No, Zelei."

"Well, then... Why did you do it?"

Gabrielle looked directly into a single brown eye. "We're even now, Zelei. You saved my life, now I've saved yours...at least for the time being. I don't owe you any more."

"So you saved me only so you won't feel guilty when they condemn me to dead?" The Amazon said flatly, shooting the bard an ominous glare.

"Something like that:"

Gabrielle turned and followed the King out of the tent.

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII

A few miles away from the camp, Xena dismounted and started to walk, leading Argo behind her. She wasn't in the mood to return to the crowded camp just yet. After a couple of minutes walking through the dark gloom of dusk, she just dropped Argo's reins and sat down on a rock close to a small stream. Argo looked questionably at her mistress for a moment or two before moving away a little and started to graze. Xena stared at the stream without blinking and let her thoughts flow with the water.

*It finally happened...like I knew it would, one day...I always hoped that maybe, just maybe he would find something for himself, something that would make him happy, but I guess... It probably wasn't meant to be.*

She raised her head and threw a quick glance at Argo before looking back at the stream.

*Damn you, Lykeas... Why does it have to be this way? Why can't you just...just...*

Xena sighed and closed her eyes, feeling the increasingly cold air wash over her body.

*I don't want to hurt you...*

She abruptly stood up and whistled for Argo to return to her.

*But you leave me no choice, do you?*

She mounted and rode the last miles to the camp. When she arrived at the outskirts of the camp, the last red traces of the sun had disappeared and night had taken over. She nodded briefly to the guards posted nearby and then made her way to the stables, taking her time to care for her horse and saddle before starting to walk in the direction of her tent. She considered for a moment whether to go see Gabrielle, but decided against it. She didn't really feel like having company tonight and with the mood she was in, she was sure to drive the bard crazy within minutes of her arrival, so she might as well save them both the trouble and go straight to bed. As she approached her tent, she noticed to her annoyance a faint light shining through the canvass and she exhaled slowly, stealing herself while trying to mobilize what was left of her social skills. Apparently, it looked like she was going to have company tonight whether she wanted to or not.

"Your Majesty?" Xena exclaimed in surprised as she entered the tent. "What are you doing here?"

Queen Phillinna rose from the chair and turned to look at the warrior, a small smile playing on her lips.

"I was waiting for you. I was told you had returned."

"Yeah, about an hour ago."

Xena took off the heavy coat she'd been wearing and threw it carelessly on the pallet before sitting down herself.

"What can I do for you, Your Majesty?" She spoke in a tired voice, clearly indicating that all she really wanted was to be left alone and go to sleep.

The Queen smiled and was obviously aware of the warrior's unspoken wish, but nonetheless turned the chair around to face her and sat down again.

"I just wanted to know if your journey went well and you accomplished what you set out to do? Considering the hurry in which you left a couple of days ago it must have been something very urgent."

Xena just shrugged and started to pull off her boots, muttering something under her breath that wasn't really supposed to mean anything. She continued with her ministrations until a direct question from Phillinna caused her to stop and look up.

"What?"

"I asked, if we should expect more trouble?"

The warrior looked around before throwing the boots down beside the pallet, "The Persians have left and Kassander's dead." She returned her gaze to the woman in front of her. "Everything's been taken care of as far as I can see."

Phillinna raised an eyebrow in a way Xena found most irritating and she crossed her arms.

"Do you have anything specific on your mind?"

"I was just wondering," the Queen spoke in a surprisingly gentle voice, "if Lykeas had returned with you?"

For a few minutes, the warrior just looked at Phillinna, then she sighed quietly, "You know he hasn't."

The Queen nodded to herself, green eyes searching Xena's face.

"I haven't failed to notice that almost a hundred of my most trusted soldiers together with a few of Polyidos' haven't returned as well. I take it there is a connection there?"

"Do you really need me to answer that?"

The hostility in the warrior's voice wasn't lost on Phillinna who smiled sadly.

"No, I guess not."

She stood up and returned the chair to its original position then moved to the exit of the tent where she paused and turned around.

"Xena?"

Their eyes met.

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do?"

For a moment the warrior's expression became guarded then the walls fell away and pain mixed with frustration showed in the blue eyes.

"I don't know, but I'll think of something...I always do."

Silence lingered between them for a few minutes before the Queen spoke again, "I'm sorry, Xena."

"So am I."

She looked away, unable to hold Phillinna's gaze.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Undo a life of hurt and indifference, violence and pain?" When the Queen didn't speak, Xena continued bitterly, "I didn't think so."

"Who exactly are we talking about here?" Phillinna asked softly.

The warrior looked up again and stared directly into warm green eyes.

"Does it matter?"

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Zelei looked up as the two Amazons stepped into the tent.

"It's time," Callias spoke tonelessly and stepped behind the chair to untie the ropes. "We're going to escort you to the council."

"What's going to happen there?" Zelei asked, trying to make eye contact with Erinya whose eyes were darting around the tent, obviously uncomfortable.

"You will get the chance to speak for yourself and then your future fate will be decided," Callias continued from behind the Amazon's back. "The Queen and King Polyidos will listen to what you have to say and then make their decision."

"What!?" The Captain craned her neck trying to see her colleague. "What does King Polyidos have to do with this? I'm an Amazon, I demand to be judged by Amazons and nobody else. No fucking man is going to decide whether I should live or die!"

"You're no Amazon," Erinya spoke for the first time since they had entered the tent. She tightened the grip around her bow. "An Amazon doesn't betray her sisters or try to assassinate her Queen. She doesn't endanger the lives or her allies and friends or murder innocent children."

"But..." The colour had started to drain from Zelei's face. "Don't you understand? I

did it all for you! For us! Gabrielle is no good as Queen, she's been holding us back, she doesn't belong in the Nation. If she wasn't Queen, we could return to our all-time greatness, we could take back all the land we've lost and again be a force people would have to reckon with. Nobody would ever dare to laugh at the Amazons again."

"With Amazons like you people are more likely to feel pity than amusement," Callias commented flatly and walked over to stand beside the weapons master.

"Let's go, they're waiting."

Erinya nodded and looked at Zelei, "I trust you not to try to do anything foolish on the way, or we'll have no scruples blindfolding you and tying your hands."

The Captain rose slowly from the chair and gazed at her former friends.

"I just have one question..."

"Yes?" Callias asked impatiently, disgust and contempt evident on her face.

"Will there..." The Amazon cleared her throat and tried to sound casually. "Will there... Is anybody going to...speak on my behalf?"

The two women exchanged a quick glance before returning their attention to their captive.

"Nobody has expressed a wish to speak on your behalf...except...."

"Except whom?" Zelei asked with growing trepidation.

"The Queen," the weapons master answered dryly, "she's offered to speak on your behalf."

"You're lying!"

The two Amazons didn't bother to answer and Callias stepped over and grabbed the Captain's elbow.

"Let's go."

Zelei hesitated for a moment, "What's going to happen to me?"

"Why?" Erinya asked mockingly. "Are you afraid?"

"No," the Captain spoke seriously. "I just want to know what's going to happen."

Callias shrugged and started to pull Zelei out of the tent, "Who knows? The King most likely want you dead and so does everybody else. I doubt banishment will be an issue at all."

"Everybody?"

The Amazon stopped, ignoring the impatient glares from her captors.

"Even you...?"

She let her eyes search the faces in front of her.

"My sisters... They want me dead too..."

They didn't answer and the Captain looked away, staring at the camp around her.

Callias and Erinya looked at each other for a few seconds, then the blond Amazon reached out to take Zelei's elbow again, but just before her hand made contact, the Captain turned her head and looked directly into the blue eyes. Callias frowned, not sure how she should read the expression in the pale brown eye staring intensely at her.

"Zelei is there somethi-."

Before she could finish the sentence, Zeli turned on her heels and started to sprint away.

"Oh, Gods be damned!" Erinya cursed and immediately place an arrow on her bow.

"Stop!" Callias cried out as she rushed after the fugitive. "Zelei, don't be silly! There's nowhere for you to run!"

All over the camp heads turned, alarmed by the sudden shouting, but nobody stepped in or tried to block the Amazon's way, most simply being too stunned or caught up in the chase to respond.

"Zelei!" The weapons master called out, "I'm warning you! If you don't stop immediately, I'll shoot."

The Captain didn't even slow down.

"Zelei!" Erinya shouted again. "I'm serious! Don't make me do this!"

Xena stepped out of the tent just in time to see the Captain fall to the ground, an arrow sticking out of her back. She vaguely heard Gabrielle inhale sharply behind her as she started to run to the bleeding Amazon. She reached Zelei just a second before Callias caught up with her and together they kneeled down beside the Captain. With more gentleness than the soldier had thought possible, Xena rolled the Amazon onto her side, careful not to touch the arrow still sticking out of Zelei's back. One look into the brown eye told the warrior all she needed to know and she looked up at Gabrielle who'd come to stand beside them.

"Do you want me to call for the healer?"

"No," Xena shook her head, "that won't be necessary."

A few bloody bubbles clung to the Captain's lips and she opened her mouth as if trying to speak. The warrior leaned down and brought her ear close to Zelei's mouth who seemed to whisper a few words, instantly followed by a hollow wheezing, her eye rolled back and the body on the ground went limp. Xena sighed quietly and stood up again, emotionless blue eyes studying the dead Amazon. She felt a warm hand on her arm and turned to see the bard's pale face. Without a word she put her arm around Gabrielle's shoulder and started to lead her away.

"Xena, wait!"

They turned and Erinya who'd arrived at the scene just in time to witness the

Captain's death stepped a few steps forward.

"What did she say?"

The warrior looked at the weapons master for a long time, then spoke slowly, "She said that nobody executes an Amazon, Amazons control their own fate...even in death."

She threw one last glance at the body on the ground then turned around and walked away, her arm still protectively placed around the bard's shoulder.

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The soldier rode through the camp as fast as possible, barely giving the people who were in his way time enough to throw themselves out of his path. Outside the council tent, he forcefully pulled on the reins and the horse came to an abrupt halt, almost throwing the man off in the attempt to stop. The soldier jumped out of the saddle and made his way into the tent, shoving the tent flap aside.

"Your Majesty?" His eyes searched out Queen Phillinna who was sitting at the table together with King Polyidos. "An army is approaching."

He stopped to take a few deep breaths, confusion showing on his face.

"Its...it's our army, I mean... At least I thought it was, but..."

"It didn't behave like it was ours, did it?"

The soldier jumped at the sudden voice coming from somewhere behind him. He turned and came face to face with Xena. The man swallowed at the sight of the imposing figure and involuntarily took a step back to put some distance between.

"No, they acted like...like..."

"Like you were the enemy?"

It was hardly a question, but the soldier felt compelled to answer nonetheless.

"Yes, I mean...they didn't attack us or anything, they just seemed really..." He paused, searching for the word. "Hostile...determined. They told me to bring you this message."

He reached into the bag hanging from his shoulder, pulled out a scroll and after a quick glance at the warrior decided to give it to her instead of his Queen. As Xena unrolled the scroll and started to read, the man gave his sovereign a bewildered look.

"I don't understand it, Your Majesty. Some of the men are my friends, I've served with them as long as I can remember. Why would they change like this? What's happened?"

Phillinna rose from her chair and gave the soldier a reassuring smile before walking over to stand beside the warrior.

"What does it say?" She paused, then continued. "What does...he say?"

Without a word, Xena handed the scroll to the Queen and turned to look at the messenger again.

"How far away are they?"

"About..." The soldier spoke thoughtfully. "About two days away from here. We should be able to see them tomorrow night."

"Who was leading them?" The warrior asked quietly, clearly already knowing the answer.

"It was..." The man's eyes narrowed. "It was your friend, Lykeas. Lykeas was leading them."

He turned to his Queen who'd just finished reading the scroll.

"Your Majesty, what's going on? Do I need to alert the men?"

Phillinna's eyes searched Xena's face and after a few seconds the warrior nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Yes," the Queen looked back at the soldier, "alert the troops and tell them to prepare for battle."

The messenger's mouth opened then it closed again slowly as disbelief spread all over his face. Then he gave her a deep bow and disappeared out of the tent.

"What's going on?" King Polyidos rose from the chair, his brown eyes tired and his face haggard. "Are the Persians returning?"

"No, the Persian's haven't returned," Phillinna spoke gently. "It's a bit more...complicated than that."

As she finished her sentence her eyes went back to Xena who hadn't spoken since the soldier left the tent.

"Xena..." The Queen put her hand carefully on the warrior's arm, not continuing until blue eyes focused on her. "What are you going to do. What are *we* going to do?"

"He has to be stopped," the warrior spoke emotionlessly. "Even though the message says he won't attack us, we can't allow him to pass so he can attack some other kingdom somewhere else..."

She stared directly into Phillinna's eyes.

"I can't let him pass."

She turned on her heels and walked out of the tent leaving Polyidos and Phillinna alone. The King looked at the blond woman beside him.

"Is this Lykeas, we're talking about? The man who rescued my son?"

The Queen nodded slowly, "Yes, the very same."

"But...but why would he turn against us? Has he lost his mind or something? It makes no sense!"

Phillinna smiled sadly at Polyidos and gave his arm gentle squeeze before leaving the tent as well.

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## CHAPTER XXXIX

Restless blue eyes searched the scorched plain below her. Even in the dark she could still see the huge burnt area and the grumbled trees and bushes looking like torn and twisted figures reaching toward the sky. She had been outside for almost an hour...waiting. Almost before she saw it, she felt it and stared through the night, trying to make out the other side of the plain. Slowly men and horses appeared, all moving quietly and controlled. She saw them begin to erect some makeshift tents and soon afterwards a few campfires were lit. Xena's gaze went from one end of the camp to the other, categorizing and labelling every moving shadow. They seemed to be slightly more than a hundred and fifty men, apparently some of Kassander's men had decided to join them or maybe it was farmers or fortune hunters. The warrior frowned slightly, it wasn't like Lykeas to use unprofessionals in an army.

*What are you up to? What are your plans, what's going on inside that dark head of yours?*

"Xena?"

She turned around to look at one of Polyidos' men.

"Inform the men and the Amazons that they've arrived."

The soldier saluted and hurried away once again leaving the warrior alone in the darkness. She turned her head and looked back at the plain. A cold wind swept from behind her down the slope, making her hair fly around her face and she knew the men down there had to be freezing.

*Are you cold too, Lykeas?*

Suddenly her eyes were drawn to a single rider that was slowly moving away from the camp up towards her. Even though the distance made it impossible to determine for sure, Xena knew without a doubt it was Lykeas. She could feel it. Her hand instinctively reached for chakram then just as naturally it fell back down, her cold fingers twitching lightly. As if sensing her emotions the rider paused for a second before urging his horse on again. Slowly the distance between them became smaller and smaller, but just before Lykeas reached the slope leading to the camp above him he stopped and brought Rarjan to a halt. He raised his head and in spite of the distance, in spite of the dark night and the dancing shadows racing over the ground, black eyes stared directly into blue. Not once did either Xena's nor Lykeas' gaze waver as they looked into each other's eyes, oblivious to everything around them. She could see his slow, steady breathing leave small clouds of steam in front of his face before they dissolved and disappeared. He tilted his head just a little and the warrior,

who recognized the familiar questioning gesture, raised a questioning eyebrow in return, fully aware that he wouldn't be able to see it, but knowing Lykeas knew she did it just the same. He looked away, back to the camp behind him and for a moment it was as if the silent communication between them ceased, and Xena had to stop herself from taking a step forward. Then the black eyes returned to her face and she shook her head slowly, knowing that this time he could see the movement. The warrior saw him straighten up in the saddle and could almost believe that she heard him let out a quiet sigh, before he slowly raised his hand. Xena's eyes darted from the raised hand to Lykeas' face and back again. She could feel his gaze upon her, could feel how he was willing her to look at him again. Hesitantly, but unable not to, she made eye contact with the dark man. A small smile flickered across his face and the warrior felt her lips curl up ever so slightly as she returned the smile. Then she raised her hand in a quiet, unspoken greeting and she could see Lykeas nod slowly, lowering his own hand before he abruptly turned Rarjan around and galloped away. Xena stared after him and continued to do so even long after he had disappeared out of her sight. The nagging, sickening feeling she'd been having in her stomach for the last couple of days eased, and instead she felt a lump in her throat, causing the warrior to swallow hard, but it didn't disappear.

*You've given me the answer, Lykeas. I know what to do now.*

"Do you want me to post more guards here?"

The soldier who had run to deliver her message had returned.

"No," Xena spoke quietly still facing away from the guard, "nothing will happen tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes... Nothing's gonna happen tonight... He told me."

"Who?" The soldier asked in bewilderment as he watched the dark woman leave, but the warrior didn't answer.

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It was midday when the two armies approached each other. Without any discussion, Xena had taken control over the soldiers and the remaining Amazons, and had briskly told them to be ready when she needed them. Gabrielle had tried to talk to her about what was going on, but the warrior had just shaken her head and left without saying anything except from goodbye. It was with more than a little trepidation and anxiety, the bard watched the two armies below her close the distance between them. She'd been surprised when she'd realized that Xena didn't intend to use the advantage of attacking downhill, but in stead insisted on meeting Lykeas on the flat plain. When she'd questioned her, the warrior had only replied that, "it was better that way."

"It doesn't seem real, does it?"

Gabrielle turned her head and looked at Phillinna whose white dress was fluttering violently in the wind.

"No," the bard replied as she for the hundredth time had to remove her hair from her eyes. "No, it doesn't."

They were standing alone, apart from the rest of the onlookers, at the edge of the slope leading down to the plain. In spite of it being in the middle of the day, the sky above them was dark-grey and a chilling wind caused everybody from soldiers to craftsmen to shiver and pull their clothes tighter around them.

"I don't understand why they're doing this," Gabrielle spoke quietly, just loud enough for the woman beside her to hear. "I mean, I understand that Xena can't allow Lykeas to pass and all...but..." She let out a frustrated sigh. "I thought they were friends."

Phillinna smiled equivocally, her eyes never leaving the scene below her.

"They are friends, Gabrielle." She looked like she was going to continue, but instead raised her arm and pointed, "Look."

The bard's brow furrowed as she took in the sight of the two armies. They were less than two miles apart now, but instead of getting closer, they seemed to slow down before completely coming to a halt before each other. Gabrielle's eyes searched for the warrior and finally spotted her at the front seemingly arguing about something with Callias and the commanding officer from Polyidos' army. She could tell from Xena's squared shoulders and crossed arms that whatever it was she'd set her heart on, the Amazon and the soldier wouldn't have any luck in talking her out of it, and for the first time in a very long time, a small smile appeared on the blond woman's lips, then it faded.

"What is she doing!"

Phillinna leaned forward, narrowing her eyes. "It looks like she's going out to meet them."

"Alone!?" The bard asked exasperated, not quite believing what she saw. "Is she crazy? She can't take them on all at once. She can't meet them alone!"

She started to move forward, but a surprisingly strong hand held her back.

"Not them...just him. Look."

Too stunned to offer an reply, Gabrielle watched as a single figure detached itself from the enemy army and made its way across the plain.

"What are they doing...?" The bard whispered to herself, her gaze riveted to the two warriors slowly approaching each other. With less than a yard separating them Lykeas and Xena stopped and although Gabrielle knew it was useless, she couldn't help herself from straining to hear what was being said. Of course she couldn't make out the words or even hear their voices, and had to settle for waiting in silence together with the two impatiently waiting armies and the even more impatient onlookers.

"So you agree to my terms?"

Lykeas nodded slowly.

"Yes."

Xena looked into the black eyes, knowing the answer already.

"Why?"

"It's better that way," he spoke finally after a long pause.

"Will your men agree to it?"

"They won't be given a choice."

Trying one last time, Xena searched the calm face before her.

"Lykeas... I think-."

He shook his head.

"No, Xena."

He gave her a weak smile, "See you tonight?"

"I'll be here."

They remained like this, standing in front of each other in silence for a long time, neither wanting to be the first to turn away. Then Lykeas shifted slightly, his gaze darting to the ground.

"Goodbye, Xena."

She waited till he looked up again, "For now."

Another pale smile. "Yeah, for now."

She turned and walked away, conscious of all the eyes upon her, but not caring.

"Xena..."

She stopped, but didn't turn around.

"Yes."

"Say...say hello to Gabrielle for me."

For the briefest of seconds, the warrior's facade cracked and a deep sadness showed in the blue eyes, then she nodded.

"I will."

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"A what?"

"A duel," the warrior repeated painstakingly, already having repeated that particular phrase one too many times. "Lykeas and I are going to meet at sunset to fight. If he loses he'll dissolve the army without any conditions, and if I lose then he'll be granted

passage through Polyidos' and Simmias' kingdoms without interference. It's a simple as that."

She started to rise, but the bard stepped closer and firmly pushed Xena back down in the chair.

"There's nothing simple about that. It's absolutely crazy!"

"Isn't it better than fighting a battle, killing even more soldiers? This way, we'll save us all a lot of bloodshed."

"If you win, yes! But have you considered the fact that you might lose? That we'll have to stand by passively and watch Lykeas attack some helpless kingdom or village."

"He won't do that!" The warrior interjected with more force than she'd intended and smiled apologetically as Gabrielle shrank away from her. "I'm sorry." She rose and took the bard's hands into her own. "I didn't mean to sound so harsh, it's just... He won't do that... I know he won't."

Concerned and worried green eyes looked into blue and Xena felt a tired smile appear on her face.

"He won't attack a village, Gabrielle. He won't. He'll only go for the kingdoms, the major city states. He won't have any interest in villages...he never really had."

"You don't know that for sure," the bard whispered softly.

The warrior sighed quietly and walked over to the pallet drawing Gabrielle down to sit beside her.

"I have to do it this way, Gabrielle. It's the only way to do this. I don't want another battle like the one we just had, we don't need that...nobody does."

She smiled and kissed the bard's forehead before resting her own against the blond hair.

"Don't you think we've experienced enough battles these last couple of months to last us a lifetime?"

The young woman didn't answer right away and when she did the question threw Xena slightly off balance.

"Why can't he just let it go? Why does he have to do this?" She leaned back so she could see the warrior's face. "You changed, why can't he?"

Xena cringed at the betrayal and hurt she detected in Gabrielle's voice and raised her hands helplessly.

"I...I don't know what to say. I've tried, believe me I have, but...but it's like..." She faltered, exhaling slowly.

"Yes?"

"It's like he doesn't want to...like he doesn't care what happens or... I can't reach

him any more, he's not listening to me... He just..."

She clenched her fists in frustration and the bard reached out to carefully pry the fingers apart before leaning back again.

"He doesn't care any more." The warrior finished impotently.

"He cares about you..."

Xena shrugged, "Maybe."

"He does, otherwise I don't understand why he should agree to do this, the duel and all."

Pale blue eyes looked up, "Don't you see it's so much easier this way...for both of us?"

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle inquired gently, "In what way?"

"We...we get to decide things ourselves this way. It's the way we've always done it."

The bard was silent for awhile, not certain she'd understood everything, but knowing she'd pushed the warrior to her limits already and decided to back down a little.

"So... You'll meet at sunset?"

The dark head nodded.

"Do you think you'll win?" She tried to make light out of the question and as Xena's eyes found hers continued cheerfully, "I mean, I'll need to know the odds if I'm going to bet. It'll be a great way to earn some dinars, won't it?"

"I didn't know you were a betting woman, Gabrielle." The warrior spoke, arching an eyebrow.

"I'm with you, aren't I? So I have to be..." She saw the light in the blue eyes fade and hurried to say, "I didn't mean it like that, Xena. I just-."

"I know." The warrior's voice was weary, but warm. "Don't worry, I know how you meant it."

She could still see the doubt in the blond woman's eyes and leaned closer, bringing their lips together. She gently tasted the bard's mouth for a few moments before pulling back and they exchanged a quiet smile.

"I'll say the odds are in my favour, but don't bet too much, there's no need to challenge fate...or the Gods for that matter."

Gabrielle was still smiling, but her eyes had turned serious.

"Xena... What if you don't win... What if-."

Again, the warrior leaned forward and cut off the words with her mouth. She kissed the bard more thoroughly this time before working her way over to the young woman's ear.

"I'm not gonna lose, Gabrielle," she whispered huskily and felt the bard shiver. "I'm better than he is."

She started to suck the earlobe into her mouth, but sighed dejectedly when she felt small hands on her chest, pushing her gently, but firmly away.

"What makes you so sure you'll defeat him?"

Xena sighed again, "I always do, that's why."

"He kicked your arse during staff practice back in the village, what makes you think he won't do that again."

"Gabrielle..." The warrior spoke more seriously, "That was *staff practice*. We were sparring and that's a whole lot different from fighting for real, besides we won't be using staves, but swords and I'm better with a sword than he is. I know it and he knows it."

"If he knows he's going to lose...why did he agree to this duel?"

Xena opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The bard rose from the pallet and placed a kiss on the dark hair.

"Get some rest, you'll need all your strength later."

Then she left the warrior alone to struggle with her own thoughts.

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## **Part 10**

### **CHAPTER XXXX**

"Uh, Gabrielle, I'm not sure that would be such a good idea."

"Please, Callias. I have to see him. Maybe if I can speak to him face to face, I'll finally be able to make some sense out of this mess." The Queen looked earnestly at her Captain. "I won't be able to stop you if you alert the guards or Xena, all I can do is to ask you to respect my wish and that's what this is. This is not an order, Callias. This is a wish, a request between friends."

They were standing alone at the edge of the slope, looking toward the enemy army which had retreated back to their tents at the other side of the plain.

The Amazon sighed and looked back at her Queen. "Gabrielle, I understand why you want to do this, I really do, but you can't just walk into their camp and ask to speak to Lykeas. It might be dangerous, they might choose to use you as a hostage."

Gabrielle shook her head slowly, "He won't do that."

"How do you know that?"

The blond woman stared towards the horizon again, "I just do."

The Captain glanced hesitantly back at their own camp. Their immediate surroundings were deserted and Gabrielle would be able to cross a big part of the plain, before the other guards would notice her and alert the troops. She sighed again and turned to the Queen who was looking at her expectantly.

"I'm gonna get into so much trouble with Xena if I let you do this."

They were both silent for a moment then Gabrielle reached out and put her hand on the Amazon's shoulder. "Please, Callias. I know I don't have any right to ask you this, but-."

"Yes, yes you do," the Captain interrupted. "It's just, I mean...you don't even know if he wants to see you. Maybe it'll all be in vain."

The Queen smiled, "I know, but I have to try anyway." The smile faded, "It'll help me sleep at nights."

Callias nodded slowly, "Do you want me to accompany you?"

"Thanks, but I need you to stall anybody who might try to stop me." She gave the warrior's shoulder a squeeze. "But don't go over the top, I don't want you to get hurt."

The Captain gave her a pale smile, "I won't."

Gabrielle looked at her for a second then she turned and started to walk down the slope.

"Gabrielle?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful, okay?"

The Queen smiled at her soldier, "I promise."

It was late afternoon when Gabrielle reached the enemy camp. The two guards posted there quickly exchanged a few words and then one left towards the centre of the camp, while the other walked out to meet the young woman.

"Your Majesty," the soldier looked at her in puzzlement before giving her a small bow, and Gabrielle recognized him as one of the young men Lykeas had been working with. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to speak with your leader," the bard spoke in her most regal tone. "I have a few things, I need to discuss with him."

"Have you changed your mind about the terms?" The soldier's eyes narrowed slightly, "I mean, the duel. Is Xena backing out?"

Gabrielle shook her head, "No, the terms are the same."

"But what is it then?"

The bard gave him a look. "I'll discuss that with Lykeas and nobody else."

The young man stared at her then nodded slowly, "As you wish, Your Majesty."

They heard running footsteps and turned to see the other guard come running back towards them. The soldier stopped in front of Gabrielle and bowed.

"I am to escort you to Lykeas' tent. Please come this way."

He gestured towards a small group of tents and waited for the bard to walk past him before following. On their way to the tent, the bard studied the area around her closely and was both worried and impressed. The soldiers were all behaving in a disciplined and controlled manner. Nobody was sitting idle around and nobody were drinking or fighting. A few curious looks followed her, but no one spoke or tried to intimidate her in any way. Finally they arrived in front of a tent no different from the rest she had seen, and the soldier bowed again.

"You can go straight in, Your Majesty. He's expecting you."

The bard nodded briefly and stepped inside.

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The tent was dark and it took awhile before Gabrielle's eyes adapted to the darkness and began to distinguish the various shapes and forms around her. She could see an unused pallet just to the right of her and the only other objects in the tent were a table with two chairs on either side. The dark man was sitting in the chair furthest away, watching her silently. The bard looked into calm black eyes.

"Hello, Gabrielle." Lykeas' voice was quiet and relaxed. "I should have known you would come by." He gestured towards the other chair, "Please sit down."

The bard walked over to the chair and sat down. Her gaze fell on the various scrolls and papers lying on the table between them, and she noticed several maps and drawings.

"Planning to take on the world, are you?" She smiled, trying to sound more cheerful than she felt.

He gave her a tired smile in return, "Something like that."

They sat in silence for a few minutes than the warrior cleared his throat.

"What can I do for you, Gabrielle?"

She looked at him and suddenly she didn't know what to say.

"I... I want you to call off the duel and dissolve your army without terms."

She studied him carefully, half fearing his reaction, but he only smiled a little.

"It's too late for that."

"No, no it isn't. The duel isn't until sunset. You can end it all now and nobody will get hurt. All it takes is for you to say the word, it's not too late."

"That's not what I meant, Gabrielle," Lykeas spoke slowly. "It's too late for me."

The bard looked at the resigned face before her.

"What do you mean?"

The warrior sighed deeply and for a second he seemed almost irritated then his expression became neutral again.

"Gabrielle, if I do as you say. What then? What will become of me afterwards?"

"You...you can become like Xena," the bard began eagerly. "You can help her fight evil and protect the innocent. The Gods know she can use all the help she can get. You could do a lot of good, Lykeas, I know you could. If only you'd understand that-."

"Have you considered the fact that I might not be interested in doing good, that I don't care about anybody but myself?" The warrior's quiet, but serious words abruptly halted Gabrielle's speech, and she stared at him in disbelief.

"I don't believe you."

He looked at her, almost sadly, "That's because you don't want to believe me, Gabrielle. I've told you before, I'm not Xena and I never will be." He paused briefly, "I don't want to be."

He suddenly straightened up. "Speaking of Xena. Does she know you're here?"

The bard smiled wryly in spite of herself, "Would you expect her to know?"

Lykeas shook his head a little, then grinned, "No, I guess not."

Silence hung in the air for a long time then Gabrielle sighed quietly.

"There's nothing I can say that will change your mind?"

"No," he looked into the green eyes, but found nothing but concern and a little resignation. "But I appreciate you trying anyway."

"Well, we're friends, aren't we?" Her tone was light, but her face was serious.

"Are we?" The warrior's eyes showed no emotion.

"Yes," the bard spoke softly. "We'll be friends till the moment you unsheathe your sword and begin to fight Xena. After that..." She faltered and looked away, "After that I don't know..."

The dark man only nodded and Gabrielle slowly returned her gaze to him.

"I don't understand it," she said simply. "I don't understand why you're doing this."

"I have to," he almost whispered.

"Why?" There was no anger or accusation in the bard's tone, just sadness.

"It's who I am, Gabrielle." Lykeas looked into her eyes, searching. "It's who I've always been."

The bard stared at him for a moment then she rose from the chair, "I have to get back."

The warrior nodded, "I know."

"Will it be safe for me to walk through the camp alone?"

"Yes," Lykeas rose as well. "But I'll escort you." He paused, "That is, if you want me to?"

She smiled briefly, "I'd like that."

They walked through the camp in silence, Gabrielle acutely aware of all the respectful, practically adoring gazes that followed the dark warrior. They reached the outskirts and stopped. They looked at each other for a few seconds then the bard stepped over and put her arms around Lykeas. For once he didn't flinch and as she released him, she gave him a small kiss on the cheek.

"Goodbye, Lykeas."

"Goodbye, Gabrielle."

She started to walk away, but then heard a voice behind her.

"I'm...I'm sorry that..."

She turned around and looked at him.

"You know what, Lykeas? When you said earlier that you didn't care about anybody but yourself, you weren't telling the truth, were you?"

"What do you mean?" His face was unreadable.

"I think it's directly opposite," the bard continued softly. "I think you do care about other people, it's yourself you don't care about."

Lykeas looked at her for a moment, the black eyes seeming even darker.

"If it makes you happy to think that, Gabrielle..."

Then he left and Gabrielle started to walk back across the plain.

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Sunset arrived and together with it, a strange solemn and supernatural glow which slowly started to affect everybody in the camp, and they became quiet and calm. People spoke in hushed voices without really knowing why, but they all felt it would be wrong to do anything else, and no laughter or banter were heard as the soldiers little by little gathered on the plain. A small area was left clear, flanked by men from

both sides. The duel was to take place there. Xena walked among the soldiers towards the circle followed by Gabrielle, and the men moved away without hesitation, granting them access. Just as she reached the free area, she turned to look at the bard who gave her a pale smile.

"I don't know what to say," she whispered quietly and Xena wrapped her arms tightly around the young woman.

"You don't have to say anything."

She let go and gently caressed Gabrielle's cheek for a second then she turned around and went into the circle. Lykeas was already there, waiting. Erinya stepped forward and even the faint sound of whispering voices faded.

"The duel which is about to take place has been agreed upon by both of the participants without pressure or influence from a third part. They do so freely and the loser has agreed to either grant passage through the area without interference or dissolve their army without conditions. Their Majesties, King Polyidos and Queen Phillina have agreed to this arrangement, as have Lykeas, commander of the hostile force and Xena, currently in charge of our own soldiers. The duel will continue until one of the combatants have either surrendered, is incapable of fighting or dead."

The weapons master stepped away, "You may begin."

All eyes went to the two warriors in the circle. Lykeas' gaze rested on Xena's face for a moment before his eyes darted to meet Gabrielle's, then he slowly unsheathed his sword and the bard closed her eyes. Xena studied the dark man before her, then without a word she drew her sword and walked out to meet him. By the first sound of metal meeting metal, Gabrielle opened her eyes again. Any doubts she might have had whether they were really serious, evaporated as she saw the grim expression on their faces and the cold look in their eyes. Whatever might have been between Xena and Lykeas, and whatever kind of friendship they had shared, it was gone from their minds now and both showed nothing but deadly determination as they circled and charged, countered and blocked. Their breathing became laboured and sweat started to glisten on their bodies. They were both sporting small bleeding cuts, but either had yet to gain the full advantage over the other. A collective gasp went through the crowd as Lykeas' sword slid down Xena's blade and cut deeply into her hand. Only small a grunt escaped the warrior's lips as she quickly changed hands and started to fight with her left in stead. Lykeas took the chance and moved forward, but suddenly Xena somersaulted over him and as she was in the air, she directed a powerful kick at his right shoulder. The sword flew from Lykeas' hand and landed on the ground a few yards away, but in stead of pressing her advantage, Xena lingered, closely studying the dark man's face. Without a word, Lykeas picked up his sword and they immediately started to fight again. Soon it became clear that he was having a problem with his shoulder, pain showed on his face every time he blocked a blow from Xena, but he didn't retreat and continued his relentless assaults. Suddenly their swords locked and their faces came within inches of each other as the two warriors tried to retrieve their weapons. Before Xena had time to react, Lykeas swept her legs away from underneath her and she landed flat on her back. For a moment it seemed like the dark man hesitated then he moved forward, raising his sword. Faster then Gabrielle thought possible, Xena's sword swung through the air, leaving a shallow, but long cut across Lykeas' abdomen. The warrior stepped back in surprise and watched for a second as

blood started to soak his tunic, then he looked back at Xena who had used that single moment of distraction to get back on her feet. Both their movements were slower now and exhaustion was beginning to show on their faces, and for awhile it seemed like nobody was able to get the upper hand, then Xena dodged a blow from Lykeas and her sword headed straight for his chest, but in the last second, the dark man raised his sword and deflected Xena's blade only to have it penetrate his exposed thigh. Lykeas groaned and fell down on one knee and again Xena stepped back. Blood was pulsing from the gash in the warrior's thigh with an alarming rate, and his face suddenly turned very pale, but still he managed to rise. For a moment, Gabrielle thought she saw anger replace the cold look in Xena's eyes then it was gone and she easily blocked a blow from the dark man. Soon after she marked him again and blood started to flow from a deep cut across his chest, but still he charged.

*Damn it, Lykeas! Why don't you just give up?*

Suddenly, Lykeas swayed a little as the blood loss started to affect him and Xena immediately saw her opening. Her blade was aiming directly for his throat when she realized that he wouldn't have the strength to deflect it, that he wouldn't be able to raise his sword in time and in that instant their eyes met. As she looked into his eyes she saw that he knew it too. To her surprise she didn't see fear or anger and without really realizing it, she managed to change the direction of the sword and it barely grazed his shoulder instead. Disbelief and something else showed in the black eyes and then Lykeas ran headlong into her, using his body to bring the warrior down. The impact knocked all air from Xena's lungs, but she quickly recovered and rolled them over, pinning the dark man beneath her.

"Give up, Lykeas." She hissed out between breaths.

*Please give up.*

"I can't," he struggled against her, but was too weak to break her hold. "Don't you understand."

She backhanded him hard and his head was knocked into the ground from the force.

"Give up, Lykeas!"

*Please...*

"No..." He squeezed out between clenched teeth. "I won't give up, Xena. I'll keep trying until you stop me."

"Damn you!" She shouted into his face. "Why can't you just let it go!"

The eerily white face made his eyes appear like two dark holes, and blood was slowly running down his cheek from a cut in his lip.

"Because it's too late already," he exhaled slowly.

The warrior stared at him then her entire body tensed, but before she could move a hand grabbed her wrist.

"I'll keep coming, Xena. No matter how many times you knock me down, I'll keep getting up." He grimaced in pain, "I won't stop until you make me." He stared into her

eyes, "Do you understand, Xena? Do you understand?"

"I don't want to," she whispered. "Please don't make me do it."

He only reached up and touched her cheek, both ignoring the blood he smeared on her face.

"You owe me, Xena, remember?"

His voice was so quiet that nobody but the two of them heard the words. Suddenly he started to cough up blood and his arm fell back to the ground.

"Please..."

"No."

"Please, Xena..."

*No...*

The grass beneath them took on a shade of deep red as blood continued to seep from Lykeas' wounds. His eyes were glassy and his face was covered by a thin sheen of sweat.

"You can still be saved," the warrior pleaded, totally oblivious to the circle of people that had started to tighten around them as the crowd stepped closer.

"No..."

She had to lean down to hear his words.

"It's too late... It's always been too late."

Lykeas's eyes became unfocused as life together with blood drained from his body.

"Even from the beginning..."

*No...*

He smiled at her, "Yes."

Without knowing why, she leaned down to place a kiss on his damp forehead and tasted salt and blood on her lips. Lykeas reached up again as if trying to make contact with her one last time, but just before his fingers touched her face, his body convulsed and the arm fell motionless to the ground.

*NO!*

"NO!"

Xena stared into the lifeless eyes.

*No!*

She put her hands under his shoulders and lifted the limp body up into her arms.

*No...*

She cradled the cold face, disbelief and shock written all over her face.

*Please no...*

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up into Gabrielle's tearstained face.

*Please...*

The crowd around them slowly dissolved, leaving the two warriors alone.

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## **CHAPTER XXXXI**

Nobody spoke as Xena walked through the camp, carrying the dead man in her arms. Nobody questioned her as she continued beyond the perimeters of the area, and nobody tried to stop her as she walked towards the forest. As in a trance, the warrior walked through the darkness and when she reached the forest, she ducked under a few branches and was embraced by an even darker shade of black. She tripped over roots, and branches scratched her arms and drew blood, but not once did she loosen her hold on the man in her arms. For how long and how far she walked she didn't know, but suddenly she entered a clearing and the moon chose the exact same moment to break through the clouds, bathing the trees in a silver light. Silently, the warrior sank to her knees, still holding Lykeas close to her body. For the last time she looked into unusual black eyes, then cold, shaking fingers gently closed the lids, and Xena felt how the ache in her chest seemed to become stronger, making it hard for her to breathe. Almost reluctantly she placed the warrior on the ground and started to build a fire. It took almost an hour before she was satisfied with the result, and carefully she lifted Lykeas from the ground and slowly placed him on the makeshift pyre.

"I've brought his weapons."

For the first time, the warrior hadn't heard the bard approach, but as she turned to see the pale young woman behind her, she only smiled.

"Thank you."

Gabrielle hesitated for a moment, then stepped closer and handed the sword and the bow to Xena who took the objects and held them in her hands briefly, before carefully arranging them on Lykeas' chest. Then she stepped back, dark blue eyes taking in the sight of the man on the pyre before her. She sensed a presence by her side and felt how the bard briefly touched her arm before continuing and coming to a halt beside the pyre. Gabrielle gently brushed a few dark strands away then leaned down and kissed Lykeas' forehead, trying to ignore the feeling of the cold skin against her lips. As she straightened up silent tears were running down her cheeks, and she smiled in spite of herself.

"See, Lykeas," she whispered quietly. "I told you, I would cry for you."

She walked back to stand beside the warrior's whose emotionless face didn't give

anything away.

"You should say goodbye," the bard spoke softly.

Xena didn't answer, but just kept staring at the pyre.

The bard put her hand on the warrior's arm, "Xena?"

"He made me do it," Xena croaked. "I never wanted this... He made me do it."

"I know," Gabrielle leaned up and kissed away a tear running down a bronze cheek.

Blue eyes blinked a few times and the warrior's gaze slowly focused on the woman beside her, then she walked the few steps over to the pyre. For a long moment she studied the white, but beautiful face below her, then she reached down to pull something out of her boot. She stared at Lykeas' knife, seeing how it reflected the bright light of the moon and then she carefully placed it on his chest above his heart.

"You look so peaceful now," she whispered. "I hope this is what you wanted."

She stepped back a little then she began the slow process of lighting the wood and branches around the pyre. It took almost five minutes before she knew the fire had become too strong to die and she stepped back. As she watched the flames rise higher and higher, she felt an arm go round her waist and she sighed quietly. She pulled the young woman closer and Gabrielle rested her head against the warrior's chest, green eyes reflecting the flames before her.

"How old was he?" The bard asked hours later when the fire had started to turn into embers.

Xena's eyes were watering, but whether it was the smoke or something else, she didn't know.

"He would have been twenty-seven next month."

Then she turned around and started to lead Gabrielle away. As they reached the trees, she stopped and hesitated for a moment, before looking back at the dying fire.

"Slep now, Lykeas," she whispered so softly that not even the bard heard the words. "May you find the peace in death you never found in life."

And then they walked in between the trees, leaving the fire to die in solitude.

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As the morning sun rose to shine on the camp, people had already been up for hours preparing to leave and head home. The fortune hunters and the craftsmen had left the day before, gone out to search for new conflicts and new opportunities, and now it was the soldiers turn to take down the tents, extinguish the fires and pack their gear. The last tent to be packed away was the one used for council meetings as it had been occupied the entire morning with warriors and royalty. All trying to come to an agreement about what to do with the men who had followed Lykeas and what to do

with Kassander's kingdom.

"I don't want them punished," Phillina spoke determinedly. "Look at them, they look like they haven't yet understood what happened yesterday. They walk around like headless chickens."

"But they betrayed us," Polyidos interjected without any real conviction or enthusiasm.

"They never raised a sword against us, did they?" The Queen continued and looked at her friend. "The moment they understood Lykeas was dead, they put down their arms. I respect that." She looked at the people in the tent, daring them to contradict her. "Besides most of them are my men and I will not allow anybody else to punish them. During the last couple of weeks they have been seduced, charmed and had a taste of greatness only to see it all fall to pieces in front of them. That, in my opinion, is punishment enough."

Polyidos shrugged uncertainly and looked helplessly at the warrior sitting next to him.

"Xena?"

The dark woman looked at the King briefly before standing up, "Do what you think is best. I don't have an opinion about this matter."

She walked to the tent flap and disappeared outside.

Phillina turned to look at Gabrielle whose eyes had been following the warrior.

"Is she all right?"

The young woman didn't answer, but only rose from the table and started to follow Xena.

"Gabrielle?"

The bard stopped and looked back at the Queen, "Yes?"

"We need to decide what to do about the army and Kassander's lands."

Gabrielle studied the woman before for a second, "That's your decision, Your Majesty, not mine. You don't need me to find a solution." She gave the King and the Queen a tired smile. "If you'll excuse me, I'm needed elsewhere."

Phillina watched the bard disappear out of the tent then she turned to look at Polyidos.

"I guess it's up to us then, my friend."

The King stared at the table for a second, then he seemed to straighten up and his voice lost some of its uncertainty, "It seems like it, Phil."

The Queen studied the tired face for a long time, then she smiled, "Let's make it fast so we can get out of here. I want to go home."

Pain showed on Polyidos' face, but still he smiled, "Yes, it's time to go home."

Gabrielle found Xena in the stable, quietly talking to Rarjan while stroking the grey mane.

"He won't eat," the warrior spoke without looking up. "I've tried anything, but I can't get him to eat."

The bard stepped closer and looked at the lost expression in the horse's eyes, "He misses Lykeas."

"I know," Xena tried to tempt Rarjan with a turnip, but the horse only moved its head away. "I don't know what to do. He'll die if he doesn't eat."

"The same goes for humans," Gabrielle said gently without reproach. "You haven't eaten anything either."

"I haven't been hungry," the warrior mumbled and tried to feed the horse again without success. "If only I knew what to do."

"Perhaps you should let him go," the bard offered slowly. "You know nobody else will be able to control him, and you can't take him with you. Perhaps it would be better to let him run free."

Xena turned around and looked at the blond woman for the first time, "He might still die. Just because he's free doesn't mean he'll start eating again."

"I know." Gabrielle entered the stall and gingerly reached for Rarjan's harness. "But at least it'll be his choice."

She started to lead the horse out of the stable and to her surprise, Rarjan followed without trouble. The warrior stared after the young woman and the horse as they disappeared out of the stable, then she sighed quietly and slowly followed them outside.

*His choice...Always...*

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A late evening, less than two weeks later, the Amazons decided to call it a day and make camp for the night. They were only a short distance away from their village and everybody had hoped against hope they would be able to reach it before darkness, but with late autumn the night arrived quickly and after a short debate, they had decided to delay their arrival to the next day. They quickly built a fire and sat down huddled close together for warmth. Shortly afterwards as their Queen and the warrior joined them, the Amazons quickly moved even closer together to allow them a spot near the fire. For a long time nobody spoke as twenty-two pairs of eyes stared into the flames, relishing the warmth and the closeness.

"Your Majesty?"

Xena had to nudge Gabrielle gently before the young woman noticed she'd been addressed.

"Yes?"

"I..." The Amazon who had spoken looked at little uncertain. "I was wondering if perhaps you would tell us a story?"

A smile slowly illuminated the bard's face, "It's been a very long time since I last told a story, Areia."

"Well, don't you think it's about time then?"

The warrior's voice reached Gabrielle's ear only and she turned to look into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. For a moment she was lost, then she smiled again and without taking her eyes of the beautiful face so close to hers, she started to tell a story. Words of love and words of sacrifice carried through the quiet night, creating images of far away places and exotic people in the minds of all the listeners. They listened to the deeds of ancient heroes and common folks, laughed at their follies and shared their sorrows, and not until Gabrielle's voice had started to become hoarse did they relent and returned to their tents, continuing the tales in their dreams. As the bard snuggled in close to the warrior, she whispered quietly, "I've missed that."

Xena smiled in the darkness, "Me too."

And for the first time in many weeks she didn't have any trouble falling asleep.

When Gabrielle awoke the next morning she was alone in the tent, but she had barely managed to sit up before the tent flap moved and the warrior stepped inside carrying a bowl of porridge. She smiled at the groggy bard.

"You better hurry to get dressed. Your Amazons are more than eager to continue and I had to practically threaten them not to run in here and wake you up so they could get going."

Gabrielle smiled, but made no attempt to get dressed, instead she reached for the bowl and Xena grinned as she watched the young woman finish the porridge in a matter of minutes.

"Hungry?"

"Always," the bard answered between mouthfuls. "Besides, I know they are eager to get home and I don't want to be the one to delay them."

The warrior looked away to hide a smirk, knowing that the Amazons had been up for hours, patiently waiting for their Queen to wake up. Then a thought struck her and she became serious.

"Gabrielle..."

The blond woman noticed Xena's change of moods and looked up, "Yes?"

"I...I was wondering..." The warrior kneeled down before the bard so they came eye to eye. "When we get there..."

"Yes?"

Xena took a deep breath, "What then?"

Gabrielle's brow furrowed, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," the warrior continued, trying to sound casual. "What are you gonna do? I mean, are you...are you gonna stay there?" She looked into the beautiful green eyes and was glad she was already on her knees. "Do you want to stay there?"

"I want to be with you," the bard answered quietly.

"No matter what?" Xena cursed herself for asking, but was unable not to.

"No matter what."

She could see that the warrior was about to speak, but she put a finger on Xena's lips to halt the words.

"We will find a way when we get there. The important thing is that we're together."

She felt the warrior smile against her finger and barely heard the whispered words.

"No matter what?"

She returned the smile, "No matter what."

Their lips met, sealing an unspoken promise, then Xena rose from the ground again.

"I'll go tell your Amazons that their Queen is just about ready."

"Don't make any promises you can't keep," Gabrielle grinned mischievously and draped the covers over her body. "I'm very comfortable as I am, thank you very much."

The warrior arched an eyebrow, "Unless, you want a dozen Amazons to come in here and drag you out of bed, I would suggest you started to get dressed now."

"Oh well..." The bard sighed melodramatically, "If it has to be..."

"Yes, it has," Xena grinned and started to leave the tent, but Gabrielle's voice stopped her and she turned around.

"Yes?"

"I have something for you."

With a surprising speed the bard got out of bed and started to rummage through the bags until she found a small scroll. She hesitated for a second then she stepped over to the warrior and handed it to her, her eyes never leaving Xena's face.

"I believe this is yours."

The warrior didn't have to read the scroll to know what it said. She had written it herself.

"I want you to go out and burn it," Gabrielle spoke softly. "You're my Champion and nothing will ever change that."

Xena stared at the scroll in her hands then she raised her head and looked into the blond woman's eyes. Slowly she leaned down and brushed her lips against the bard's before walking outside to throw the scroll onto the fire.

\*\*\*\*\*

The moment they entered the forest, the Amazons subconsciously picked a faster pace eager to get home. Soon they heard several birdcalls from the trees around them, some welcoming them home, others informing the village of their return. As they stepped out of the forest and took in the sight of the village and the crowd waiting for them, the Amazon warriors forgot all about their tough and cool images and ran forward only to be met halfway by loved ones. Xena and Gabrielle remained where they were, smiling as they watched Kelife trying to get a look at Callias' arm and Erinya's leg, before she gave up and simply joined in with the rest of the cheering Amazons. The bard smiled broadly and began to walk towards the village and the warrior started to follow, but suddenly she felt something behind her and she turned around to look back at the forest. Xena's eyes studied the dark shadows between the trees, unable to shake the feeling that she was being watched. And then she saw him. Between two trees, partly hidden in the shadows stood a young boy. He was dressed in Amazon clothing and black hair carelessly framed the bronze face. Dark eyes studied her intensely for a long moment, then slowly a smile spread on his face and the warrior felt herself smile in return.

"Xena?"

Gabrielle's voice caused the warrior to turn around briefly before looking back to the forest, but now there was nothing but darkness between the two trees and the boy was gone.

"Are you coming?"

Xena looked at the golden leaves and heard them whisper quietly in the wind then she smiled and turned around to face the bard. She reached out to take the young woman's hand and together they walked toward the village and the awaiting Amazons.

**The End**