

~ Artemis Complex ~

by

JLynn and Brigit M. Morgan

Disclaimers:

Xena, Gabrielle, Autolycus, Ephiny and any other characters featured in the actual TV series are copyrighted to MCA/Universal and Renaissance Pictures while the rest of the story and other characters are our own.

Story Blurb: While on the way to the Amazon village for the sacred festival of Brauronia, Xena and Gabrielle encounter several bizarre (and seemingly unrelated) occurrences drawing them into a series of events and comedies of error that may spell the doom of the Amazon Nation and possibly the world.

The goddess Artemis has had the source of her divine powers stolen and, without it, the laws of Nature are spiraling out of control. To make matters worse, the thief is nowhere to be found and time is running out. As they struggle to solve the deepening mystery, Gabrielle and Xena must face armies of slavers, in-fighting Amazons, crazed animals, and most importantly their own divisive struggle when deepening passions and suspicions threaten to tear their friendship apart.

Set in the second season between *The Execution* and *Blind Faith*, the story is both a comedic and dramatic race against time, as Gabrielle and Xena struggle to discover the identity of the thief and restore Artemis' belt before the Nation and its goddess are destroyed.

Violence Disclaimer: This story depicts scenes of violence, and its aftermath. Readers who are disturbed by or sensitive to this type of depiction may wish to read something other than this story.

Sexual Content Disclaimer: This is an ALT story, which implies, on occasion, adult sexual behavior between members of the same sex. Readers who are disturbed by or sensitive to this type of depiction may wish to read something other than this story—or watch Fox News.

Timeline and Continuity: This story takes place during Season 2, between the episodes *The Execution* and *Blind Faith*. Given that the series has been over for some time, no disclaimers will be made regarding any references made to events having taken place in the series to this point.

Sequel Disclaimer: As per JLynn's request, I, B. M. Morgan, do hereby swear that I will not now, nor ever suggest, conceive, or pester about a sequel (or prequel) to this story. Nor will I create a fake identity/email address/fan club/forum/blog etc. from which to do so.

Bard Challenge by DJWP: She who is awesomely talented recently posted this at the end of her lovely story *The Irresistible Flame* – “And last but not least, to the rest of the Bards out there – X&G classic fan fiction is in danger of extinction. I challenge each of you out there who are pounding out the Ubers – write a classic. If you all wrote one classic and posted it, we would be inundated with new X&G stories to read. For every X&G classic you write and reference this challenge, then I’ll write another, too!”

To DJWP: Consider *Artemis Complex* a bit of bardly ‘backatcha!’ :). We also encourage any of our fellow bards to consider taking up the challenge.

Brigit would like to thank everyone on the Tavern Wall who helped egg us on with sweet comments, gentle prodding and bribes dipped in chocolate. Also, I would especially like to thank JLynn, who has listened to me rant and rave and rapture about all things XWP and writing and has never once told me to shut the BEEP up—I love you, kitten, THANKS!

JLynn would also like to thank everyone on the Tavern Wall, but is suspiciously curious about the gentle proddings part since I was usually the recipient of threats and violence. Regardless, the denizens of the Wall have often been instrumental in rah-rahing me to the end of stories and I’m forever in their debt. The cheques are in the mail. I would also like to profusely thank my partner in crime, Brigit, for a mind-altering, alien-probing, X-Files-ish experience of working with someone of her incredible talent and caliber. For all the creativity and fun, my dear Bri -- *mwah!*

Special Beta Thanks: to AngelRad for scouring through the story for anything offensive or suspect. The extra set of eyes is very much appreciated!

Contact us at: futuremuse@gmail.com (for JLynn) or bmmorgan3000@hotmail.com (for Brigit M. Morgan).

Last, but not least: *Artemis Complex* is complete, but will be posted serially for your prolonged entertainment.

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Prologue—Chastely Though I Lay...

She bathed amongst the stars. The twinkling points of light floated upon the river’s surface and across her glistening skin as she swept a handful of moon-drenched water over her youthful form, rinsing away the exertion of the hunt. Artemis sighed in pleasure and the overhanging boughs of the trees rustled in quiet echo. The grasses whispered, and the cattails and water reeds drew closer, jealously guarding the privacy of their mistress.

The daughter of Zeus and Leto appeared lithe and young; a warrior-child on the cusp of womanhood with only the wisps of adolescence clinging to her small, firm breasts, narrow hips, and slender limbs. Artemis ducked beneath the surface and stood again a moment later, the cascades of water silvering her form in the faint moonlight. She scrubbed at her short-cropped hair, running her fingers through the fine, chestnut strands until they stood up like small, sharp quills in bristled warning. It framed a piquant and serious face, buttressed by a stubborn chin. Her fingers flicked the single, long braid trailing from her right temple back over her tanned shoulder, and then she turned and eased herself into the water with the grace of an otter, cleaving the

surface and disappearing into the river's dark, mysterious embrace.

The eyes that watched the goddess unawares from the far bank took in the pale ripple of bare flesh beneath the water. The watcher, though affected, was not deceived by the veneer of natural beauty and innocence the youth exuded. Deftly, silently, the intricately designed belt was lifted from the pile of clothes tumbled at the water's edge, and quickly hidden from sight. A moment later, Artemis' visitor stepped between the shadows and slipped away entirely.

Refreshed and clean, Artemis exited the water, her fingertips trailing along its surface until she ascended to the pebbly shoreline. Untroubled by the rocks, she approached her belongings and dropped to her haunches. She reached out for her boots and paused, disturbed. Her top had been moved. Her nostrils flared delicately, catching something faint upon the night air, something out of place, and in an instant she pulled her bow into her fist and notched an arrow to the string. Mindful of her modesty, Artemis crouched behind the foliage, the silvery blue-grey of her eyes roving quickly over the landscape, unimpeded by the darkness.

Nothing stirred. The night continued on around her, unaware.

Warily, she lowered her bow and reached for her clothing. The buck had put up a considerable chase through most of the afternoon, but she still had energy to spare. The bath had invigorated her; a night hunt would be exciting. Top, skirt, boots... Artemis' brow furrowed. Where was it? Her eyes searched the bank only to find it empty and pristine. Gone? How could it be gone? Distress was an alien emotion, one that rendered her heart quick and fluttery, like that of the deer she had pursued through the day.

"Where is it...?" She prowled the water's edge with quickening steps. Prints caught her gaze. Immediately she dropped to one knee, her eyes probing the near invisible tracks left upon the earth. A bent blade of grass. A small rock's long buried side exposed.

No god would have been so careless. Indeed, no prints would have been left at all had one of her brethren thought to play games with her.

Stolen then! Artemis' breath froze in her chest.

Without the belt... without it...

She lifted panicked eyes to the heavy crescent of moon visible through the treetops. There would not be much time. How dare he? How dare he?! It was an outrage! For a mortal to defile something so sacred to her deserved no less punishment than death. Frightened and angry, Artemis picked up her bow and quiver and followed the tracks deeper into the woods, her aspect turning resolute and feral as she gave herself to the hunt.

PART 1

I. Let Them Eat Crow (or Getting Here was Murder)

One of the things you learn as a warrior is that cutting through the woods is rarely a good idea.

Not even counting ambushes and traps, forests are just full of little “surprises.” You can end up wasting a lot of precious time sitting around picking burs out of your nether regions or limping around on a sprained ankle all because you wanted to take the “scenic route.” When all is said and done, the short cut winds up being the long way around. Give me a nice, straight dusty road stretching flat and boring into the horizon any day.

Apparently this doesn't make the curriculum for things they teach a bard.

Maybe she was just cranky about not having her usual three-course breakfast. I apologized, eventually. Fishing is an art, not a science, but try and tell her that. Besides, olives and dried fruit and day old bread are the staples that made Greece what it is today.

Maybe she got up on the wrong side of the bedroll. She's always moaning and groaning and grinding her teeth through most nights so I never know what she's dreaming about or what to expect in the morning.

Sometimes after a night of gnashing and growling and sweating to all Tartarus she skips out of bed with a chirpy ‘*Good morning, Xe-na!*’ You can imagine my delight.

Then there are the other times—the “quiet” times. She usually starts with a long, drawn out sigh as she wakes. Then she slowly rises to a sitting position. Another sigh, quick this time, and sadder sounding and then she pushes a lock of hair behind her ear. It's almost impossible not to ask her what's on her mind.

“*Nothing, Xena. Nothing...*” she says. Although, it sounds like: “*Nothing, Xena. Noth...*” because she turns away disconsolately halfway through the sentence. Then she gets up, stretches—once to get the kinks out and then again for sheer pleasure. Here she returns to her melancholy, the stretch not quite placing her firmly in a better mood.

It's usually here that I'm hit with several “options” that might lift her spirits. She pretends not to like my pranks, but I think the attention and humor make her feel better. I know it does wonders for me.

That day, it was hard to tell what was going on with her.

In hindsight, maybe I should have trusted my gut instead of giving in to body parts of less-steely resolve.

I can't remember what side of the bed she woke up on that morning. I had been busy fishing and whatnot, so I wasn't sure. She was silent through breakfast and as we broke camp—not that I'm complaining.

I knew something was bothering her because she started to straggle after about an hour on the road. Argo was getting frustrated at the inconsistent pace, so I decided to

see what was up—knowing full well that I was staring a four candle-mark conversation straight in the face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her, bringing Argo to a halt in the road.

She squinted up at me, the sun igniting the green of her eyes in a flash before she brought a tanned forearm up to shade her face. “What?”

“What’s wrong?”

She shook her head unconvincingly, sliding a lock of hair behind her ear. “Nothing, Xena. Nothi...”

I sighed. She feebly brushed sweat from her brow. I looked off into the horizon. I turned back to face her. “Look, Gabrielle, if there’s something you want to say or ask just do it, because we still have a bit of a ride to the Amazon lands and I want to get there by sunset.” Harsh, but sensitive enough, I thought.

She sighed. “I...Xena, I had a...I had a bad night and...well...would it be possible to maybe get out of the sun for some of this trip?”

I was about to explain the merits of a nice, straight dusty road stretching flat and boring into the horizon to her, when she bit her lip out of frustration. Right there in the road she nibbled down on her pouty little lips. I don’t know about anyone else, but I can’t say ‘no’ to an Amazon Queen biting her lip out of frustration—at least, I didn’t think so at the time.

She rolled her bottom lip absently along her front teeth. It was truly amazing how smooth Gabrielle’s lips stayed, keeping such a wonderful sheen across their plump shape.

“Uh, Xena?”

I blinked. “I’m thinking.”

Pausing for an extra moment on her lips, I took a look around the surrounding landscape for prospective short cuts. We needed to head in a northeast direction but I had been moving us along a stiletto-straight road leading north into Macedonia before hitting one of the eastern trade routes into Thrace and eventually the woods that bordered the Amazon lands.

To the northeast of us was a dense forest. I sighed: *the ole short cut through the woods...*

I turned back ready to tell her all the reasons why I thought it was a bad idea, to tell her why, in the end, it wouldn’t save us time. I turned to see her face had been transformed by hope into a heart-melting, almost-cheerful expression.

I grinned dumbly. “We can cut through those woods right there.” *What was I thinking?*

I told myself heading in a straight line toward our destination wasn’t a bad thing. Maybe we could get to where we needed to be faster. Forests don’t always have to be a mistake.

People often accuse me of being a pessimist, or a cynic, or at the very least “dark,” to those detractors I submit this last bit of fancy as a counterargument.

Gabrielle’s disposition improved drastically with shade and a slower pace. I had to walk, so mine didn’t. The forest was pretty thick but had a few somewhat-traveled paths we were able to use. I had to admit, being out of the sun was kind of nice.

Soon the bard’s lips were loosened and she was going on about some-such-thing. I was almost getting to the point where I was relaxed enough to start to listen, when something made me stop.

She kept talking. “...and so I was thinking that maybe by appointing a Royal scribe we could change the oral tradition of the Amazons to a written one...and...hey...what is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, good ‘cause I thought...”

“No. *Nothing*. There’s no sound. There’s *nothing*.”

Gabrielle moved close and scrunched up her nose in that way she does. “That’s not necessarily a bad thing, is it? Is it, Xena? Xena?”

“Shhh!”

Kneeling, I stretched out my hearing. Nothing seemed to be moving out there, which was unsettling to say the least. When you take these short cuts through the woods, you learn that sound is a good thing. It’s when the background noise disappears that you have a problem.

A more distressing problem is when noise suddenly returns—and especially when in abundance.

“Gabrielle.” I stood. “Run.”

“What?”

“Run!”

I led her and Argo away from the sound, crashing through the underbrush and avoiding the low hanging boughs of trees. We needed a hiding spot and fast. I wasn’t sure what would work exactly but I knew I couldn’t be choosy. The sound grew, swelling through the woods behind us.

“What is it?” Gabrielle asked breathlessly.

I kept running as the answer soon became obvious: movement—the sound of thousands of angry black wings cutting through the labyrinth of trees. The canopy of the woods became engorged with the madness of crow’s cackles. Argo whinnied in fear and I decided to let her go. We were just holding her back and her own instincts would serve her better than mine, given our predicament. She was soon out of our sight, swallowed by the tangle of forest ahead.

We kept sprinting through the woods. It was beginning to look bleak.

Then I saw it, the shelter. Two large trees lay rotting, supported on each other's shoulders above the forest floor. There was just enough room for a bard and a warrior to hide.

"This way."

I wasn't sure she could hear me over the noise that was surrounding us; I just hoped she could follow my lead. We scampered for the low opening beneath the trees. Jagged black shapes were entering my periphery as I helped her slide into the shelter. I crawled inside and settled down in the musty leaves beside Gabrielle. She was trembling. Our hiding spot didn't drown out the sound.

Soon the forest around us was spiny with crows, their sly black eyes all peering down at us. Some tried to bounce along the ground and get at us through the opening, but a quick backhand had them thinking better of it. It looked like we were in a waiting game.

Gabrielle turned to me. "What are we going to do now?"

"Wait and see."

"You have a plan?"

"Yup." I stared out at the black spattered woods. "The plan is: wait and see."

She nodded then bit her lip. "Sorry about this," she said.

I tried to focus on the situation at hand. "Y'know, Gabrielle, one of the things you learn as a warrior is that cutting through the woods is rarely a good idea..."

* * *

II. Something Fishy Going On

One of the things you learn as a bard is that "waiting and seeing" makes for very poor story material.

Though, after seeing how softly the masters live at the Academy, I was beginning to think they could shove their lesson up their scroll case. There's something to be said for being stuck in a place; it gives you time to catch your breath, for one, and in a case like this, it also gives you time to think. It appeared we were safe for the moment so I didn't mind, but glancing over at Xena I could readily see she didn't feel the same. She crouched morosely in front of the opening, her chakram dangling from her left hand, and her pale eyes relentlessly tracking the danger outside while muttering under her breath the whole time about plain, boring, dusty roads. Xena didn't look at me, but I somehow felt as though, once again, I was entirely responsible for this newest mess.

Jammed in beside her, I still had a decent view of the situation. I've never seen anything like it. Not even on my uncle's farm where clouds of crows would show up by the dozens to steal feed corn or seed from the fields. The sheer number here formed a black wall, nearly obliterating what sunlight had managed to wend its way through the heavy canopy of leaves and leaving us in muted shadows. Being stared at by that

many eyes was unnerving to say the least. The fact they had all suddenly fallen silent was making it worse. I figured this was probably bad.

I couldn't take it any more. "This is bad, right?"

"Shh." Xena continued to stare back at the feathered congregation, but otherwise remained still.

"Are we still waiting and seeing? Is there more to the plan?"

I think I heard a sigh. "We need Argo if we're going to get out of here," she murmured.

Well, I could see the sense in that. If we had any hope of a fighting retreat, we'd need her speed and stamina to make it possible. There was only one problem with the plan. "Do you see her anywhere?"

"No. I'll have to get out there and call for her. I don't want to bring her to us only to leave her undefended."

My eyes lifted and took in what seemed like hundreds of sharp beaks and even sharper talons. Trepidation filled me. "But, Xena, you'll—"

"Stay here," she ordered and bolted from our shelter, giving her war cry at the top of her lungs.

"— be shredded," I finished belatedly, even as I forced myself to halt my forward momentum right at the shelter's threshold, wanting to follow, but if I were honest, I'm more afraid of her losing her temper with me than what might happen if I stayed where I was.

Xena putting herself in the way of danger scared me, I think it always had. But it thrilled me, too. She is so superb a warrior that she makes art of violence, making each move a thing of beauty and grace. She transcends physical limitations in situations that would otherwise doom anyone else. At least that's how it usually worked. Today, however; Xena appeared to be having an off day.

I think it was the trip that probably saved her life. To give her credit, she avoided the holes, the tree roots and all of the loose rocks, but the one, lone twig took her down like she'd been clubbed by a Cyclops, and laid her out flat on her back, the smooth, aged wood having obligingly rolled her right off her feet. If not for that, the funnel cloud of crows stooping on her might have taken her head off.

Even in the gloom, I could see her eyes widen as the crows, like a long, black arm paused in the air above her and suddenly changed course. In a second, Xena was back on her feet, her sword swinging in a wide and lethal arc. The caws and shrieks of sound cut my hearing, and beneath it all I could hear Xena shouting and cursing back. They enveloped her, their eyes gleaming, more and more of them until I couldn't even see her. Ebony wings rippled the air and I screamed her name, preparing to join her even though I imagined I could already feel their beaks piercing my skin.

The dark curtain ripped and tore, and Xena heaved herself free, throwing crows every which way. She cleaved a deadly pattern with her sword and chakram, forming a tight net of protection around herself from the whirlwind of pecking, screeching bodies as

she moved step by agonizing step back towards our shelter. Uncertain what to do, I crouched there, gripping my staff.

Her progress picked up speed, and she forced her way through the maelstrom, the sword flashing in the uncertain light, her muscles flexing and taut. She broke from the attack and ran, and I could see the flutter of wings on her back, against her dark hair. I threw myself back from the entrance just as she dove into the small enclosure and slammed hard against the back of our hole beneath the fallen trees.

Xena grunted and, with hardly a pause, spun, pressed me into the dirt and whipped her chakram around. She slashed repeatedly as dark wings beat at the opening, spilling the messy remains of dive-bombing crows into our hiding place.

Filletted innards splattered across my hand and I jerked in disgust, shaking it off. “Oh yuck!” I hoped the smell would come off. “Xena!” She pressed even harder on my head, keeping me pinned in place. Gore sprayed everywhere.

“Stay down!”

Every effort and movement was telegraphed through her hand on me, and I could feel it—the adrenaline, the phenomenal energy that fueled her speed as it traveled right down into my bones. I squeezed my eyes shut against the attack, which only intensified the odd feeling of connection. It made my heart pound and my insides tighten. Unable to move or help, I laid as flat as I could until, at last, I felt her slow, pause and then finally relax. Unsure what to do, I waited, the smell of blood and leaf mold thick in my nose. The scuffling sound of her moving seemed a kind of signal, but I didn’t move until the pressure against my hair changed to a lighter touch, and I felt her pat my head.

“You okay?” she asked me. I could hear her breathing hard.

Immediately, I sat up and turned to her, aghast at what I saw. She was a mess. Scratches and pecks liberally scored her skin and trickles of blood flowed in squiggled lines from all her intense efforts to defend herself. Black feathers stuck to the smears of blood coating her armor and her hair was scattered and sweaty. Amidst all this, she fingered the small gash that had been opened along her jaw.

“You’re hurt!”

“I’m fine. None of it’s as bad as it looks.”

“Yeah? Well, it *looks* pretty bad.”

I watched her grimace and rub at her nose with the back of her arm, her hands too gory to do the job. “Stings,” she conceded, then nodded towards the wall of black, baleful eyes outside. “We’ll have to sit them out.” Xena looked so annoyed.

“Maybe they’ll get bored and fly away?” I suggested, hoping to inject some optimism into what was likely going to be another of our harrowing, life-threatening experiences. I’ve always felt that a little hope and optimism go a long way.

“Mm.”

I should have known better: Xena’s probably the least optimistic person I know. “I

guess we're still waiting and seeing, huh?" She glowered at me, and repositioned herself to continue her vigil.

"Yup."

Within minutes they tried another flurry of attacks, which Xena vigorously defended against. As a parting shot, one of them pooped from above and colorfully redecorated the toe of her right boot. Even from where I sat, pressed against the back of the enclosure, I could hear the powerful grind of her teeth.

This had definitely not been one of Xena's better days. Come to think of it, this had been a fairly strange day, period. Especially considering what happened that morning. "Do you think the fish have anything to do with this?"

She shot me a dirty look and I saw the corners of her lips tighten before she turned her attention outside again.

I had been ready to chalk it up to it being summer and the spawning season, but maybe it wasn't.

The dreams had been wild and consuming, full of the heated feel of skin against skin all colored by the sensual movement of firelight. I had awoken disoriented and confused, and unaccountably shy in the pearly grey dawn. Xena, already awake, had kept looking at me, first in curiosity, then worry, and then annoyance when I couldn't provide anything more convincing than, "Nothing, Xena, nothing." I was too embarrassed to tell her the truth. To cover for myself and to deflect attention elsewhere, I complained about having to eat olives again for breakfast.

Without a sound, Xena stopped dressing, pulled off her boots and headed straight into the river. "Perch or trout," she asked me, wading hip deep in the water in only her shift.

"Xena, you don't—"

"Gabrielle."

"Whatever you get your hands on first," I mumbled. "I'm starving."

"When aren't you?" Xena muttered.

"Hey!"

"Choose, or I'll give you the crayfish that thinks it can eat my toe."

"Trout."

So she set to it in that unusual way she has, bundling up her hair and leaning over the water to hear the fish beneath the surface. With her eyes half-closed and unfocused, I'm sure she couldn't see behind her, so it wasn't a surprise that I saw it first. But in hindsight, that's probably when I should have mentioned it.

A small ripple disturbed the slow moving river behind her and I didn't think anything

of it. Water bugs. Fish feeding.

I definitely should have said something.

Another ripple appeared off to the right of her. And then another. More and more of them until I looked up into the still cloudy sky and held out my hand, wondering if it was starting to rain. Nothing. I didn't get it. I opened my mouth to say something and that's when Xena's hands plunged into the water and pulled out a large, plump fish. It heaved and squirmed in her grasp, its tail flashing in the first rays of morning.

And that's when the river erupted.

The multitude of ripples churned the water into whitecaps and Xena, out near the middle of the river, took one look, tossed the fish behind her and started for shore. Fish leapt from the water, clubbing her, and she batted them away. They must have been attacking from below, as well, because she lost her footing and splashed into the water, disappearing from my sight.

I leapt to my feet and hurried to the edge of the water, my staff in hand.

"Xena!"

She reappeared almost immediately, the oddest look on her dripping face. She tugged at the water's surface, trying to pull herself forward faster. The water around her bubbled and roiled, and I heard her give the most...well, girlish noise I think I've ever heard come out of her mouth.

Xena, obviously angry now, surged toward shore, and it's then that I saw the fish rubbing and squirming against her. Reaching the shallows at last, Xena stalked past me, dropping a fish at my feet she had just pulled from the neckline of her shift. Watching her awkward gait, I was shocked to see a second one drop from beneath her hem.

The fish at my feet flopped miserably and, too aware of where it had been, I nudged it towards the water with my foot where it joined its fellows who seemed almost disappointed that Xena was gone.

"Amorous fish... murderous crows..." I left my deeply sensual dreams off the list. "What if there's a connection?"

"It's odd, I'll grant you. Have you noticed anything else unusual lately?"

Thankfully, she didn't notice my blush in the darkness of the shelter. "Not that I can come up with." I looked behind us, into the loamy darkness where the trees pressed into the earth, and that's when I noticed it. "Xena!"

She had the chakram ready and her sword halfway unsheathed before I could calm her down. "No, look!" I pointed to the edge of the tree trunk where the dirt from Xena's collision with it had been dislodged, revealing a small, gapping hole. "It's a way out!"

I could see her mind moving behind her eyes, always examining, analyzing. She

glanced from the hole, to the birds outside, to me. “Start digging. But quietly.”

“What’re you—”

“Do it.”

I knew better than to argue with that tone of voice. The earth was damp, but not too hard packed, and I scabbled at the opening to enlarge it. From the corner of my eye, I could see her scraping at the litter of feathers and carcasses in the dirt, the look of distaste for what she was doing to her chakram very plain. And three weeks ago she’d thought fish guts were bad.

In minutes I was sweating heavily, but I had made enough of an opening that I thought even Xena’s shoulders, armor and all, would fit through.

I looked back and saw her use her chakram like a shovel to flip the offal out into the clearing. In seconds they descended on it, the noise level raucous as they vied for a piece.

“Go, go!” Xena urged me, pushing me towards the hole. I slid my way through and heard Xena breathing behind me as we pressed close to the ground and slithered away on our bellies.

“Number three,” I breathed, “if you’re outnumbered, let them fight each other, while you run.”

Despite her bad mood, I heard Xena give a near-silent snort of amusement.

* * *

III. Spatters, Clatters and Idle Chatters

Even from where our search for Argo began, I could still hear the crows. I cursed under my breath.

“What?” Gabrielle poked her head up from where she was crouched, looking for hoof-prints.

“Keep looking.”

She rubbed her chin, scrutinizing me. I pretended not to notice and whistled again for my missing horse. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end under her continued gaze. I crossed my arms. “What?”

“Uh... you’ve got...” Gabrielle indicated her chin with a wiping motion. “You missed a bit of...”

“Oh.” I wiped at a piece of crow gore. “Did I get it?”

“Uh...no...no it’s still there.”

“Now?”

She smiled. “Nope.”

I wiped again. “Okay?”

“Still there.”

I sighed. “Get over here and wipe this piece of crow offa me.” There was a slight hesitation and she looked at her feet. I guess I was a bit harsh. I smiled, mixing in just the right amount of a pout. “Please?”

She walked over, stepping into the gentle showers of light falling through the hood of leaves above our heads. I bit my lip. There was crow on it. I spat. She stopped. I smiled. “Sorry,” I said. “Crow.” She grinned widely, her nose crinkling. She stepped in close and chuckled.

“What?” I asked.

“You stink.”

I crossed my arms. “It’s been a rough morning.”

She pulled out that piece of cloth she’s been carrying around and washing for the last two years. Luckily, I knew she had washed it the night before. “Bend down,” she asked. I leaned in. Her breathing quickened as she brought the cloth to her lips, I could see that her fingers trembled. After all we had been through, I wasn’t surprised.

She swallowed visibly. Her lips opened and she brought the soft cloth close, her tongue parting them to moisten it. I closed my mouth and our eyes met. “Hold still,” she said. As her hand neared, golden heat rippled from her fingers, her forearms, trickling upon my cheeks and collarbone. The cloth hovered just above my chin.

There was a snort from nearby—a horse’s snort. I opened my eyes. “Argo?”

Gabrielle turned, squinting off into the trees. “I think it came from over that way.”

We jogged through the brush as quiet as we could. I whistled, hoping the crows would think we were other forest birds and stay where they were. There was another snort. We stopped. I could hear breathing—Argo’s breathing coming from a tightly laced group of trees.

I squinted into the shade. “Argo? Is that you, girl?”

A rumble of warning came from the shade at the center of the brush. I stepped forward. Gabrielle shifted uncomfortably. “Uh...Xena...”

“It’s okay,” I smiled reassuringly. I turned back to the bush wrapped around my horse. “Hey, girl. C’mon. It’s *me*.”

A loud neigh. Another snort. Suddenly, Argo burst from the trees heading straight for me. Her eyes were wild with fear, with confusion—with something else. I cart-wheeled out of danger, landing on my feet. “That’s enough, Argo.”

She was out of control, swinging at Gabrielle with her front hooves. The poor bard dodged to the side and quickly scrambled up a tree. I lunged for Argo’s bridle, managing to grip the leather and pull hard. “Easy, girl. Easy,” I whispered into the horse’s ear. “What’s wrong with you? Huh?” I pat her trembling haunches. The vein

that coiled through her neck pulsed heavily. Her eyes rolled, the whites visible. Something had her spooked.

After a bit of sweet talk and some oats, I was able to have Argo trust me. She was still very jittery, but she would let me lead her. It would have to be good enough.

“Ahem.” It was Gabrielle from up in the tree.

“Quit clowning around, Gabrielle. We’ve got to get moving.”

She dropped from the branch she had been clinging to. Dusting herself off, she stuck her nose haughtily into the air. “I can’t imagine what those fish ever saw in you.”

Argo snorted.

I raised an eyebrow. “Maybe you just didn’t have the same vantage point.”

Gabrielle scrunched up her face. “Yeah? Well maybe.” She stuck her tongue out as an ending to her statement.

“As much as I’d like to continue this eloquent and stimulating verbal sparring, we’ve got a festival to attend.” I smiled. “Right, your Majesty?”

Growling, the bard and her staff walked away in a huff. Chuckling, I prepared to jump up on Argo. She stepped to the side, away from me.

“Hey. C’mon, girl.”

I tried again and Argo side-stepped with a snort and shake of her head.

“Hey. Quit fooling.”

More snorting.

Gabrielle appeared at my side, grinning. She sniffed at me. “I guess Argo *smells* trouble, hmm?”

“Start walking, Gabrielle, or I’ll introduce you to some of my more *ripe* bits.”

Soon, we had reached the road and made our way along it. To say things progressed smoothly would be a lie. Oxen lowed oddly at us from across fields. Snakes lunged from their sun-drenched rocks at our feet. When Gabrielle had stood too long near an anthill, crimson ants poured from its mouth and up her leg. (I knew a way to reduce the itching, but the swelling—Gods I had never seen swelling like that.)

And the birds—swooping from out of the sky, from out of branches, temple rooftops clawing, nipping at our heads and then floating away. I was really learning to hate them. I would fantasize about a chicken deciding to take its chances with us, running up in the dust—straight into the ole chakram.

The sun was pretty ruthless. Yes, it’s Greece, it’s summer, you sort of expect this kind of thing, but it was really showing us something that day. We kept moving as best as we could, taking the western road into the Amazon lands.

My scalp was itchy. So was my skin. I scratched when I could.

Beside me, Argo snorted every once in awhile, fighting the reins. Gabrielle also kept her distance. I assumed it was because she was still a little put off by my “clowning around” comments.

The forest was silent. It was like entering a crypt.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” I said.

Nothing happened. We began slowly, silently, stepping with care through the underbrush, past the ancient trees. Still nothing happened, not an insect or animal out of place. We moved quickly, with caution.

We reached a point in the woods and I stopped. Gabrielle looked around. “The outer sentries should have met us by now,” she whispered.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Let’s go.”

Leading Argo, we moved at a steady jog toward the Amazon village. It was still several miles off, but in a candle-mark we had reached the outskirts, the huts peaking up out of them unruly grass. There was still no sign of sentries. I tethered Argo to a tree and we crouched in the underbrush.

“What do you think?” Gabrielle asked, moving away, for a better view.

I blinked at the village. Amazons could be seen walking about. Fires cooked. Decorations adorned. Drums could be heard, albeit faintly. Barring the unprotected perimeter, things seemed normal. I scratched at my scalp. “It seems okay.”

“Let’s go then.” Gabrielle rose and strode into the village.

Shrugging, I followed her, my hand near my chakram. “At the risk of repeating myself: I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

* * *

IV. Don’t Do Me Any Party Favors

With Argo, Xena, and her smell in tow, I led us into the village. The last of the sunlight was gilding the trees in rosy gold and the heat was beginning to dissipate at last, making me all too aware of the film of dirt, sweat and other things even less pleasant coating my skin. Given the way Xena was scratching at herself, I could only imagine how much worse it was for her. I hadn’t been close enough to her the last two candle-marks to be sure, but Argo’s continuous efforts to break free and run away said a lot.

The bustle of activity was more than enough to distract me for a moment, especially considering the number of women and young girls moving every which way, talking excitedly while they made their preparations. It looked as though most of the Nation had shown up for the Brauronia Festival. A group of children we passed were industriously sewing leaf crowns, while an older set of girls were putting the finishing touches on buttercup-yellow tunics made of what looked like the softest suede.

Excited and relieved to have finally arrived, I searched amongst the faces for Ephiny.

The village, looking prosperous and peaceful, appeared to have benefited from her appointment as Regent; definitely one of my better decisions. “Excuse me,” I interrupted a chatting group of older women engaged in fletching bundles of arrows, “would any of you happen to know where I might find Ephiny?”

“Queen Gabrielle!” one woman responded with surprised pleasure. “We didn’t expect you yet.” Behind her I could see two other elders exchange some odd look. “Ephiny is...” She looked from one hut to another, and then pointed towards the barracks. “...over there, with the guard.”

“Thanks.” I ran my fingers through my hair, wondering just how bad I looked when another thought occurred to me. “Do you know where the sentries have gone? No one met us in the woods.”

The gray-haired woman’s expression rippled into smoothness. “That’s very odd. I hadn’t heard of anything planned, but this place is a menagerie lately, what, with other villages arriving for the ceremony. Like as much, Ephiny will know, your majesty.”

“Thanks,” I said again, trying to discreetly wave the fly off Xena’s shoulder armor as I turned us towards the barracks. “Maybe it’s just the excitement of the Festival,” I murmured to Xena when we were out of earshot. “Maybe they met another group coming in.”

“Maybe pigs will fly,” Xena added, her fingers still staying in the vicinity of her chakram despite the friendliness of our surroundings. “Bad feeling. Told you.”

We were almost upon Ephiny and the warrior she was speaking to when she caught sight of us. She made some parting comment to the other woman and turned our way, wearing less than the happy smile I’d expected at seeing us again. “Ephiny,” I called out, lifting my hand in a wave.

Her curly hair bouncing around her shoulders, Ephiny shot a glance back towards the barrack’s darkened open door and hurried to meet us. “Gabrielle, we weren’t expecting you yet.”

I resisted the urge to look at Xena. “We, um, took a short-cut.”

“It’s great to see you,” she said, closing the distance between us, and then stopped abruptly short. Her eyes widened ever so slightly and I almost missed the nose wrinkle that she hid in a low bow before me. “My queen, we are honored by your presence and celebrate your return. The Nation stands in readiness and eagerly awaits the moment you will lead us through the Brauronia ceremony.” I was taken aback by her overly formal behavior until I realized she was maintaining the position of obedience in order to properly fortify her expression against our stench. Losing one’s dinner at the Queen’s feet is probably a serious breach of protocol.

Feeling the weight of eyes on me, I settled for a nod, saying, “It’s our pleasure to be here.” She still wasn’t moving. Too tired for this any longer, I moved closer and put my hand on her shoulder. “When did I become such a tyrant that my Regent can’t greet me like a friend?”

She straightened up, a wry smile on her face as she stepped closer and embraced me.

“Have you two been wading through a midden heap?” she whispered in my ear as she hugged me. “My eyes are watering. What in Hades happened to you? You look awful.”

“We... had a few encounters,” Xena grumbled.

Ephiny reached out to shake Xena’s arm, but stopped in mid-motion and waved instead. “So I smell,” she replied, appearing to wish, very dearly, that she could plug her nose.

“Is everything okay here?” I asked.

The Regent broke eye contact with me and looked around the village. “Oh, we’re right on schedule.”

“No, I mean—”

“The sentries didn’t stop us at the border,” Xena stepped in. Basting in her own juices as she was, I suspect Xena was impatient with the pace of the conversation. “What’s going on?”

There was just enough hesitation before Ephiny answered to make me suspicious. “We had slavers bothering us on the east side by the river. A group went out to harass them and drive them off, and the rest of the sentries were spread out more to meet incoming groups for the Festival. I didn’t want visitors getting snatched and sold, not now.”

I knew what she meant. Hosting the Brauronia was a huge honor for the village, seeing as it’s only held once every four years. Falling victim to an incursion would not only endanger lives, but bring dishonor to the village, showing them to be weak and bringing ill luck to the entire Nation for the next four years. Knowing now the reason, I felt a little silly for thinking suspicious thoughts. After recent events, paranoia doesn’t seem entirely out of place. “Great work. Is everyone okay?”

Ephiny nodded, glancing towards the barracks again. “They got back a little while ago.”

“Maybe I should speak with them and say thanks,” I said, thinking about the pressure the warriors would be under to protect not only the village, but the added number of sisters visiting from the outside. I glanced at Xena and saw the subtle nod of approval.

“No!”

I jerked my head back around at Ephiny’s vehement response.

“No,” she said again, more calmly this time. “They just got back, you just arrived. You must be starved. And, really, you probably would like to get—” She sniffed. “—cleaned up a bit?” She had such a look of hope in her eyes.

Argo snorted and nodded her head, pulling on the reins.

“Hey, I don’t complain when you stink,” I heard Xena whisper to her mare behind me.

“That’s probably a good idea,” I said. “I think after all this time, I’ve just gotten used

to her.” I hooked a thumb over my shoulder at Xena.

“You’re no field of flowers either, your majesty,” Xena reminded me. “Don’t make me explain the hole in your skirt.”

I glared at her and fingered the edge of the ragged, dinar-sized hole in the material covering my thigh, thinking of the innocent little fawn that had tried to devour me. “Fine. You’ve still got fish scales on your neck, by the way.” I turned back to Ephiny. “I think you’re right; we need to freshen up. We could probably use a bite to eat, too.”

Ephiny gave us her first full smile yet. “Good. We’ve got your quarters all set up.”

“I’ll meet you two over there,” Xena offered. “I want to get Argo settled.” She turned towards the barracks with its adjoining stable, and Ephiny immediately put out a hand to stop her.

“No, Xena.”

I watched Xena’s brows draw together in confused impatience.

“What?”

“You can’t...” She seemed to struggle. “You... you’re honored guests! We can’t have the Queen’s champion scrubbing down a horse.”

“This isn’t a horse,” Xena argued. “This is Argo.”

“I’ll have someone take care of her for you. You’ve had a long trip. You should relax.”

One lone, dark brow slowly hiked upwards.

I glanced between the two women, feeling suspicious all over again, but Xena beat me to it.

“Ephiny, what’s going on?” Xena asked, her voice smooth and her lips smiling, but her eyes piercing and serious. “You might as well tell us now because neither Argo nor I are moving from this spot until you do. And tomorrow is going to be at least as hot as today was.” Xena took a very deep sniff to underline her point.

Tan shoulders slumped and Ephiny put her face in her hands. “We have a problem.”

Alarmed, I stepped closer, putting my hand on her arm. “What is it? What’s happened?”

“We have a prisoner.”

Well, that didn’t sound like a bad thing. “Who? A slaver?”

“No. Worse.” Ephiny sighed. “It’s Autolykus.”

“Autolykus!” Xena exclaimed. “Why?”

“He was caught stealing.”

Out here? What on earth could there be to steal out here? “What did he take?”

Ephiny looked aggrieved. “It’s not just *what* he took. It’s *who* he took it from.”

Xena rolled her eyes. “Okay, so just *who* did he take *whatever* from?”

“Artemis. And she’s gonna kill him.”

* * *

PART 2

V. The Odors of Perception (or Pussy Galore)

Remember the short-cut rule? Much higher on the list of things you learn when you're a traveling warrior is: *unless you absolutely can't avoid it, never get involved with the gods*. I've done my best to follow this rule as much as I can—to mixed results, unfortunately.

It's not a fear thing. On the contrary, when you meet the higher powers you realize just how annoying and flawed they really are and as a result, not the least bit scary. Unfortunately, they're annoying and flawed with the ability to cause mass destruction and mischief. Not a good combination. So avoiding them and their petty little plans is a good rule in my opinion.

Evidently, this rule is not high priority in thieving circles.

I suppose it could have been worse. It could have been Hera. Or Zeus—now there's a guy you don't want to have mad at you.

Although from what I'd heard, Artemis was no Peloponnesian picnic either. Stories of her prowess as a huntress often ended in the tracking and slaying of human prey. And it wasn't like she was a big fan of men either.

Autolycus had certainly outdone himself this time. Still, he is a friend—and I owe him my life.

I looked up at Ephiny. “I want to see him. *Now*,” I demanded.

“Not a good idea,” Ephiny shook her head. “Artemis would never allow it.”

I crossed my arms. “Really? We'll see about—”

“Xena.” Gabrielle put her hand on my arm.

I sighed. “Take us to Artemis, then.”

Ephiny darted her eyes to the side. “O-okay.”

“Maybe we could...maybe we could clean up first?” Gabrielle offered quickly. “Why give Artemis an excuse to...deny our requests? Right?”

I glared at the bard, but noticed that several of the village cats had begun to move with curiosity and hunger toward us. Not to mention the constant swarm of gnats around my head.

Ephiny tilted her head. “Yeah, diplomacy might go over better.” I could see her sidelong glance at me. “While I do that, Dorcas can show you to your quarters.”

“Thanks,” Gabrielle said. “Oh, and thanks again for agreeing to take my place in the ceremony. If the Nation knew about my two left feet, they’d probably thank you.”

Ephiny cleared her throat and tried to hide her grin, saying, “Why do you think I agreed in the first place? I saw you dance the first time, remember? You’d probably cause a plague of locusts or bunnies or something.”

Gabrielle planted her hands on her hips. “Oh, you’re so funny.”

“And you’re so smelly. Go hit the showers, your majesty.” She signaled to Dorcas who waited politely out of earshot.

Gabrielle nodded and waved, turning to follow our guide.

I turned to Ephiny as I passed her. “Make sure nothing happens while we’re getting ready.”

She raised her nose and nodded.

We followed the young warrior toward the queen's hut near the center of the village. I nudged Gabrielle. “Where do they keep getting these?”

“Wouldn't *you* like to know?” She growled.

“Huh?”

Before I could finish, I realized we were being led to a different hut, Ephiny's by the look of it. “I guess Artemis gets to bunk in the Queen's place when she's in town, huh?”

Gabrielle kept walking, a sort of snooty bearing to her stride. *Someone* was a little sore about losing her fancy quarters. As long as there was a tub and a way to get hot water, I wouldn't complain.

Behind us, a handful of cats prowled just out of reach. I growled and they backed off a bit, for now. *Damn cats...* The things I do for friends...

I thought about Autolycus. I was going under the assumption that he stole whatever it was he stole from Artemis on purpose. What was he thinking? I know he's good, but no one is *that* good. I guess someone who calls himself the “King of Thieves” can't have the smallest of egos. He's usually more cautious—especially when it comes to the big stuff. I really needed to talk to him if I was going to help.

We arrived at the Regent's hut (which really wasn't much smaller than the Royal hut) and Dorcas bowed. “Your quarters, Queen Gabrielle.”

Gabrielle grunted and entered the torch light of the hut. I smiled apologetically at the kid. She turned up her nose. I scowled and moved inside.

Everything appeared how I remembered the Royal hut appearing, except that it was on a slightly smaller scale. The main room contained a small living area with tables and chairs. A kitchen was nearby with a large hearth. A separate room for sleeping and bathing could be seen beyond the entrance.

Several Amazons poured steaming water from a large cauldron into a medium-sized

bath. Gabrielle walked into the room and quickly dismissed them. They jogged out of the hut, keeping a wide berth of me. Now that I was indoors, I was starting to get a real sense of why. I moved into the bedroom, hoping to be sunk within the gorgeous-looking bath water before you could say Joxer the Mighty.

I began removing my armor, finally starting to feel just how many scratches and bites those birds got around it. Gabrielle turned. Her mouth dropped open for a second then shut back up. She let out a quick, exasperated sigh. I gave her the ole eyebrow and stopped what I was doing. She seemed all hot n' bothered about something, so I thought I'd stir things up a little more. Don't ask me why.

“Yes, your majesty?”

She rolled her eyes, sighed again and then laughed in that if-I-don't-laugh-I'll-claw-your-eyes-out kind of way she does when she's angry. “Never mind. Just take your bath.”

I pouted. “Aren't you going to join me?”

I've never seen so many different emotions flash across someone's face so quickly. She really *was* upset about something. I tilted my head. “What is it, Gabrielle? Really.”

“I don't know...Tired, I guess...I'm sorry.”

“A bath will definitely help.” I smiled, pointing to the steamy tub. “Go on.”

I managed to peel off my armor. There was enough dried blood and gore to knit a couple of crows. I would definitely need to clean it up as soon as I could. My leathers weren't doing so well either. They get a little rank under the best conditions. I tossed them into a pile with my boots and turned.

Gabrielle had peeled off her green top and was folding it neatly. Her skin had been burnished a warm bronze by the sun, gradually yielding to softer tones of gold and even coral. I averted my eyes. They found their way back to her body—the subtle muscles in her shoulders; the tense plain of her stomach; the wondrous transformation from shoulder to long, golden neck. I closed my mouth, ignoring how dry it had become.

She began to remove her skirt and undergarments in one smooth, easy motion with a low bend at the waist. The muscles in her thighs and buttocks flexed in the warm firelight as she slipped the clothes from her body and then stood straight. The dancing flames poured across her, playing in the red-gold of her hair, or the gentle softness of her hips. I swallowed with difficulty.

With growing scrutiny, Gabrielle squinted at her skirt and the hole in it. She sighed. “I guess my top is going to get shorter if I want this hole fixed, huh?”

I blinked.

“Xena?”

“Uh...yup.”

She grinned, her face brightening. “Sounds like you need a bath too, huh?”

I smirked. “Uh...have you smelled me lately?”

In answer, the sound of several cats chimed in chorus just outside the hut. I slouched. Gabrielle laughed, climbing into the hot water. She let out a soft, almost unconscious purr. “Oh, Xena...you're gonna love this.”

I grinned and began removing my shift and underclothes. The gore had managed to find its way in there as well. I tossed the clothes into a pile and climbed in, quickly submerging myself. I popped up and Gabrielle splashed me right in the face.

When I cleared my eyes, she was smiling mischievously. I smirked. “What was that for?”

“For being a stinker.” She laughed.

“Ha ha.”

She pouted a little. “And for being so... Ugh...never mind.”

I started washing up and peeling away dried bits of crow and blood. “What's with you today, anyway?”

She splashed me again. I scowled. “Gabrielle, I'd cut that out if I were you.”

She splashed again, her smile sloping into a sneer.

“Really— *stop it* .” I was tired and found it harder and harder to stay calm.

“Or what? Huh? HUH?” More splashing accented her posturing.

Unable to hold back, I sprang up, water spraying and grabbed her wrists. With a twist I turned her around, making sure not to hurt, but only overpower. Her arms twitched uselessly in my grip.

“Xena!?!”

I held her close, her buttocks rubbing against me. I spoke into her ear. “Are you going to cut it out?” I whispered.

She was trembling. Her breathing became ragged and raspy, but not from pain. My grip loosened somewhat. Her head slumped back against my shoulder, neck offered. My lips parted.

A large urn that my crow-splattered shift had fallen upon crashed to the ground. A cat had snuck into the hut and was now running away with it between its teeth.

“My chakram! Gimme my chakram!”

“Xena, wait!”

I splashed out of the water and after the little menace. The cat trotted around the tub as I gave chase, triumphantly carrying my shift in its teeth. I gained on it and stretched my hands to clutch it.

In my years of doing all this (the hero thing, never mind being just being a warrior) I've faced gods, I've faced warlords, I've faced Bacchae, I've gone toe-to-toe with countless adversaries and were I to die, I could hold my head proud without a shred of shame in my prowess and skills.

Until this moment, that is.

Of all the foes I've faced, to be bested *and* embarrassed by a cat was certainly not the way I thought it would go.

I slipped—although, I believe this word isn't precise enough for what happened. It doesn't seem to evoke the graceless desperation, or the clumsy and frantic arm flaps coupled with the sheer speed of the actual loss of balance. Nor does it indicate the air time (at least a full second) and the soggy slap as I hit the ground.

The worst part wasn't that I had slipped and fallen and looked like an ass. It wasn't that I was naked and wet on the floor. It wasn't even that the cat sat just out of reach licking its paw, knowing the chase was over, the shift in a pile before it.

The worst part was: I started crying—sobbing, really. I guess after the fish, and the crows and the long trip, I guess I couldn't stop everything from just flowing out. Later, Gabrielle and I would chalk it up to all the strangeness that was going on, but at the time, I really felt miserable.

Or did I? I was crying, damn it. Why was I crying? “Why am I crying?” I looked around the room, as if I could find an answer. The fact that I couldn't find an answer fueled a new eruption of tears and choking, hacking sobs.

“Are—are you alright?” Gabrielle leaned over the side of the tub, a look of concern on her face.

“No...”

“You're not hurt, are you?”

Pause. “No.”

“Oh.”

I kept sobbing. Big, pathetic, undignified sobs. Then I heard her laughing; a deep, belly laugh that she was fighting a losing battle against. Later, she would blame the unusual circumstances, but I don't buy it. It made me more upset.

“Go ahead and laugh.”

“Xena, I'm sorry...it's just...you...” She burst into an endless giggle.

The cat rolled ecstatically in my shift. Composing myself with as few sniffles as possible, I got to my feet and began to dry off and get ready. “Fine, I just won't wear a shift to see Artemis.”

I wouldn't be surprised if they heard Gabrielle's laughter as far as the river.

* * *

VI. Accessorizing After the Fact

I have never before been so relieved to have a bath end in my life. I love hot baths, and given the amount of time we spend off in the bushes, a hot bath is a rare luxury to savor when the opportunity presents itself. There was very little savoring going on today. I honestly don't know what came over me. And I wondered about it as I dried my hair by the fire.

The water had felt glorious and I felt my gloom lift immediately. Wanting to break through Xena's mood, and given that splashing her had worked in the past... well, it just made sense at the time. Or it would have if my frame of mind hadn't taken an abrupt about-face. In some twisted way, it pleased me to see her getting angry. Well, why not? She'd been making me angry all day and that fluffy young bit of Amazon Xena had been ogling on our way to the hut didn't improve matters any. It wasn't jealousy. The girl was just way too young, if you ask me.

I pushed the cloth through my hair and then dried my ears, trying to figure out if I'd been deliberately provoking her, and if I had, then why? I felt a heat that had nothing to do with the flames as I remembered the feel of her hands on me, the careful yet unbreakable grip, as she pulled me against her. My skin tingled at the memory of her smooth, firm body pressed against my back, the warm water slick and intimate between us. I tried not to feel it now, to banish the memory of the thrill I felt in that dangerous moment.

The cloth was damp against my face, cooler than the fire and I pressed it to my eyes to take refuge in momentary and illusory darkness. It was a temporary relief from the unaccountable rush of confused emotion I'd been feeling all day.

"I'm *not* wearing this."

Startled by Xena's voice, I pulled the towel down in time to see her appear from behind the dressing screen. An acorn colored leather brassiere overlaid in metal studs, black feathers and chain, along with a low-slung, mid-thigh length skirt and knee-high soft boots of a similar shade completed her ensemble. She stood before me, glowering, her hair slicked back from the bath and her bronzed skin fairly glowing in the firelight. The outfit accented the curves of waist and breasts, and threw her muscular definition into clear relief, exposing parts of her not usually visible for examination. I was absurdly shocked to once again discover she had a navel, and a very soft looking one at that. The further lowering of her brows reminded me that a response was required and I nearly bit my tongue off when I snapped my jaw closed. "Um, what's wrong with it?" I managed to ask. "It looks great." What a gross understatement.

"It chafes. Why did you give them my stuff?" she demanded, planting her hands on her hips and ignoring my question.

"Because you can't go to an audience with a god smelling like a week-old pig carcass!"

Xena turned away from me and stalked across the hut to retrieve her weapons. "Ares never minded," I think I heard her mutter.

"I'm not surprised; he probably gets off on that kinda thing," I snipped, unable to stop

myself.

Her head whipped around and I braced myself for the stinging comeback. With effort she reined herself in and instead gathered up a spare towel on her way to a chair. The thin line of her mouth tightened as she regarded the state of her weapons. She sniffed at the chakram and pulled her head away quickly, her face wrinkling in disgust.

I closed my eyes, wondering why I was feeling so on edge and unsettled. Just as worrisome was Xena's earlier outburst. She'd fallen on her backside twice in one day and I suppose given the stresses of recent events it wasn't unthinkable that someone would get emotional about it. But this was *Xena*. Xena just doesn't *do* emotional.

That time of the moon? I knew better than to ask. Still, it'd been unnerving, and my own reaction even more so. I hadn't actually intended to laugh at her, but it was either that or start crying myself. "What is going on?" I muttered, frustrated and bewildered.

"What?" Her attention remained on her weapons, but her phenomenal hearing still caught it.

"Something seems really... off."

"I'm cleaning this stuff as fast as I can. I can't help that it smells."

"No—well, yes, that still stinks—but I mean, all the stuff that's been going on lately."

She nodded. "I know."

"I've never seen you... I mean, you've never... at least not like *that*." One really shouldn't suggest that big, tough warriors sob like children.

"I know." Xena's voice was flat and hard.

I winced, knowing her ego was likely feeling raw. As always, my first instinct was to try to help. "Y'know, it's okay to cry when you have a bad da--"

"Gabrielle."

"—y. There's lots of time I've felt like crying. Like after that day we spent walking through all those hills only to find the pass blocked? It was so hot and humid, and we'd run out of food, and I knew we had to walk all the way back. Well, *I* had to walk, you had Argo, not that it bothered—"

"Gabrielle."

"—me. I was so tired and sore and bug-bitten, I just wanted to wrap myself in my blanket and bawl my—"

"*Gab-ri-elle!*"

Oops.

"I know it's okay. But it wasn't okay today. It felt... wrong."

"Wrong?"

Xena stood up and carried her weapons to the tub. The leather skirt hugged and

fluttered across her thighs as she walked, and I admit to being mesmerized. But only by the pure novelty of it. Really. The outfit reshaped Xena's normally dangerous presence into something more primal and animalistic, and the firelight off her cheekbones and light blue eyes seemed distinctly cat-like. The muscles of her thighs and belly visibly bunched and flowed as she leaned over the now-cool water and swished her weapons through it, and I felt my breath catch.

“All those animals, you, me... It's obvious something's happened, but I can't get a finger on what it is yet. We have to be on our guard. Whatever's gone wrong is influencing our emotions and making us behave almost irrationally.”

“Like splashing you in the tub,” I said immediately. “I couldn't get myself to stop even though I knew it was making you angry.”

Xena nodded slowly.

“Do you think it's Ares?”

“No.” She pulled her sword and chakram from the water, grimacing at the water running from their surface. Hours upon hours of watching Xena care for her gear left me well acquainted with her methods. Wet metal was bad. The first chance that presented itself, she'd be meticulously oiling them again to guard against rust. There wasn't time now; she merely wiped them down and slid her blade home in its scabbard. “This isn't his style. It feels way too... random. Undisciplined.”

“Aphrodite?” Our run-in with her recently had been interesting, but left a bad taste in my mouth. Joxer as a hero was something I was *still* trying to find a way to record in my scrolls.

Xena shook her head. “I'd say no, but for the fish.”

“They were fresh, at least.” A giggle popped out of my mouth before I could stop it. I gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry?”

“Uh huh,” she drawled, one brow lifting. “I better not be hearing that one re-told in a tavern a month from now.”

I put on the most innocent, bland and well-intentioned expression I could. She grunted and turned away, which I took to mean it needed work yet. A change of subject was clearly in order. “So if it's not Ares, and probably not Aphrodite, who could it be?”

“Let's solve this problem with Autolycus and then find out. Ephiny didn't say when Artemis planned to execute him, and I want to see him as quickly as I can.”

“He'll be in the barracks, but even as Queen, I'm not sure they'll let me in. We'll have to see Artemis first.”

I watched her rig a strap for her scabbard across her back and another for her chakram at her hip. She gave herself a once over, snorted in disgust at her outfit, and then waved me to precede her toward the door. “C'mon. Let's go pay a visit.”

“Wait.”

She stopped and looked at me expectantly. “What now?”

I yanked it loose from the seam of the scabbard, held the fluffy little crow feather up for her inspection and grinned. “You missed one.”

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“Queen Gabrielle and her champion, Xena of Amphipolis,” the herald's voice rang out.

I waited for the slender woman to step aside before moving into the middle of the unofficial audience area of the Queen's quarters. Xena followed closely at my shoulder looking stony and unbending. Two more steps took me to the edge of the bear rug where I dropped lightly to one knee, bending my head in respectful deference to the goddess who, legend held, oversaw the fate of the Amazon Nation.

Wood creaked, and I heard Artemis rise to her feet. “What disrespect is this?” Her voice was both lighter and harder than I'd expected, and I was taken aback by the whiplash of her words. Stung, I looked up, wondering how I'd already managed to offend her. She was younger looking than I expected, with short cropped hair and a single, long braid twined with a dark green ribbon hanging from her temple. Her face was severe, sharply cut along the jaw, and she moved with an athlete's grace as she approached, fluid and sure. I was both relieved and worried when I discovered she wasn't talking to me at all.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw that Xena was still standing straight and tall behind me, her face expressionless but for her eyes where I could see the faintest hint of amused defiance. *Oh, no...*

“My...” How does one address a goddess? “My lady, I'd ask a boon of you.”

Artemis ignored me, walked right past me, until she stood toe-to-toe with Xena. Tall as she was, Xena was taller, and I could see that the slight difference irked the goddess who stood taller than the others in the room. Xena noted the difference also, and Artemis' reaction to it, her lips holding the ghost of a smirk.

“You are not Amazon.” It was a challenge, not a question.

“That's right,” Xena answered easily, unperturbed by the goddess' ire.

“Why are you here?”

I could feel the temperature in the room rising, and had a gut premonition that neither of them would be inclined to back down. *Time to step in...* “She's my champion.”

“I am aware of that.” Artemis turned to look at me for the first time, judging, evaluating, her granite eyes beholding me in a way that made me feel unaccountably vulnerable. Dragging her eyes away, she returned her attention to Xena. “Answer my question.”

“You've locked up my friend. I wanna know why.”

“Your *friend* is a lying thief and a voyeur!”

The thief part, sure, but a voyeur? I knew Autolycus had an appreciation for women...

“He refuses to tell me where he put my belt!” the goddess railed. “Were that not enough, he also spied on me while I bathed. I demand retribution!”

I exchanged looks with Xena. “You want to kill him because he allegedly saw you in the altogether and took your clothes?” When I said it out loud, I had to admit that it seemed a little creepy. I'd have slapped him, myself.

“No man may lay eyes upon me. Even you, not Amazon born, should know this.” Her scorn raked me.

Xena moved closer, towering over us both from behind my left shoulder. “Peeking at your parts is hardly reason to kill a man.” Her fingers came up to rest lightly against my back, and even without them I could feel the tension she radiated. “Neither is getting a piece of clothing stolen. Why not just replace it?”

“It's not an ordinary belt,” I breathed, suddenly remembering my lore. “Is it?”

Artemis shook her head, her lips thinning to a narrow line. “I need it back immediately.”

“What's so special about this belt?” Xena asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice.

The goddess turned away and walked slowly back up to what would have been my chair. Not certain if Artemis was going to answer or not, I said, “It embodies what she represents.”

“High-handed obnoxiousness?” Xena hazarded sarcastically.

I smacked her shoulder. “No!”

“She *means*,” Artemis broke in tightly, “the belt personifies and amplifies my powers; chastity, discipline, my influence over nature and the hunt are all contained within it.”

Well, doesn't that explain a few things? I saw from Xena's expression she was thinking the same thing. “And just what happens when you're without it?” she asked, crossing her arms.

Artemis' jaw worked. “If I don't get it back by the full moon during Brauronia, I'll lose my godhood.”

“But you're still a goddess now?” I asked, clasping my hands behind me and walking closer to her.

“My power and control... is waning.” Artemis shifted in her chair, her left hand curling into a fist on the armrest.

Xena rubbed at a reddened patch of skin sporting a gash from our run-in with the crows. “You don't say.”

“Xena,” I tsked. “So all the animals we've seen acting strangely—”

“Who've attacked us,” Xena corrected in a mutter.

I shot her a look, but continued. “—this has to do with your loss of the belt?”

“Yes.”

“And if someone else uses it?” Xena asked.

“If I don't get it back, then whoever has stolen it will obtain my powers and perhaps be a minor deity in their own right.”

Memories of Velasca's rampage sprung fearfully to mind and I turned to Xena to see her looking unmoved by Artemis' plight. I wasn't surprised; she didn't have much sympathy for any of the gods given the antics they got up to sometimes. But this went beyond just Artemis; nature—and us, too, it seemed—were in jeopardy as a result of her loss.

Xena crossed the room and settled herself in another chair, making the herald glare at her for daring to sit in Artemis' presence without permission. Further, she reached into the fruit bowl on the side table and retrieved an apple for herself. “If Autolycus stole it, why won't he give it back?” she asked, taking a noisy bite.

This did nothing to improve Artemis' mood. She came to her feet, pacing near me. I felt her looking me over, taking in the design of the soft, rust-colored outfit I wore. “He won't tell me,” she seethed. “Gabrielle, I want satisfaction. You are my Queen. I demand you uphold the laws of the Nation.”

“W-what?” My blood ran cold.

“He refuses to return the belt to me. He will pay the price of his crime.”

Another soft crunch of fruit. “And what if he didn't steal it?” Xena asked casually, examining the marbled skin of the apple. “Do you know for sure? Did you see him do it?”

“I followed his tracks from the river and found him shortly after in the woods. What arrogance! He was sitting under a tree. It was a simple matter to bring him back to the village.”

Xena stood up sharply, startling me. “I wanna see him. Now.”

“You *dare* make demands of me?”

“I'm not asking you; I'm telling you,” Xena clarified. With that, she turned and gave me a look, pulling me to her side with her eyes as she headed for the door. I heard an outraged sound behind me, but kept walking, wondering what *else* could happen next.

* * *

VII. Between a Frock and a Hard Place

I knew she would back down.

If Autolycus wasn't talking to Artemis, it was in her best interest to let him speak with someone that he might be inclined to. Of course, she couldn't just ask for help and had to prance around like she really had a choice in the matter. I just decided to skip the dance and go straight to the good stuff.

The village was still bustling with activity, Amazons rushing about in preparation.

With arms full of decorations, or food, or ceremonial weaponry they'd lope along, slowing for a moment as they approached to nod, or grin. Gabrielle snorted behind me.

“Guess they like your costume.”

“Not another word.”

We continued toward Ephiny's temporary quarters. Gabrielle furrowed her brow. “So, we talk to Autolycus, get him to return the belt, then convince Artemis to spare his life, right?”

“I have a feeling things aren't going to play out that easy.”

The bard groaned. “Figures. Y'know, just once why can't it, huh?”

I stopped and raised an eyebrow. “What?”

Gabrielle shook her head letting out a tense growl. “I'm just saying that why can't things work out the easy way for once, that's all.” She looked to me incredulously. “Is that too much to ask?”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “We're dealing with a Goddess, the King of Thieves and a village full of Amazons. Just on the cusp of a full moon. How did you expect things to work out?”

“Good point.” She smiled.

Ephiny poked her head out of her hut, spotted us approaching, darted back inside then stuck her head out again, only to quickly dart back in once more.

“Ephiny, we saw you,” Gabrielle chuckled.

“Yeah, get out here.” I crossed my arms.

The Regent of the Amazon nation slowly opened her door and began tapping along its frame. Her grin fell crooked from her sheepishness. “Just...uh...checking for wood mites...”

“I see.” Gabrielle nodded. “We need to see Autolycus.”

“Now.” I added, by way of encouragement.

Ephiny straightened, let her eyes travel the course of our outfits and then straightened again. “And Artemis—”

“—Has given us permission,” I finished.

“Sort of.” Gabrielle added.

Ephiny raised an eyebrow then shrugged. “Well, whatever. Follow me.”

She led us toward the northern edge of the village. We passed many makeshift campsites along the way. There seemed to be an abundance of guests at the festival, and not enough sleeping quarters. The visitors didn't seem to mind sharing accommodations, though, often sleeping three or four to a tent, judging by the giggles

that could be heard. Soon, I was able to recognize the area around the Amazon barracks and holding cells. Eponin and Solari stood watch outside. They both smiled, then smiled wider as we approached.

“Something funny?” I asked.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Eponin smirked, trying not to eyeball our outfits.

Gabrielle nodded to them. “We're here to speak with Autolycus.”

Solari darkened, gripping her spear. “Artemis forbids any contact with the defiler.”

I smirked. Autolycus would like that one. Ephiny stepped forward. “The Goddess has allowed it in this instance.”

Reluctantly, they stepped aside. Eponin looked with embarrassment to the ground. “We're sorry, your majesty.”

Gabrielle waved it off. “You were just doing your job.”

We entered, Ephiny leading the way to the cells. All were empty, save one—the last, small and cramped. Crumpled uncomfortably in the corner, making the room seem even smaller than it was, was Autolycus. His head, somewhat scuffed and bruised, leaned back against the cell. He seemed to be mumbling to himself about something.

I smirked. “Nice digs.”

While he remained composed, Autolycus' initial brightening gave away how relieved he truly was to see us. He smoothed his moustache. “Only a temporary inconvenience, of course.”

“Of course,” Gabrielle mocked. She nodded to Ephiny, who opened the cell door and let us in.

“If you need me...” The Regent indicated while walking away.

The King of Thieves smirked, watching Ephiny leave. He spoke brashly for her benefit as she moved out of earshot. “Really Xena, I appreciate the gesture but—”

I picked him up by the collar. “What in Tartarus were you thinking? Stealing from a Goddess?”

“That's a dumb idea even for you,” Gabrielle chimed in.

He looked embarrassed for a brief moment, then grinned. “Well ladies, sometimes a master becomes bored with the same old tired and trivial fare and finds himself forced to branch out toward newer challenges...challenges more befitting the skills of—”

“You didn't know it was hers, did you?” Gabrielle finished.

He sighed. “Didn't have a clue...”

I let him go. Gabrielle shrugged. “Okay, well now you do. Why not give it back and we'll ask Artemis to forgive you?” She looked at me. “Shouldn't be hard, right?”

He fidgeted. “Well, Gabrielle, y'see...it's uh...the situation is somewhat

complicated...uhm...vis-à-vis the belt..."

"You don't have it." I voiced what had been my suspicion all along.

He slouched. "Nope."

I crossed my arms, growing impatient. "Then who does?"

"*Xena*," he said with a coy smile. "I'm flattered that you hold my abilities in these matters in such high regard, but to be honest I didn't have the time to sell it...before..." He seemed to have a bad taste in his mouth. "Before..."

Ever curious, Gabrielle leaned forward. "Before?"

He backed up, growing pale. "...Before..."

I sighed and rolled my eyes. "*Before ...*"

"Before I had it stolen from *me*." He slumped dejectedly against the back wall, sliding dramatically to the floor where he landed with a pathetic little plop. He poked gingerly at the goose-egg on his forehead. "Got this big bump on my head too," he whined softly.

I looked to Gabrielle. She was trying hard not to laugh, and while the situation was rather humorous, the implications and consequences weren't—especially for Autolycus.

I walked over to him. "Let's see that head wound."

"Aw, it's nothing. I deserve worse for being so careless...Pft! *Me*: the King of Thieves getting bonked on the head in the middle of the forest..."

"Mm-hmm," I looked at the wound. There was an odd elliptical shape to the impact point. "And where did this happen exactly?"

He looked puzzled. "Mm...having trouble remembering, actually. I think it was close, though."

Gabrielle moved in. "Could you show us?" I raised an eyebrow, impressed. She read my mind.

He shrugged. "I suppose."

I straightened. "Okay then, sit tight and we'll go see if we can talk some sense into the Goddess."

Gabrielle called for Ephiny as she opened the cell door.

"Put in a good word," he added as we began to leave. "I'm just too dashing to die like this."

I slammed the door. Gabrielle rolled her eyes and we followed Ephiny out of the building. The Regent turned. "Shall I escort you back to—"

"We're going to see Artemis again." I said. "Now."

Gabrielle shifted apologetically. “Uhm...take us to her, please, Ephiny.”

Ephiny sighed then shrugged. “Well, whatever. Follow me.”

The village continued to bustle with activity. Lithe dancing had sprung up in pockets, backlit by the flicker of large cooking fires.

I nudged Gabrielle. “Looks like the festival is starting early.”

She smiled up at me, her face aglow with dancing flame. I blinked for a moment, the heat of the fires reaching my cheeks. We soon arrived at the Queen's quarters. Ephiny nodded to the guards and then turned to us. “I'll announce you.” She disappeared inside.

Gabrielle turned to me, leaning in close to whisper. “I sure hope you have a plan, because I don't.”

“I think I can wing it.” I winked.

She looked confused for a moment, then shook her head. “That makes me feel so much better.”

Ephiny appeared at the door. Right away I knew something was wrong. She approached, wringing her fingers. “Uhm...the Goddess will see you now...it's just...”

Gabrielle and I exchanged a look. The bard gestured for Ephiny to get on with it. “It's just, what?”

Swallowing with difficulty, the Regent shrugged, avoiding any eye contact with me. “She will only meet with Gabrielle.”

* * *

VIII. A Queen in the Hut's Worth Two in a Bush

“What?” Panic grabbed my stomach and put a knife to its throat. I shot a pleading look at Xena, who looked equally taken aback, before appealing to our friend. “Ephiny—”

“No way, Gabrielle. She was very clear that she only wants to see you. I'm not gonna to be the one to tell her different.”

So much for Xena's ‘winging it’ plan. Agitated, I began to pace. “What am I going to say to her? ‘Hi, Artemis, do you mind if we borrow the prisoner you wanna execute? We'll bring him right back, I promise.’ She's *never* going to believe that one.”

Xena shook her head, looking angry, but resigned. “You're going to have to convince her.” Given what was at stake, I gathered from her comment that Xena was going to take the low-profile route. “You can do this. Talk her into it.”

“But what if I say something that makes her want to kill him sooner?” It wasn't an unreasonable comment; I'd known several warlords who had wanted to kill me sooner after I'd started talking to them.

She took me by the shoulders, turned me towards the door, and said, “He's counting on you, Gabrielle.” And with that, she shoved me gently towards the entrance. No pressure, right?

I pushed aside the skin acting as a screen and stepped into the familiar confines of the Queen's hut. Candles had been lit to augment the light thrown by the fire pit, and in the soft glow I examined the room more closely, curious to see what goddesses left lying about. Except for a tray of food, presumably a dinner offering, I could see nothing that screamed “Made on Mt Olympus.” Well, I suppose that figured. “I'd be paranoid to leave anything around now, too,” I muttered under my breath, nervous at finding myself alone.

In mid-step I felt a caress run across my body, like the touch of cool water on a hot day, and it raised the hair on my arms and preceded the waft of pine and musk that suddenly filled my senses. I shivered in reaction and gasped quietly. Was this what Xena felt when Ares was near?

“Gabrielle.”

The darkness off to one side of the room called my name and I looked towards it to see Artemis emerging with a silent stride from the shadows in a dapple of mystical light.

“My lady.” I hesitantly bobbed my head, wondering how formal I should be on this occasion.

She looked at me and smiled, and it transformed her face from sulking intensity to mischievous amusement. Gliding closer, I felt her eyes stroke me and I glanced away, unable to maintain her gaze. “I'm pleased you came back to see me.” She brushed by me, a scent of jasmine and honeysuckle trailing enticingly behind her as she grasped a decanter and poured out an equal measure for two. Returning to my side, she offered a cup. “Did your friend get any further answers from the thief?” I may have been mistaken, but I thought I heard a harder edge enter her voice when she referred to Xena.

“No—well, in a way,” I answered. “Autolycus didn't know he was stealing from you—”

“And ignorance negates his crime?”

Damn. Stepped right into that one. “No,” I conceded, and took a sip of my drink to buy me a moment of thought. Wine, light and sweet, rippled over my tongue. “It doesn't, but he regrets his actions—”

“Regrets getting caught, you mean.”

“—and told us that as much as he would like to give it back, he can't. Someone else stole it from him.”

Artemis smiled wryly. “A likely story.”

“You don't believe him?”

“No. He was alone, as I said earlier, and sitting beneath a tree, carefree as you please.”

“But what about the wound on his head?” Gabrielle pointed out. “He didn't do that to himself. Did you happen to notice any other footprints besides the ones you were tracking?” From the way her brows contracted, I knew I'd offended her ego. I rashly wondered if that might be a target to aim for again.

“There were no others. His fate is decided. Now,” she said, decisively, trying to replace the stern frown with a gentler smile, “let us discuss something more pleasan—”

“Can you be certain?”

“Yes.”

I could tell by the exasperation in her voice that I was pushing her, but I couldn't give up. “I'd like to see the spot for myself, if you don't mind. I mean, you never know; you were angry and distracted, and maybe something went un—”

Her expression as she listened to me changed, the anger morphing into intrigued fascination with the speed of a startled deer. “Your beauty calms me. ”

“—noti...uh... pardon me?”

“My restlessness ebbs in your presence, Gabrielle. You possess an artlessly graceful and natural beauty that I think I could look on for hours.” Artemis glided closer and lifted a hand to stroke the long strands of hair at my shoulder. “Honeyed wheat...” Fingers traced the air over my gaze. “...clover eyes...” Artemis circled me and I felt a pair of warm palms against my back before they slid down to rest disconcertingly on hips. “...supple strength and glorious womanhood. You could easily be mistaken for one of my nymphs, Gabrielle.”

Whoa! I felt the heat of her hands through my leather skirt and I scooted away, intent on distancing myself from this rather intense examination. I set my wine down on a side table. For some reason I got the impression I might want to have my hands free, just in case. “I'm flattered by the compliment, my lady, but I'd still like to talk about Autolykus...”

“Artemis. Call me Artemis.” She set down her own cup and followed me slowly, something about the set of her head, the confident sway of her body, putting me on my guard. “Please, Gabrielle, you must see that I cannot allow him to live. To do so would show weakness and others might think they can take advantage of me, and of the Nation, as easily in the future.”

I took a few discrete steps backwards, putting a chair between the two of us. “I wouldn't confuse weakness with compassion. Or mercy. Is there no room in your heart for forgiveness?”

She turned away from me, pacing slowly to my left, her hands clasped behind her

back. "You've a gentle soul. An innocent soul. I fear you know less of human nature than you think you do."

"I know it's wrong to kill a man for seeing you naked."

Artemis stopped and lifted her gaze to meet mine. "But he doesn't deny he stole from me? In any market in Greece a thief would lose a hand at least. Shall I maim him instead? Is that the clemency you'd ask for him? Given how he carried on when I found him, I don't think he'd be one to last long if he were unable to indulge in his...profession."

"But—"

"No!"

This wasn't going well at all. If I wasn't careful she might march out to the barracks and kill him herself right now to prove her point. "He wants to make amends."

"So he's sorry he was caught and now he wants to make it better so I can let him loose to do this again?"

Pretty much? No, no... can't say that. "Autolycus has a good heart. He's not a cruel or malicious man. He's done good in the past and if given a chance he could do that again. Now. For the good of the Nation."

Artemis looked skeptical as she approached. "The Nation."

"Without him Xena would never have returned from the dead."

From the look on the goddess' face, this wouldn't have been a tragedy. "I fail to see the connection."

With only a little space between us I realized belatedly that she'd flanked me, her hand reaching out to rest on the back of the chair next to mine, close enough that I could feel the warmth of her skin. My insides tightened and I pulled away, fidgeting with the ornate belt at my waist. I tried to ignore how closely she followed me.

"I don't shed blood. I think there has to be a different path than that of the sword. I think the Amazon traditions will eventually be our undoing if we don't find a way to evolve and integrate ourselves into the world. Isolation will prove our downfall if we can't form alliances and end old feuds. Look at what would have happened with the Centaurs if we hadn't stepped in." I let that statement hang in the air before adding, "If she hadn't come back, I'd have ruled over the Nation here instead of Ephiny. Can you imagine what I might have done if I'd been here to form policy?"

She paused; her jaw shifted from left to right though the rest of her expression remained neutral.

"Maybe I'm getting tired of the road," I considered aloud. "Maybe Xena and I could use a rest, a permanent spot to call home for a few years. Maybe for the rest of our lives. We could probably do a lot of good for the Amazons. I could show them a

different path, a peaceful path, and with Xena, given all she knows, we could make changes—”

“No! You cannot change eons of history!”

“You have no idea what I can do!” I was a little surprised by my own vehemence, but I was used to a more stubborn will than hers.

I found myself gripped suddenly by the arms, Artemis' flinty grey eyes boring down into mine. “You dare to blackmail *me*?”

“I want to see the spot where you found him. And,” I said, pausing to lick my dry lips, “I want him to come with us.” Her grip loosened a little and I could feel her fingers caressing my skin while she considered the situation. Standing this close to a goddess and being held by her, I found myself unaccountably breathless.

“There will be conditions,” Artemis replied at last.

“Which are?”

“If he is to accompany you, then I will lead you there myself. I won't have him escaping.”

Other than Xena being furious at being babysat, I think she could live with that.

“Okay. Was there something else?”

“You, not Ephiny, must dance with me at the height of Brauronia.”

Taken by surprise, my mouth opened but nothing came out. The way she was looking at me as she laid out this particular condition was a mix of satisfaction and hunger, and her eyes never left my face.

“Well?”

Well... aside from Ephiny's reaction and my own lack of coordination, what was the harm in a dance? “Okay.”

She smiled suddenly, the earlier expression evaporating in a wash of happiness. Artemis squeezed my arms gently and then released me. “Excellent. We'll leave as soon as the prisoner is prepared. See to it, Gabrielle, and then notify me when the party is ready.” And then she rippled out of sight, covered for a moment in a fall of breezy sunshine before that too disappeared.

Artemis had seemed awfully happy with my capitulation. What on earth had I done?

There wasn't any harm in a dance.

Right?

* * *

IX. The Game is Afoot

“What did you say?” I asked Gabrielle. I was willing to entertain the possibility that my hearing could be affected by Artemis' dorky belt and that she didn't just say what I thought she said.

Her gulp was both visible and audible. She put up her hands in a pacifying gesture, which was sweet, but futile. “Now, Xena, look...it was the only way I could get her to agree to spare Autolycus' life.” She crinkled her nose. “Well...for a little while anyway...but we'll figure something out.” She put her hand on my shoulder. “That's what you wanted, right?”

I crossed my arms, my eyebrow raising. “A dance?”

She nodded, reassuring me. “A dance.”

There wasn't any harm in a dance.

Right?

“Just a dance?”

Gabrielle looked away for a second, to give her credit: a very quick second then looked at me again. “Just a dance.”

“Hmm...” I thought about it. We were basically getting everything we wanted out of this, except that 'Hatchet Face' was coming along for the ride. Autolycus was given some more time, we were given more time to help him out, it seemed like Gabrielle worked out a pretty sweet deal for us here. I guess I could get over having an annoying and useless presence tag along—thanks to all the practice with Joxer lately. The situation was pretty much where I wanted it to be, all things considered.

Then why wasn't it sitting right with me?

Gabrielle was nervous, that's why. Was she worried about the dance? A bard getting stage-fright? Highly unlikely. Terpsichore knows Gabrielle never missed a chance to be the centre of attention—so it wasn't the dance. What was it?

I inspected the laces of one of my bracers, playing nonchalant. “So...uh...what's this Brauronia dance thing you and Artemis are going to do, huh?”

Gabrielle flushed a little. “Well...the dance celebrates nature and all of its...uhm...r-regenerative qualities...” Her fingers were in knots. “In dance...to music...”

“Oh yeah? So what do ya have to do, jump around pretending you're a rain cloud and she's the Earth and you sprinkle sparkles on her to make her grow or something?”

The bard laughed nervously. Another pause. “No. No... not like that...” She turned away. “Definitely not like that,” she mumbled.

I let it go. For about two seconds.

I fiddled with my chakram and stared at the faint stain of bird poop on my boot. “So what is it?” Why was I doing this? I knew what 'Hatchet Face' was after, it was pretty damn obvious from the moment we walked into town she was after one thing and one thing only—and it sure as Scylla wasn't just her belt. Maybe all this craziness was

getting me a little too hot under the collar about it.

"Well..." Gabrielle began, her forehead as creased and choppy as the sea. "It...uh...it's meant to be an interpretive sort of dance...so...it's not like we...uhm...play any sort of recognizable roles..."

I looked up from my boots. Standing there, by the fire, she looked so conflicted, so helpless. Why was I doing this, especially to her? I stepped toward her. "Gabrielle, I..."

So what if Artemis was being completely unreasonable and wanted to kill one of my friends just because he made her look like a dork? So what if she was tagging along with us, keeping an eye on every little thing we do, making her little quips and comments and throwing in a whole lot of I-told-you-so's? So what if a goddess (of chastity, I might add), was using the predicament to blackmail my best friend into a compromising situation that may lead to gods know what? So what if she was going to get Gabrielle to perform some wildly sensual, fire-lit dance, where the two of them spend hours bathing in special oils and then painting their bodies up in honey-scented paints and dyes just to get ready to thrash around and rub around together to the beat of pounding, primal drumming under a full moon in front of a crowd of rutting Amazons?

So. Frikkin'. What.

"Xena?" Gabrielle blinked at me. "What is it?"

My jaw hurt. I unclenched it. I grabbed my gear and headed out. "Come on, Twinkle Toes, we've got a belt to find."

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After we rendezvoused with Artemis and poor Autolycus, he led us into the southern woods bordering the Nation. We trekked in a southwesterly path for a couple of hours. Not much happened. Artemis kept trying to impress Gabrielle with her little tricks. It wasn't working. At least, it didn't appear to be working. I had other things to worry about and I wasn't going to play babysitter.

We continued along. The King of Thieves seemed a little quiet, so I fell in beside him.

"You okay?" I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "Hm...Am I okay? Am I okay? Well... Let's see..." He began counting off on his fingers. "I let the biggest score of my life slip through my fingers. It turned out to be the belt of a very vengeful—and man-hating, I might add—goddess, who wants to carry out various unspeakable and painful punishments upon me before finally killing me. If she doesn't get it back, some madman will have the power of an Olympian god and probably wreak all manner of havoc upon the earth—because, let's face it, it's never just a simple farm-boy with a heart of gold type that ends up with one of those, right? I've been in an Amazon jail, I smell horrible, look terrible—hard to believe, I know, but take my word for it. I have a headache thanks to this knock I took that might leave a scar. So...Am I okay?" He glared at me. "Just peachy. How are you?"

I smirked. "Some thanks I get for keeping you alive."

His mood darkened. "Yes, but for how long? I hate having to rely on the mercy of a goddess." He leaned in to whisper, adding a mirthless wink. "Especially one who's as tightly wound as she is, if you know what I mean?"

I found this a little more amusing than I normally would have. Okay, a lot more. I cleared my throat. "Look...would it help if you thought of it as your life being in our hands—mine and Gabrielle's?"

The King of Thieves rolled his eyes, his hand straying near his beltline. "At least this time my bodily functions are safe." He pointed ahead. "It's just beyond there."

I turned to gather Gabrielle and the goddess. They were nowhere in sight.

I took a deep breath. It didn't work. I took another.

"Where'd they go?" Autolycus asked.

"Son of a Bacchae." I muttered through grit teeth. "Gabrielle?" I called out. "Gabrielle?"

Artemis and Gabrielle appeared farther down the path. "We're here," the bard called.

I stormed over to them. "And just where were you?"

Gabrielle smiled. "Artemis was showing me how to communicate with some of the woodland creatures."

"Oh," I said. "Really?"

The goddess smiled as if even the softest cheese wouldn't melt in her stinking little mouth. "Indeed, I was. Gabrielle is quite good at it." Keeping her eyes locked with mine, she finished, "She's a *natural*."

"Oh...I think that squirrel was just being very patient with me. I wasn't that good, really." Gabrielle smiled bashfully. "Was I?" Was she blushing?

"You were, little one." Again Artemis spoke to Gabrielle, but leveled her sharp little face at me. "I suppose you don't receive compliments or encouragement on a regular basis?"

I took a deep breath. It didn't work. I took another. I think if this deep breath stuff actually works for you, you're probably not very angry. I forced a smile.

"Well...now...if we're all finished talking to the various creatures of the forest, pointy-faced or otherwise," I glared at Artemis, "Autolycus has led us back to the spot where the belt was taken."

I stormed away from them. "Son of a Bacchae." I muttered.

Autolycus was standing in a tiny culvert, shaded by many old trees. "Well...this is where—Woah! What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

I glared at him. "Drop it, or I drop you."

He put his hands up. "Okay, okay." He gestured to the area around him. "This is where it happened." He re-enacted the scene. "Got distracted by a noise, they snuck up on me and 'pow' I took one to the head." He dropped to the ground, on all fours. "I didn't even have time to fight for it—just 'bam,' lights out."

I looked around. There were some tracks. There had definitely been a scuffle, and someone had definitely got the best of Autolycus. That wasn't odd. It didn't seem like more than one person that attacked him. Now, that *was* odd. The tracks headed to the northwest—to the slaver's camp Ephiny had mentioned, I figured.

Gabrielle and Artemis arrived. The bard approached. "Any luck?" she asked.

"Looks like slavers," I said. "The tracks head off to the northwest and the wound on Autolycus' head is from a cudgel I've seen them use before. It incapacitates rather than kills."

Autolycus ran a finger through his moustache. "Effective if you don't want to harm the merchandise too much, hm?"

"So Autolycus didn't do it." Gabrielle said.

The King of Thieves looked hurt. "What? You didn't believe me?"

"I didn't say that...I meant that we have proof now." She turned to the Goddess, who remained uncharacteristically mute.

I moved up beside Gabrielle, putting a hand on her shoulder but maintaining eye contact with Artemis. "It was pretty obvious given all the tracks everywhere. I'm surprised you didn't notice it yourself."

I think if looks could kill, I'd be in Tartarus right now. Even though looks were harmless enough, the one Artemis leveled at me stung a little. She regained her composure and wandered around the culvert, stopping at the tracks. She raised an eyebrow at us. "Slavers tend to move in groups. There's only one set of tracks here."

"It could've been a scout?" Gabrielle offered.

"Perhaps." Artemis crossed her arms. "Or perhaps that is what this thief wants us to believe."

"Madame, I'm flattered," Autolycus bowed. "But I'm a city boy, and not much of a woodsman. I wouldn't know how to throw anyone off of anything out here."

"You didn't seem to have any trouble dispossessing me of my property in my private forest glade, did you?"

"Oh, well..." Autolycus, always on the ready for compliments, waved his hands in a way that suggested that while this was in fact the case, it wasn't necessary to say so, because wasn't it all so blushingly embarrassing, but if she would like to continue...

"Look," I interrupted, wanting to head this off. "Scout or not, whoever took the belt

seems to have headed off in the direction of the slaver's camp, I'd suggest we do the same."

Gabrielle nodded to the pointy-faced deity. "It does make sense, Artemis."

The new-found chumminess of being on a first-name basis with Artemis was not lost on me.

Artemis stood, unmoving. She closed her eyes for a brief second and then sighed. "Gabrielle and I will return to the village," Artemis spoke arrogantly. She looked to Autolycus and I. "And the two of you will journey to the slaver's camp."

To say I was angry would be like saying Mount Olympus is a gentle bump in the landscape. I strode over to her, stopping when we were eye-to-eye—well, I was taller so it wasn't exact. I don't think she liked that. "If you think you can use Gabrielle as a hostage, you've got another—"

"Xena, wait," Gabrielle got between us, and Artemis grinned at me over her shoulder. "I have my duties to perform in preparation for the...festival." She met my eyes, whispering to me. "I'll be all right."

I didn't even bother taking a breath. "Son of a Bacchae," I muttered.

* * *

PART 3

X. Lions and Tigers and Bears! Oh my!

The walk back to the village was an exercise in constant wariness. I rubbed at the stiffness of my neck and wondered if I was going to have whiplash from constantly trying to keep an eye on Artemis' whereabouts. When not strolling with casual ease alongside of me, her darkly tanned arm brushing mine in spite of the width of the path, she was pacing with predator-like patience behind me. I couldn't help feeling like a skittish gazelle scenting lions on the breeze.

"Why don't you walk with me?" I suggested, hoping my voice didn't betray my nervousness. At least beside me, I wouldn't be wondering what she was up to and I could give my neck a rest. "You can tell me more about the... um... about..." Damn. Tired and frazzled to the point of distraction I couldn't come up with something simple and innocuous.

"Perhaps the dance?" Almost at once, Artemis was by my side, but the knowing looks she had given me since we arrived had disappeared beneath a solemn and earnest expression. "You will want to know more, especially given its importance in the coming days of the festival."

I smiled weakly. "Right." *Honest, Xena, I'm not encouraging her.* "The dance." I could almost imagine hearing Xena's teeth grinding at just the thought.

"We'll bathe in special oils and adorn ourselves in the colors of nature and fertility."

Fertility has a color? I wasn't sure I wanted to ask so I nodded instead.

“A child, a mother and an elder will each help us prepare for the rites, applying the paints and dyes; symbolic patterns written on both mortal and immortal flesh binding us and nature together and completing the circle...”

My head whipped around and I stared at Artemis in startled surprise. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Had she overheard? Was she mocking Xena on purpose? *Either way, Xena's gonna freak.* I cleared my throat. “And that's when we dance?”

The somber expression cracked and her warmest smile yet turned to greet me. It was amazing how much prettier Artemis was when she wasn't scowling. “Not quite. There will be a sacrifice, performed by your Regent. I had thought of using the thief, but obviously a substitute will need to be found now.” Artemis paused, looking rather put out at the necessary change of plans. “The sacrifice will be gutted and burned while the rites are sung.”

I couldn't help noticing the enthusiasm lighting her face. Personally, it made me shudder; the thought of some poor, defenseless animal being cut up and roasted for the sake of ritual was enough to make me feel ill. *Oh Zeus, I hope I don't throw up at that point.*

“Afterwards,” Artemis continued, “the fires will be lit and the drummers will play. The children will strew flowers before us as we lead the dance before the tribes. We will unite them; woman to nature, heaven to earth, god to mortal—”

The intensity of her gaze was hard to ignore and my skin tingled where her hand touched my bare arm in her earnest zeal.

“—Gabrielle, you and I will usher in the Amazons' most glorious age. Let this Brauronia be a new beginning from which we will spread out across the world once more and reclaim the land of our foremothers. We will be strong again. Skilled. Self-sufficient. Independent. Powerful. Even *Rome* would be wary of my daughters. Gabrielle, can you not share my vision?” She wrapped my hand in both her own and I barely noticed the warmth of them, so taken was I by the emotion in her voice, the way her eyes pleaded with me to understand. Breathlessly, I shuddered in apprehension, sensing a thread of war in the persuasive tapestry of her words. But, I had to admit, it was, by far, the least selfish statement I'd ever heard an Olympian deity ever make. Artemis had always struck me as very reserved by comparison and it seemed that she might actually care for the Amazons who revered her.

I tried to compose myself. “Artemis...” She drew nearer to me, and I felt myself drawn irresistibly off the path, turned and turned again until my back came to rest against the broad trunk of a tree.

“Gabrielle, you and I, we could do this.” She held my hand cupped to her chest, her supple fingers entwined with mine. I felt her return the squeeze of my fingers. “I admit to being headstrong, but it is with good reason. Women in a man's world... the Amazons must hold stubborn and firm against the tide; else they'll be swept away beneath the waves of history.”

“Artemis—” Her fingers gently silenced me.

“Your goodness, your beauty... the Amazons look to you, their eyes follow you. I've seen it. You've the heart of a tiger; as fierce with your words as an Amazon with a

sword. We are warriors, but... perhaps there is room for your brand of diplomacy.”

I was reaching her without having to say a word and I couldn't help but smile. Artemis smiled back; a full, soft smile that smoothed the hard planes of her face and warmed the grey of her eyes. The transformation was so striking I felt the desire to stroke her cheek and barely caught myself, startled by the urge. *What are we doing?*

“If even a goddess can feel the force of your charm, Gabrielle, how can any nation think to stand against you?”

The distance between us dwindled further and my heart hammered abruptly in my chest. The tail of her braid tickled a trail of sensation across my chest as she leaned toward me. I opened my mouth to speak, to raise some kind of defense against this sense of pliancy that was stealing over me, but the tips of her fingers lightly traced over the edges of my lips, forestalling protest.

“Ours will be the brightest age,” she breathed. “Our confluence will be a thing of legends...”

Her words brushed across my lips and my own breath faltered. I was paralyzed, unable to either surrender or flee from her touch.

“...Gabrielle...” Her mouth savored my name.

My eyes, overwhelmed by the sight of her, shied away and, before she blocked out all view of the world, something caught my eye.

“Bear,” I mumbled, feeling distantly that I should be far more alarmed than I was.

Her hand was at my shoulder, stroking along the edge of the leather shoulder strap. “I will bare everything to you...”

The stink of musk, dead fish and urine assaulted my senses just as her lips tried to find mine, slapping me abruptly out from beneath her spell. *Oh my gods.* “Look out!” I shouted just as a huffing growl rattled the air. I shoved her hard to my left, just out of the path of the massive mitt swiping through the air right in front of my face. The fetid reek of animal and rot made my eyes water.

In a panic I whacked it hard on the nose with my staff. The bear yowled in pain and reared back, shaking its huge head and spraying saliva across the glade before it growled again. That was enough for me; I ran, grabbing Artemis' arm to drag her along as I passed. “Time to go!”

“No!” Artemis pulled away from me. “I will calm her.” She raised her arms and locked eyes with the wild animal. “Be still, be silent!”

The bear had other ideas. Now furious in addition to being stinky, the creature lifted itself on its hind legs, magically tripling in height.

“Oh boy.” I hooked my fingers into the back of Artemis' top and yanked her backwards, forcing the goddess into a stumbling run just as the bear growled again. “C'mon!”

“Gabrielle! I'm trying to commune with her!”

“The only communing you're gonna do is with its claws!” I headed us off at the quickest pace I could, trying to remember Xena's advice about bears. Beyond the, “stay away from them. I mean it, Gabrielle!” part of her advice, I mean. “This way!” I jumped over a fallen log and headed for a sharp, rocky incline. We ducked branches and plowed headlong through a leaf-carpeted gully.

I could hear the she-bear grunting and panting behind us, apparently less bothered by the falling darkness than we were. My goal was in sight and I just hoped Artemis could keep up with me. *Damn it. Xena makes this look so easy.* “Take my hand!” Our hands slapped together and I couldn't tell if the sweat between our palms was mine or hers. “Hang on!”

With my heart in my throat I gauged the last few steps. “Jump!”

“What?!”

The earth dropped away beneath us and I released Artemis, hoping she could see the plan she was falling into. Branches and pine needles scraped against my skin as I scrambled for purchase as we hit the tree.

Behind us, the bear stopped abruptly, her feet working at the ledge as she tried to halt in time, tumbling rocks and pebbles over the edge of the outcropping. Robbed of her prey, the bear stood impotently on the ledge and yowled at us. The tree swayed with our weight and I glanced down, seeing the trunk disappear into the craggy slope. We were stuck—but safe. I slumped with relief in the arms of the tree and finally let myself relax. *I can't believe that actually worked.*

Artemis, however, was climbing up past me, muttering angrily under her breath and making the tree shake alarmingly. I sneezed twice in rapid succession, the intense smell of pine filling my nose even as the needles rained down on me. “What are you doing?” I demanded. “We're safe right here.”

“She should have obeyed me!” The goddess looked prepared to throw herself back onto land.

“Stop!” I grabbed her boot. “Would you stay where you are? We're safe. Stop. Ow! Gods damn it! Your powers are fading; there's nothing you can do!”

She stopped struggling and in the twilight I could see her peer down at me between the branches. “They're not!” Her foot stomped the branch she was standing on, shedding more needles on top of me. “They're not, do you hear me? They're not, they're not, they're n...” Her expression fell, her brow folding beneath the pressure of some quaking emotion. My mouth fell open when she pressed a hand to her face, hiding her eyes as she began to sob hysterically. Shocked, I listened to her and the bear howl together in a bizarre kind of harmony.

“It... it'll be okay.” I reached up and awkwardly patted her foot. “We'll get your belt back.” Artemis sucked in a trembling breath and proceeded to cry even louder. Not to be outdone, the she-bear yowled again. I let out a sigh and rested my chin on my hand, bracing it on a convenient limb. “Go ahead. Let it out. I think we're going to be here for a while...”

Stuck in one place again, I realized. Hopefully Xena was faring better than us...

* * *

XI. It's Always Darkest before It's Pitch Black

“Hey, it happens to everyone, one time or another,” Autolycus comforted.

We were standing on the pebble dusted edge of a narrow river. The tracks had been easy to follow for the most part, pressing on into the west through the woods. Outside of an occasional bird diving for our heads, things had been quiet and I had tracked our belt-thief (a female, medium height, lightly shod, I might add) through the underbrush. Then we hit the river and I lost the tracks. That was half a candle-mark ago and I still hadn't picked them up. Even the spill of water sounded like it was laughing at me.

The King of Thieves continued to moonlight as an adviser. “Take a deep breath, try to relax and it'll come back to you.”

“Why's everyone always telling me to take a deep breath?” I asked, temper flaring. “It's not breathing I'm having trouble with.”

I paced along the riverbank staring down at the same ground, all of it blank and unreadable. In spite of the settling dusk the temperature was still uncomfortably hot, and it wasn't helping my frame of mind any that I was sweating like an ox. I shrugged inside my armor, trying to ignore the feverish sensation. It was a small mercy that the trees of the forest reached out across the river, joining branches with their kin on the other side and keeping the banks in a cool shade.

Autolycus moved in beside me, looking down at the same stretch of bank I was. “Okay, well, let's think back now,” he said, rubbing his moustache. “The tracks were strong and headed toward the river and you say you lost them somewhere just over there.” He pointed into the forest just behind us. “Yes, well, and there doesn't seem to be any tracks leading to the river, you say? Hmm...they just seem to disappear...that is definitely out of the ordinary...very peculiar... peculiar indeed...just disappear—”

“They're not the only thing that'll just disappear if you don't shut it and let me think.” His nattering was starting to get to me.

“Okay, okay. Sorry.” He crossed his arms and stared at the ground again. Soon, his foot began to tap. Although it was easily one of the most difficult tasks of the day, I managed to ignore it and continued to try and find something, anything that would help. Autolycus began tapping lightly on some rocks. The tapping grew into full-on drumming.

I shot him one of my glares. He stopped with a sheepish shrug. “Heh. Sorry.”

I narrowed my eyes back to the pebbles and stones of the bank. Not a rock out of place. In the woods at the edge, the tracks seemed to vanish into thin air.

Beside me, Autolycus began to whistle, and not even a tune, just random whistles, each one like tiny pin pricks in my skull. He carried on, the whistles growing louder and louder. I had to do something, before he made me hurt him.

“Hey, chirpy.” I stood up. “I'm doing this for you, y'know? The guy who's in trouble with a Goddess? Big, bad Autolycus, the world renowned King of Thieves who goes

around and stumbles into the biggest score in history since the Golden Fleece and certainly in *his* insignificant little life?"

"Xena I—"

"Then he goes and tromps off into the woods—with no clue what he had in his grimy little hands, I might add—and lets some little girl come and whack him on the head and take it."

"A... *girl*?" Autolycus looked hurt. "Listen there must have been at least two... well... hmm..." He looked embarrassed. "A girl, huh?"

My anger somewhat spent, I began to feel a little guilty. "Well, maybe not a girl, but a woman. That's what these tracks are saying. Well, *were* saying until I lost them." There was something in my throat as I ended that sentence, so I turned away to clear it out.

Autolycus looked into the river. "Some of those slaver women are tough as Carthaginian leather...plus, I wasn't paying attention—" He turned toward me. "Hey, come on, Xena. Look, who cares if we lost the tracks." He cautiously placed his hand on my shoulder letting it settle with a tentative weight. "Listen; there are three things a thief has to be good at: sneaking, running and leaping. Now, you can take these essential skills literally of course, but you can also think of them as figurative attributes as well."

I smiled. "Becoming a philosopher in your old age?"

He shook his head. "Only better looking." He chuckled. "As I was saying, we don't have any idea where the tracks are, but we do know which way they were headed, right?" He stopped. I blinked at him. He seemed frustrated. "Right?" he asked again.

I scowled at him. "Right."

"So then we make a leap—of logic as it were—and assume that the...uhm...slaver queen kept on in the same direction—"

"Across the river." I finished. Of course, that was it.

"See? A leap." Autolycus grinned proudly.

I looked up into the overhanging branches. "Exactly." I pointed up and smiled. "A leap."

Autolycus whistled. "Thieves' highway, huh?"

Something about it sat wrong with me, but there was no time. "Come on, this isn't over yet. Maybe we can get to the slaver camp before nightfall."

Beyond the river, the forest thickened as tall pines interlaced with the thick rooted oaks and elms we had encountered before. While I never found the tracks of our quarry, we soon came upon what were obviously the tracks of other slavers. At the tops of hills we were able to watch the rusty line of sunset shrink on the horizon.

Slowing our pace to a stealthy crawl, we came upon the camp just before nightfall. Spread out across a shallow valley, there were about twenty-five tents and four main

campfires. At the four outlying corners tall torches flickered, casting orange light onto the forest and the ground. In the light, shapes could be seen moving about and voices carried off high into the falling dark.

Just away from the center of the camp was a large pen. There were poles covered with chains, cages, rocks—the standard slaver set up. Although, there didn't seem to be any slaves about. Probably lucky for these guys, now I wouldn't have to come back and break up this little get-together. Not until after the festival, anyway.

I watched the comings and goings. It was dinner and most in the camp were eating at the center of things. There seemed to be women among the men, dining and carrying on just the same. I spotted a woman who seemed to fit the size requirements of our belt thief, although it was hard to be certain from this distance. She entered a tent near the center of the camp.

“I think I found her,” I said.

“Now what?” Autolycus asked.

“What was the first thing that thieves are supposed to be good at?”

“Sneaking?” He didn't look happy about it. “Right. Well, if we have to.”

I smiled. “We could always head back to the Amazons and they could have your head on a stake by morning.”

“Hey, I didn't say I wasn't going to sneak in there,” he said. “I just thought you might afford me the professional courtesy of complaining a little. You know: I complain a little, you grunt in that charming sort of way warriors of your caliber do, then I shrug or sigh or both and we get the job done.”

I shrugged and grunted.

He smiled. “Y'see, *now* we're getting somewhere.” He sighed dramatically. “I guess there's nothing to be done except what needs to be done.” He winked and we moved down into the valley.

Getting into the camp wasn't that difficult. The slavers had a pretty lax perimeter guard system that was easy to penetrate. We slipped by when the two guards passed and ducked into the shadows behind a tent.

Now came the hard part; staying unnoticed. Saving the boring details, we managed to slip into the center of the camp and right up to the flap of the thief's tent. Autolycus listened at the entrance. “She's not here,” he whispered.

“Okay, let's get in there, get the belt and get out of here.”

Autolycus nodded. “I couldn't agree with you more.” He gestured at the flap. “Brains before beauty,” he said, bowing.

I scowled before entering. Inside we found what you might expect in a slaver's tent. Gaudy cushions. Exotic animal skin bedding. Brass lamps. Whips. Autolycus entered and immediately set about looking for secret compartments and hiding places while I checked the more obvious nooks and crannies. Nothing, belt-shaped or otherwise

seemed to be turning up. That got me to thinking. “Any luck?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“None,” Autolycus replied. “Actually...just bad.”

I chuckled as I thought things out. It was the branches over the river that got me thinking.

“Uhm...Xena...” Autolycus wouldn't shut up.

“Shh.”

“Xena...really...I think you should...”

I turned around ready to throw one of the slavers' tacky knick-knacks at his head, when I saw what he was twittering about. In the doorway stood the woman we had seen moving through the camp, another of the slavers' tacky knick-knacks perhaps. She had a crossbow aimed at the King of Thieves who stood tight-lipped in the corner and her eyes were fixed on me.

“Which of the three skills covers this situation?” I asked.

Autolycus shrugged. “The unwritten fourth one: surrendering...” He raised his hands.

I know what you're thinking, and I thought it too at this point—why didn't Xena wait outside and guard the door? Good question. I blame the belt.

Sighing, I raised my hands.

* * *

XII. Nymphomania

Sitting in the tree, I had ample time to consider the unreality of the exchange Artemis and I had shared just before the bear had nearly taken her head off. “Okay, think it through,” I muttered to myself, trying not to disturb Artemis who had finally quieted down in the branches above me.

I was still mystified by my reaction earlier, by my inaction and by that curious sensation of teetering on the edge of something remarkably dangerous and wrong. Even more than that was the vague sense of shame I felt that I had never even given Xena a thought the whole time. I felt as though I had betrayed her by not trying harder to resist—whatever it was Artemis had intended. The blush warmed my cheeks. There was no denying it; I knew what she had wanted and some part of me had been flattered by it, attracted to her passion—for the future of the Amazons and, more still, for her interest in me.

It was like something had come over me—a spell—and I had stood there when now, in a calmer moment, I knew I'd never have willingly behaved like that. Or so I'd hope. *The belt*. It must have been tied to the loss of Artemis' belt. More uncharacteristic behavior. *What am I going to do?* It seemed that I was unable to control myself when such moments occurred. I hated the loss of control and the feeling of being unable to change things even when I realized what was happening. It was a window of insight into Xena's earlier crying jag.

Xena . I looked off into the distance down the ridge and wondered how she was faring. *Hopefully better than us.*

A mournful and dispirited whine broke the air and I glanced towards the ledge in time to see the bear shake itself and lumber away. “Finally.” I waited a few more minutes to make sure it was gone and was about to reach up for Artemis when the goddess lowered herself quietly to the same limb I was standing on.

“We will return to the village now.”

Whatever loss of composure she had suffered earlier, there was no sign of it now. The hardness was back in her face and reflected in her eyes. The stoniness had returned. A little wary of this return to form, I followed after her.

“Are... is everything okay?” I wound my way down awkwardly with my staff in one hand.

“Yes, thank you for asking.”

So formal. *So uptight* , I could imagine Xena saying. “You know, it's okay to be upset and scared. You've probably never been through something—”

Artemis took hold of the rocky crag and I could see her faced turned up towards me, tight and fierce. “I am *not* scared.”

I hesitated for only a moment and then continued lowered myself to the slope. “But you *are* upset.”

“Ga-bri-elle.”

It's funny how when that certain level of annoyed frustration is reached everyone winds up pronouncing my name the exact same way. I swung myself down the last few feet, hoping she wasn't going to be in the frame of mind to smite me; she'd been known to do that, after all. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“It is entirely preposterous that a mortal should be seeking to counsel *me* ,” she said as she turned away and began climbing back up to the ledge.

“Well, ex- *cuse* me,” I muttered under my breath as I followed after her. I was starting to miss her romantic side at this rate. Conversation was suspended for a short time as we made our way back up the rocky side of the ledge. She climbed nimbly up the rock face and paused at the top to turn and offer me her hand. For the second time that day, I let her take my hand and I felt the strength of her grip and saw it in the subtle lines of muscle that announced themselves as she pulled me up and onto more solid ground.

Leaving me to brush away the pine needles and dirt, she walked a few feet away and dropped to her haunches, her eyes riveted to the tracks on the ground. Her piercing eyes followed the trail and I watched her head lift looking for all the world as if she were testing the scents on the air. In all the surprise of Artemis losing her belt and her powers, I'd nearly forgotten her prowess as a huntress, and her connection with animals. “What is it?”

“She's headed off towards the river. For easier pickings, I imagine.” Artemis stood up smoothly and brushed her hands together. “We'll have to take a slightly different route

back to the village. It'll take longer, but we'll arrive not long after true dark."

Given the attitude of the bear, I certainly didn't mind. "That's all right. We'll find a way to pass the time." I tried not to notice how she looked less than enthused. "Why don't you tell me more about the belt?"

I hadn't seen anyone look that conflicted since Xena silently debated the merits of leaving me in a pirate port town versus the danger in bringing me along to clean out some especially hoary, hideous and cruel bad guy. I think it was the silver-toothed seadog who started a bidding war on me right there in the tavern in front of Xena that decided her. I'm sure I could have dealt with it. I mean, how much trouble could I really have gotten into? But never mind that. Artemis was looking torn; I could imagine that the last thing she wanted to think about was her loss of divine powers, but then, what else was likely occupying her thoughts at this point? She seemed to have gotten over the bear pretty quickly.

"We'll get your belt back, you know." I offered her a smile. "I'll bet Xena has it already."

Artemis' jaw tightened. "I pray your faith in your friend is justified."

"It is. She's amazing. I've never seen anyone who can do the things she does."

"She is not immortal."

I found it curious that Artemis felt she had to remind me of that. "I know; but that's what makes her so incredible."

"She's flawed and full of anger," she pointed out. "She's dangerous." Her shoulders shifted and she looked away, muttering so I could barely hear, "She is unworthy of you."

"Wait." I put my hand on her arm, stopping us in the middle of the path. "Everything you said is true. Except the last part." I moved to face her full on. "Why do you hate her so much?" "Hate" seemed like such a strong word, but given Artemis' reaction to Xena...

She lifted her chin and gazed down on me, stern and pitying, and suddenly far, far older than she appeared. "You mistake me if you think that."

And with that, she started off down the path, leaving me staring after her until I realized I was being left behind in the gathering shadows.

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It was perhaps another candle-mark before conversation resumed and by that point even I could tell we were getting close to the village. After the day I'd had—was it only this morning we'd had the problems with the fish and the crows?—I was more than ready for some rest.

Artemis peered into the sky towards the thickening moon now visible between the tree trunks. "Do you know of my nymphs, Gabrielle?"

I nodded, hesitantly. "They celebrate your rites and mysteries, don't they?"

“Indeed. Their dances and devotions celebrate the changing of the seasons, the cycle of life, and our place in it. From time-to-time I even choose a mortal woman to join them.”

“A great honor,” I murmured.

“Yes.” Artemis nodded and clasped her hands behind her back as we walked. “But I don’t choose just anyone. The woman must *be* a woman; innocence has its place, but one ushered through the rites into womanhood is more open to all its mysteries. But they must be virgins.” Her voice bore no room for compromise. “I will have none that have sullied themselves, dallying about with men.”

“But, what about mothers? Married women?” Her opinions seemed unreasonably harsh to me.

“Let them appeal to Aphrodite or Demeter. I have no use for such as they that have known the touch of men.”

“You may be missing out, you know. Virginity’s sort of overrated.”

She gave a hard laugh. “Nonsense. There is magic and power to be found in the tremulous point of suspension between the innocence of childhood and the fulfillment of marital duty. It is the culmination of purity and knowledge for the purposes of achieving higher goals.”

Sounds convoluted. I’m sure Xena would have rolled her eyes and suggested that maybe Artemis should get some and then re-evaluate her position. “Only a few are chosen, huh?”

I felt her eyes graze over me. “You know... you could easily—”

My hands whipped up in front of me, stopping her in mid-word. “Oh no! No, no, no. I, uh, I’m not one for dancing.” Obviously Artemis must have missed my first forays in dancing as an Amazon Princess. “Besides,” I continued blithely, “I’m not a virgin.”

Artemis stopped and stared at me in horrified shock and dismay. “No...”

“Yes.” I nodded. “But I was married at the time, just so you know.”

She pressed a hand to her chest. “You jest with me.”

“Nope.” *She’s not going to pass out, is she?* “Maybe you should put your head betwe—”

“But you’re so young! So innocent! So... so...”

“So unqualified to be a nymph,” I finished for her gently, adding a smile to soften the blow.

Her shoulders slumped almost comically and I tightened my jaw, trying to avoid laughing at her shattered illusion. She wore her disappointment like a heavy cloak, her steps now slow and plodding. “C’mon, it’s not that bad.” I paused, thinking of the upcoming ceremony. And the dancing. “Is it?”

Artemis let out a sigh and kept walking. “Do you wish to see the nymphs dance in the

moonlight with me?” From the tone of her voice I got the impression that she almost wished I wouldn't.

“Um, it's been a long day and... I should probably get back to the village. Xe—see if Ephiny's been looking for me.” Whew. She didn't seem to notice my slip.

“As you will.” She gestured off to our left. “The village is just over the rise. I will meet with you in the morning.”

“Um. G'night.” I waved at her retreating back, feeling bad that I'd apparently let her down so badly, even if it wasn't my fault. I nibbled my lower lip, wondering what to do, but just standing there I thought I could see, off in the distance between the trees, small, pale figures moving with beautiful grace in the moonlight. Mesmerized, I drank in their movements, watching how the pale blue light of the moon caressed the dancers' skin, their youthful forms and faces a harlequin of soft light and shadow. A change in the direction of the evening breeze brought an ethereal tune to me; the trill of a flute became another player in their dance, a welcomed partner, as they dipped and spun lightly and joyously through their glade.

The wind changed again and all was rendered silent and I blinked, separated from their dance even as I saw Artemis join them.

Regretfully I turned my steps towards the village and left Artemis to the solace of her dancers.

In only a matter of a few minutes, I found myself back in the village proper. My stomach rumbled at the lingering smell of the cook-fires; I couldn't remember when I last ate. But first things first. I nodded greetings with various inhabitants and visitors as I made my way back to my temporary hut, only to find it dimly lit and empty.
Where could she be?

Feeling a worm of worry niggling through my gut, I went in search of Ephiny, eventually discovering her speaking with a visiting queen. Catching her eye, she quickly excused herself to join me apart from the others.

“Where have you been!” she demanded in an undertone.

“Artemis and I had a run-in with a bear. We, um, had to take a roundabout route. Look, have you heard from Xena? She and Autolycus were looking into some tracks they found, but I thought they'd be back hours ago.”

“A bear? Do I even want to know?” She sighed. “I haven't heard she'd returned, but then it's so crazy here Hera could show up and I probably wouldn't know that either.”

This was bad. Xena wouldn't be late returning unless something serious had come up or she had gotten into trouble. *Time to go and find out which one it is.* “Gather up a small war party for me. Quietly, okay?”

“No way. You can't go haring off to look for her, Gabrielle. You're the queen; you need to be the one rubbing elbows with the other queens or else they're going to suspect something's wrong. They keep asking me when you're going to show up.”

I winced knowing she was right. I couldn't afford to cast even the slightest bit of doubt on our ability to carry off Brauronia this year. “Then I need you to go find her. She

was heading towards the slavers' camp when we separated.”

Ephiny looked doubtful. “You don't think she can take care of herself?”

“Will you go look for her for me?” I was totally evading the question, but then Xena's ability to look after herself wasn't the point. “She's late and I want to know what happened to her.”

“Gabrielle, there's tons to do—”

“Please?”

“Fine.” She scrubbed a frustrated hand through her curls and gave me a look. “You know, I'm still totally up in the air over which of you causes me more trouble.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” But she was already striding away, muttering heatedly under her breath. The wind just happened to carry some of it back to me. “And no! For your information Xena is *not* ‘whipped!’”

I turned away and stopped abruptly, discovering way too many pairs of eyes staring back at me, wide-eyed, at my general announcement. I tried to smile.

Xena was going to kill me.

* * *

XIII. Three's Company, Too

“Now, I know what you're thinking, but,” Autolycus began his standard caught-in-the-act disclaimer, “this isn't what it looks like.”

The woman took a step further into the tent, her eyes (and the crossbow) moving between the King of Thieves and me. There wasn't enough of an opening to lay into her with the chakram, but I was patient.

She raised an eyebrow at Autolycus. “You're *not* ransacking my tent?”

“Uhm...well...I guess it *is* what you're thinking, b-but it's not *why* you're thinking.”

“You're obviously looking for a specific item,” the slaver ‘queen’ said with self-satisfaction. “Otherwise you wouldn't have overlooked the Persian coins, those daggers and the pillows.”

“Heh. You're good at this.” Autolycus glanced my way for help. “Xena, why don't you tell this lovely lady why we're here.”

“We're looking for a belt,” I said. “It belongs to a *friend* of ours. We think you have it.”

“Xe-na,” Autolycus grumbled.

It's funny how when that certain level of annoyed frustration is reached, everyone winds up pronouncing my name the exact same way. I was beginning to think the slavers didn't have the belt—and never did—so I figured I could prove my growing suspicions by taking the direct route.

The woman pouted and moved further into the room, toward Autolycus. Her hips rocked sensually as she did. “Such a shame to lose one's belt,” she purred. She leaned in close to the increasingly flabbergasted King of Thieves. Her breathing was ragged, shallow. “It leaves one in a position where *anything* could happen...”

With an impressive speed, not to mention dexterity, the slaver yanked at Autolycus' belt, untying it and allowing his breeches to drop.

I've been all over the world, I've seen a lot of strange and wondrous things, but I've never seen a man switch from such a bright shade of red to such a pale shade of white and back again.

Also, I had never seen undergarments in that particular style before. “I guess that answers the boxers or briefs question...” I mumbled.

Poor Autolycus; to his credit he tried to carry on. “B-beautiful *and* quick with her hands,” he stammered. “Well, aren't you a keeper.”

She growled then pushed him backward onto the pillows. He spilled among them, pants around his ankles. “Direct, too. It gets better and better...” he quipped.

As I was about to end this little scene with a well-placed throw of the chakram, the woman turned on me. I would be lying if I said that I wasn't expecting this. What did surprise me was the look in her eyes. It was the same smoldering, longing, out-of-control look she had leveled against Autolycus.

“Your armor.” She gestured at me with the weapon. “Take it off.”

“Now just a second...” Autolycus began, trying to be chivalrous, I suppose—an impossibility when your pants are around your ankles, but an A for effort.

The slaver snarled at him, never moving her eyes from me. He closed his mouth.

I shrugged and began removing the fastenings of my wrist-guards. It seemed like the belt was having its affect on more than just animals and Amazons. If I could draw this out, I thought I might be able to distract her long enough to find an opening. She licked her full lips as I let the armor fall to the floor, her big green eyes blinking slowly, catching the light of the torches, which cast a sensual orange glow on the exposed skin of her thighs, arms, her abdomen...

Bad Xena...

Clearing my throat, I had to stay focused. I went for my upper arm guards and she shook the crossbow at me. “Leave those,” she said. “The boots. Then the breastplate.”

“Y'know,” the pant-less Autolycus yapped from the pillows, “we don't even know your name.”

“Iskra.” She rolled the ‘r’ off her tongue, watching me remove my breastplate.

“Well, *Iskra*, we're both really flattered—”

I shot him a look as I dropped my boots to the floor.

“Okay,” he corrected. “*I'm* very flattered but this is all—while proving without

question how gracious a host you can be—very sudden and—”

“Shut up!” Both Iskra and I ordered. She smiled then motioned to the pillows as I dropped my breastplate to the ground. I shuffled over to them. To her credit, the moon-crazed slaver chick didn't leave herself open to any attack as I walked by. I sat on the cushions—for all their gaudiness, they weren't very comfortable.

“You can get out of that armor really quick, can't you?” Autolycus smirked.

I gestured at his underwear. “Nice...whatever those are.”

“Hey! These are the cutting edge of style, I'll have you know. Very popular in Corinth this year—”

Iskra inhaled languidly, interrupting our whispered sparring. She drew in deeply, closing her eyes and beginning to sway back and forth. Soon, she began to gyrate and dance. She began to gyrate and dance and remove her jewelry and clothes, running her fingers across her skin.

Autolycus' mouth fell open. “Uh...sh-shouldn't we do something?”

“I think we won't have much of a choice in a minute.”

“Oh, uh...well...I'm sure Gabrielle will understand, given the situation...”

Before I could ask what the Hades *that* was supposed to mean, there was a throaty sigh of pleasure from Iskra. The woman was completely caught up in the belt's mumbo jumbo, moaning, half-naked, her hips writhing. While it all had a certain trashy appeal, we needed to get out of here.

“I guess this has gone on long enough,” I said and swept my leg into hers spilling her onto the bed between Autolycus and I. Before I could knock her unconscious, the King of Thieves brought one of those cheap brass lamps out from behind his back and into the front of Iskra's head with a clang. She passed out amidst us.

Autolycus shrugged, indicating his current state of undress. “More than just some pretty legs, huh?”

I got up and moved for my breastplate. “We need to get back to the Amazon village,” I said as I started to collect my clothes.

Autolycus tried to get up then looked at me blankly. “Huh? Back? Why? What about the belt?”

Where in Hellas is my right wrist-guard? “The slavers don't have it.” My breastplate was half on and I was having trouble lacing up my boots. On the bed, the bare-breasted Iskra continued to writhe and purr and moan even in unconsciousness. *That is some belt ...*

“They don't?” Autolycus had just stood up and began to pull up his pants. “Then who does?”

“Iskra?” a voice came from the tent's opening. “ISKRA!”

I suppose I would have made the same mistake the slaver “king” made if I had seen

what he had as he entered the tent—Autolyclus bouncing up and down on one leg trying to get his breeches up; me with one boot half-laced and the rest of me spilling out of my leather skirt; and poor, half-naked Iskra groaning and rolling in ecstasy on those ugly pillows. Well, I would have made the same mistake, but I'd like to think that my eyes wouldn't have bulged out in such an undignified manner, or at the very least not have my skin fall into a shade akin to ripe grapes. "Guards!" he yelled as he drew his sword.

"Aw, for the love of Zeus," Autolyclus groaned.

I sighed, getting ready to fight with one boot on. "I hate that friggin' belt."

* * *

XIV. An Ounce of Prevention...

We all stared at one another and I could feel my body temperature rise to a mortified inferno. A drunken giggle was immediately cut off by the sharp crack of a fist meeting flesh, followed by the sound of a body falling heavily to the ground.

"As you were." My voice was high and tight and I could only blush harder as I quickly backpedaled and retreated towards the half-shadows beneath the eaves of the communal kitchen where I began pacing restlessly. "Stupid, stupid, stupid." I smacked my forehead repeatedly for punctuation, unable to believe I'd said that in front of more than half the fully assembled Nation. The sewing circle back in Poteidaia had been bad enough; how much gossip could a group of women a hundred times that size get up to? The answer stopped me in my tracks. "Oh gods; Xena's gonna kill me. A lot." Where's a rampaging, power-hungry Amazon god or blonde, psychotic, homicidal maniac when you really need to be put out of your misery in a hurry? "Where is that lava pit again?"

"What?"

"Oh!" I jumped, startled by the appearance of two lithe warriors, both equipped with swords, ridged and decoratively beaded chobos and short bows. Arrow fletchings bristled at their waists in combinations of white and black feathers, the quivers looking worn, but well cared-for. They could have been twins, but for the dark brown hair of one contrasted by the amber red of the other. Sisters, perhaps?

"Sorry, your majesty."

The dark one didn't look too sorry. I tried to regain my composure, tucking my hair back behind my ears. "Ephiny sent you over?"

They nodded.

"I don't remember seeing either of you the last time I was here. What're your names?"

"Mia," the dark-haired woman replied shortly as she adjusted the scabbard on her back, looking as though there was some place else she preferred to be.

"Dimitra, your majesty," the other woman said, smiling shyly. She bobbed her head in a little bow. Mia followed suit belatedly. "We came from Pelos late last year."

“Pelos? Isn't that somewhere in the valley outside the forest?”

Dimitra nodded.

“Warlords?” It wasn't an uncommon reason for women to find their way into the Nation. War, floods, a bad situation... the Amazons held those born outside to high standards—I thought about my introduction and acknowledged a few exceptions—so I knew these two women had likely passed any number of trials to get where they were now, that Ephiny would trust them to see this task done for me.

Mia snorted and gave me an unreadable look before directing her gaze towards the fire and all the women gathered there, talking and drinking and getting friendlier than one might expect in the wash of firelight.

Dimitra glared at her and then gave me an apologetic look. “No. We... were looking for a different life than what we could find in our village.”

I smiled at her, understanding completely. “You're happier now?”

“Oh, much!” Dimitra fairly gushed. “The weapons-master, Eponin, she scared me pretty badly at first, but I like her now. The Regent... she just seems to be everywhere at once, watching us, you know?”

“Staring, if you ask me,” Mia muttered.

Dimitra glared at her again before turning back to me. “Never mind her, your majesty. She's just got a burr under her saddle.”

“Oh?” I gave Mia my full attention. “Something you want to talk about? I'm a pretty good listener.”

The warrior's face hardened. “Nothing I would trouble you with.” She paused. “Your majesty.” She returned to her moody observation of the lively goings-on.

Mia seemed pricklier than the situation warranted. In fact, she seemed downright insubordinate. I wish I knew why. I made a mental note to mention her to Xena. Her reticence and demeanor were making me suspicious. In the meanwhile, I turned my attention back to Dimitra. “So you've settled in all right?”

“It's been hard,” she admitted. “It's taken a while to fit in, but I'm finding some friends now. I'm starting to understand things; the rules and the traditions...”

“There's enough of them, aren't there?” I nodded at her, thinking of my own feelings of being overwhelmed when Ephiny first introduced me to the ways and means of being an Amazon.

Dimitra shook her hair away from her face and smiled back at me, her shyness appearing to ease. “I thought Solari was going to beat me with a scroll case, she was getting so frustrated. I want to do well. It's all been amazing. And now you're here, and—and Xena, and I can't believe we're actually seeing Artemis!”

Mia shook her head and snorted.

I couldn't hold back any longer. “Mind telling me your problem?”

“She's practically in love with her.” Mia hitched a thumb over her shoulder towards the moonlit grove.

In love with who? Xena? Well, I could underst —

“I am not!” Dimitra hauled off and punched Mia in the shoulder, showing her—sister? friend?—a disapproving frown. “You're just upset because—”

“You're nothing but a silly girl, Di. She's self-centered and full of herself. She doesn't even know we exist.”

Ah. Artemis. Of course. Silly of me. “That's not true,” I said, keeping my tone light and calm. “Artemis is well aware of her people. She cares a great deal for the Nation and the women in it.” Mia's evident dislike, truthful or not, put me even further on my guard.

“And your majesty would know,” Mia said, her tone on the knife's edge between agreement and sarcasm. She turned away again.

“Ignore her,” Dimitra advised as she stood up, having noticed that Ephiny, also armed to her teeth, was approaching with another three warriors in tow. “I think they're beautiful. The nymphs, I mean.” She smiled at me and then looked wistfully towards the trees and the sacred grove. “They're so lovely when they dance.”

I looked back towards the darkened woods where I had left the goddess moving in time to some silent music and couldn't help but agree. If it weren't for the necessary politics tonight, I wouldn't have minded going back to watch them myself. *What?* I took a shaky breath and tried to eradicate the odd sensation of disappointment and longing I felt in not being able to join them. The influence of the missing belt was becoming far more pervasive, it seemed. *Wow, that was weird.*

“We're ready, Gabrielle,” Ephiny said without preamble. “Shawna and Dimitra here were with the war party that came in after chasing off the slavers, so she can lead us back to where Autolycus was found by Artemis.”

Shawna gave me a feral, but friendly grin, her lean muscles shifting visibly as she dropped the length of a studded chobo onto her shoulder. She exchanged some odd look with Mia, who sneered and looked away again. The sight of the iron studs in the chobo design reminded me of Autolycus' injury and from the look of Shawna's physique she could have easily been a match for him, especially if he hadn't seen her coming. I glanced around the group, realizing that at this rate I was going to wind up suspecting half the Nation.

“I'll take them out myself,” Ephiny went on, having missed the looks. “We'll see if we can pick up Xena's tracks by the river.” Ephiny adjusted a piece of shoulder armor and gave the others a nod. “Pick up some flint and tinder for torches if we need them and wait for me by the east post. We'll leave from there. Now move.” I watched as they obeyed her with alacrity, even Mia.

“You're so good at that.” I watched as they jogged away, falling into a loose formation as they went.

“What? Telling people what to do?”

I nodded. "Yeah. Maybe you should be queen."

Ephiny gave me a sympathetic look. "Too late for you to chicken out now. You go schmooze and I'll go look for Xena."

"You get all the fun."

"And here I was going to say the same thing." She gave me a knowing look. "Stay out of trouble."

"Did Xena tell you to say that?"

"I've got enough sense of my own to say it. Don't forget; I've seen you in action."

I crossed my arms and blew out a breath. "Why do you always think I'm going to find trouble?"

"Name me one time you've been here that you haven't."

"Hey, last time was Xena's fault! I just went along for the ride."

"Trick sarcophagus riding. I remember." Ephiny dropped a hand on my shoulder and leaned closer. "I'll find her for you, Gabrielle. I promise." Her voice was gentle, sincere, and I could see the understanding in her eyes. She knew. The assurance given, she shook me lightly "Now, get back out there; the Nation needs its queen." She released me and began trotting away.

"Be careful!" I called.

She turned around and pointed at me. "The village better be standing when I get back." And then she turned and jogged away, leaving me to deal with the Nation, its goddess and a deepening mystery with no apparent solution. I looked to the moon and realized how little time we had left and wondered what would become of us all if we failed to find the belt in time.

* * *

XV. Valley of the Ultra Vixens

"This isn't what it looks like." Once again, Autolycus finished up his caught-in-the-act disclaimer, which was actually true for once, as he did his best to pull his leather breeches up over that undergarment sideshow he was wearing.

The slaver—one of those big, longhaired, angry types Gabrielle would die for—pointed his sword at the King of Thieves. "I'm gonna kill you first," he said and started for the hopping thief.

"No sense in waiting, I guess," Autolycus groaned.

I swung one of my boots at the slaver's blade, knocking it aside and stopping the big ox in his tracks. "You're not killing anyone," I said. "And we didn't lay a hand on your girlfriend over there."

"Or anything else," Autolycus chimed in.

I shot him a look. "The point is: we didn't touch her."

Iskra groaned in her "sleep," squeezing her thighs closed, biting her plump, pouty lip in some kind of sweet and far off ecstasy that was probably the cause of the slow and steady writhing of her hips...

Bad Xena .

The unconscious woman reached for Autolycus' still bare leg, tugging lovingly on it. He looked down at her and then back to the slaver in horror. "Oh dear," he mumbled.

The slaver roared in anger, lunging again at the hapless, half-naked thief. I used my boot to parry and swung it for his head, just to let him know I was the one he should be paying attention to.

I decided that, for the moment, the best I could do was collect my clothes and worry about putting them on as I went. Only problem was, I still couldn't find that pesky right wrist guard. It's my favorite one, too.

Brandishing my left boot, I gave the slaver my best glare—the one that I secretly call *Badass* . "Now, the smart move would be to just let us go."

"My guardsmen are on the way," he snarled. "You'll never ex-cape."

Autolycus looked at me and mouthed: "ex-cape?"

I was getting angry to say the least. "Look, buddy, we didn't touch—"

Iskra moaned again and rolled onto her stomach, arching her back slightly; the entire display culminating in a prolonged, stuttering, and admittedly enviable, ecstatic convulsion.

I rolled my eyes. "Aw, for the love of Achilles," I grouched and swung at "lover boy" with my errant footwear. We exchanged some swings and I started worrying that my boots might not make it out of this one.

Autolycus, freed from Iskra's passionate grip, still struggled with his pants. As he finally pulled them up, his frustration got the better of him and he started to taunt the slaver. "You know how it is, pal; backwoods girl comes across a couple of high rollers from the big city and gets all starry-eyed and wrapped up in the glitz and glam." He grinned. "You just gotta get used to it."

Breaking away from my boot, the slaver took a swing at Autolycus who dropped to the pillows and fully into the embrace of the unconscious, though no less randy Iskra. She locked onto him like a hound on a soup bone.

"Even *I* know I'm not *this* charming," Autolycus exclaimed as he wriggled in the woman's amorous grip.

I gave a reluctant laugh of agreement as I whacked the slaver in the side of the head

with my boot.

He fell to his knees. "Guards! Guards!! Where are my guards?" He was getting upset, desperate. "You can't ex-cape."

As I brought my boot down to finish him, he rolled at my legs, looking to take them out from under me. I hopped over him without trouble, but he brought the pommel of his sword down on the top of my foot—my *bare* foot.

Have you ever experienced that excruciating pain when you smack your toe into a table-leg or chair? Or the fiery sting of scalding hot water if you spill some an especially tender part of you? Well, take those and multiply by ten thousand. I think I saw stars. Whole constellations. I know I fell to the floor beside the pillowy area where Autolycus rolled around with Iskra, all feet tangled and twisted together, clutching my throbbing foot and letting out a groan between my tightly bared teeth.

It was in that instant, my foot feeling completely ruined, I discovered for sure the slavers didn't have, and never had, Artemis' belt—but I'll get to that in a minute.

Having to move fast, I rolled onto my back and used my non-smashed leg to kick the quickly descending slaver in the face. He fell over some tacky statue of a dog or jackal or something and spilled onto his stomach. As I got to my feet, my foot somehow hurt worse, but I could still walk on it. From what I understand about these things, that's a good sign. I pounced (well, dropped) onto him. Just as I was about to knock him out, I pulled up. "Oh, and it's *ess* -cape," I said and punched him in the back of the head.

I got to my feet and limped over to the cushions. Rolling Iskra off the King of Thieves was somewhat difficult (for someone who was supposed to be out cold, the lady had quite the leg strength), but I managed to do it. I smiled down at Autolycus. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were enjoying that."

He winked. "Just another of the many sacrifices one makes to not be a sacrifice, I suppose."

We dressed quietly, all the while expecting a troop of guards to jump through the tent flap at any moment. Meanwhile, Iskra dreamed not-so-quietly away on the pillows. Time went on and still no guards.

"We need to get out of here," I said as I laced up my boot, encasing my now swelling foot.

Autolycus looked around. "Hey, where are that guy's guards anyway? Talk about a bunch of slackers, huh?"

I crouched low and peeked out the front of the tent. The coast seemed clear, so we made our way through the sleeping camp, checking for slavers then moving to the next hiding spot. This carried on uneventfully as we headed for the western edge of the encampment.

When we crossed near the center of the camp, our questions about the missing guardsmen were answered. Writhing and laughing black forms arced across the

flickering fires. Much like Iskra, the slaver women had succumbed to the spell of the belt and were carrying on and dancing and cavorting in various states of undress with the guards.

I smirked. "I guess I wouldn't attend to my duties either."

Autolycus was wide-eyed. "Guh."

"We have to get back to the amazons." He didn't move. I hit him. "Hey!"

I dragged him out of the camp and into the woods. We moved stealthily and as quickly as we could in the forest's darkness for a half candle-mark before we came to a stop.

We were back at the riverbank. Autolycus smiled at me. "I won't say anything about what happened back there, if you won't?"

"You're crazy if you think I'm not telling anyone about that underwear of yours."

"All right, all right, we can talk terms after all of this. And speaking of after all of this—" He stroked his moustache thoughtfully, "—how were you so sure the slavers didn't take the belt? We only searched one tent?"

"The slavers didn't make the tracks we followed," I said. "As I was beating up the jealous boyfriend for you—"

"Hey!"

"—I noticed his footwear. I noticed your girlfriend's too."

"Seriously, Xena—"

"The slavers are from somewhere marshy, probably far to the north, probably Germania or somewhere like that," I said. "They wear reed sandals, probably because they're not used to the warmer climate around here."

"That's all terribly interesting." Autolycus couldn't hide his growing impatience. "But how does that help us here?"

"Our belt-thief wears leather boots."

"Great." Autolycus squinted as he thought it out. "So, they could be anyone in Greece, including me" He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "I'm doomed."

We stood listening to the night—the crickets, the river flowing and animals scurrying by in the forest behind us.

I turned to him. "You're *sure* you don't have it, right?"

"Xe-na."

"What? Just asking." I straightened up and pat him on the back. "Let's go. And cheer up." I looked up into the trees interlaced over the river, black shadows now against the night sky. "There are other trails we can follow."

* * *

XVI. Bottoms Up

I wandered the main gathering area, stopping to informally greet the visiting queens and exchange news with the women and children of my own tribe who took to me with a kind of bemused pride. After our last visit to the Amazons, I was at least more comfortable in looking the part and certainly more adept in managing the feathers and beads and decorative bits of metal with a little more grace than before. That and the changes a year had made in my strength and confidence with the staff helped me feel as though I fit in better, no longer this scrawny farm girl from a backwater village. However; from the way Mia had treated me, it seemed I still had a ways to go yet where the whole regal dignity and unquestioned respect thing was concerned.

But some of them looked at me that way; some shy and others deferential. They parted ranks for me and made room for me amongst them as I smiled and asked after their comfort. They smiled back. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

The volume around the fires was considerable; the conversation and singing rising on the night air like the sparks lifting towards the heavens. I smiled, noting their full and healthy faces. It'd been a good year. Hopefully, Brauronia would sustain our good fortune. *Of course, we can't leave it up to just a ceremony.* There'd be treaties to look over with the other queens, a review of weapons and supplies and medicines, discussions about population and hunting concerns—

"Your majesty!"

Startled from my musings, I found a grinning young woman beside me, scantily attired in spotted leathers with a feathered mask pushed back on her head, pressing a mug into my hand. "Wha—"

"To her majesty! Queen Gabrielle!" She thrust her own drink into the air.

A rousing cheer went up in response to the toast and I found myself pulled towards the forefront of the group. "Whoa! Slow down!" Was that a hand on my butt? "No need to push."

"Another drink!" Someone clinked their mug firmly against mine, slopping its contents, while another hand reached out and urged me to drink. I tipped the cup towards me, catching a whiff of mead before I took a sip and that's when the chanting started.

"Chug! Chug! Chug!"

Uh.

"Ten dinarsh shaysh *our* queen can out-drink any of yoursh!" Solari yelled, swaying dangerously with the force of her loyal declaration. She leaned on her neighbor, squashing the other woman's headdress flat. Raucous catcalls and creative but friendly insults followed from all sides.

Oh boy. I'd seen Xena do it before, with a great deal of panache and ego, I might add. But me, well... I sniff the cork and I'm tipsy. I raised one hand in protest. "As much as I'd like to—"

"Accepted." Jio, one of the northern queens with her white furs and a bear tooth necklace, suddenly swapped my drink for a larger one, the foaming liquid splashing a bit over the sides. From the flush across her cheeks, she'd been imbibing for a while before I'd showed up this evening. She sported a similar sized mug of her own. "A hog's (hic) head of dinars and a night with my body-slave against your piddly ten," Jio shouted in reply, pulling a buxom lass to her side. There was a flurry of betting in response. She tossed her long blonde hair out of the way and regarded me with a tough, competitive gleam in her bloodshot blue eyes.

And just like that tribal honor was on the line, and every eye was on us. *Oh crap.* I could smell the overpowering rawness of the liquor already—smelling of a dead, wet dog—and I hadn't even touched it yet. This *had* to be a new record for me for finding trouble. At least the village would still be standing after this. I hoped.

Like a woman facing ritual execution, I squared my shoulders and raised my mug. I took a deep breath, giving my voice the strength to carry. "To a strong and powerful Nation!"

"The Nation!" was the return salute. Jio, seemingly confident in her abilities, immediately set to downing her drink.

In for a dinar... I put the cup to my lips and began to drink. My eyes teared up immediately. The equivalent of Greek fire coursed across my palate and waterfalled into my stomach, setting it ablaze in a molten, acidic bath. I wanted to gasp, choke, stop—anything but continue sucking down this nasty, fiery mixture. What was this stuff? *Ugh, gods...* The dead, wet dog had apparently been peed on and buried under garbage before being steeped in whatever this was. Dribbles escaped and dripped down my chin, and I felt my gag reflex struggle not to react as I tried to get it all down before I had no choice but to stop, either for air or to disgrace myself before everyone. The chanting of my name accompanied each swallow and finally the last of the brew burned its way down my throat.

I dropped the mug and wheezed for breath, resurfacing for much needed air. I couldn't tell if the buzzing noise was the sound of the crowd cheering or the sudden disorienting alcoholic rush as my brain pickled itself in the fumes rising from my stomach. Hands slapped me on the back and it only occurred to me then to look for my opponent.

"You did it!" Solari yelled in my ear. I craned my neck—a bad idea as things tilted sideways—and discovered the other queen laying face first in the dirt, her mug next to her limp hand and its contents soaking the ground near the fire.

Members of my own tribe teased and jeered good-naturedly at their rivals and money began exchanging hands from bets lost and won.

"Take her to her quarters," I said, gesturing to the woman snoring peaceably on the ground. The movement, even mild as it was, set off a sense of dizzied disorientation. The breath I took to steady myself didn't seem to help much.

“Your majesty.” A warm body pressed against mine and, bewildered by my victory, I reflexively wrapped an arm around the waist of the woman sliding her hands over my shoulders and into my hair. Jio's body slave didn't seem too displeased about being passed over to me. She snuggled closer. “Mmm.”

It felt kinda nice. Comfortable. Warm. Whoa. Was that her knee? *What am I doing?* I pulled my hands away from her waist and firmly, but gently, detached her tentacle-like grip. “No, really, you don't need to do th-this....um...” I fumbled for a name.

She smiled at me. “Tula .”

“Tula , really, not that I'm not flattered—I am—but you've a right to choose, you know. You're not obligated, because you're your own person and I don't hold with slavery. So, you don't have to either and, you know, I'm kind of tired anyway and it's getting a bit late...” And I was babbling so bad it was embarrassing.

“But you won me, your majesty.” She purred for me. Right in my ear.

I looked pleadingly at Solari.

Solari sniggered helpfully and gave me an unsubtle wink. “Whit-cchshhhh!” She made a rapid wrist action that I gathered was supposed to be the cracking of a whip. I just *knew* that was going to come back to haunt me. “You've got the shtammna! Take her, too!”

Too? My head was already pounding too much to try to figure out what she meant by that. Covering my eyes didn't help. Nor did it make her go away. Either of them.

“Don't you like me, your majesty?” The slave's hands were back, this time more insistently, her lips nuzzling my throat. Things were fuzzy and distant, and the trouble was, I was beginning to like what Tula was doing, but finding that I had someone else in mind to be doing it.

Gods, what was in that drink?

Belatedly, I pushed myself away. “Excuse me.” Other arms caught me when I stumbled off balance, buoyed me up and carried me along on the current of celebration and fun. Everything swirled around me in lurid splashes of color and garish sound, more drinks were offered, their names passed along with knowing smiles that seemed confusing and mysterious to me.

Even clouded, I noticed that not everyone was feeling jolly; a few fights were breaking out, violent and intense, but again I was passed and pulled along before I could do anything to stop it. So many strangers, so many faces... even amongst the Amazons, my adopted family, I couldn't help but find myself feeling oddly alone and isolated. Ephiny, the only one amongst them that I had ever felt comfortable confiding in, was off on a mission to find Xena. And Xena...

I missed her so badly right then. I wanted the comfort of her presence, the feeling of strength and security just having her beside me could provide. The sense of *belonging* . She was my real family.

I think I could be happy anywhere so long as it's with her.

But Xena was gone. Missing. Maybe injured. My worry and concern intensified, adding to the misery of being lightheaded and overwhelmed by the noise and music. I drained the cup of whatever had been shoved into my hands—my third or fourth by this time, I guessed—grimacing as I did so and then set it down on a convenient flat surface before weaving my way towards the perimeter. I needed peace, a bit of space and solitude. With the party falling away behind me, I felt the welcome brush of the cooler night air against my flushed cheeks. I stood there, under the overhanging branches and leaned against a tree, fitting my fingers into the rough fissures in its ancient bark.

“Xena, where are you?” I let my eyes adjust to the moonlit shrouded woods, feeling sad and lonely and sorry for myself, when the faintest hint of flute music caressed my ears. Soft and melancholy, it squeezed my chest to tightness and left me feeling an odd sense of empathy with its singular, haunting melody. Its voice called to me and, wrapped in its spell, I followed it, catching sight of the ethereal silhouettes dancing, stately and beautiful, to its tune.

Without another thought, I went to them.

* * *

XVII. Her Left Foot

The forest began to change, the trees spreading out, the floor full of wider spaces. Our pace increased—well, as much as my foot allowed it to. As we hit a small clearing, we could hear the drums of the Amazon camp even though a distance away. They were *still* at it, it seemed. Looking up into the night sky, we could see the far off light of campfires against the wispy clouds.

Autolycus shook his head. “Those girls really like to party.”

“Not the greatest cooks, though,” I said with a smirk.

“Oh, I don't know about that,” he offered mirthlessly. “That gruel they've been feeding me has really been hitting the spot.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “It's only for a little while longer. We'll get you out of this, you'll see.” I smiled. “Gabrielle's on the job.”

“That makes me feel *so* much better.” He said with a wry twist of his face. “You know as well as I do, spending a night—or several—In a jail cell never gets any easier.” He darkened somewhat. “No matter how many times you do it.”

I gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze, hoping this didn't have to progress to comforting rub or, my least favorite, the consoling hug; it was late and I just didn't have it in me. “I know, but I also know that right now, believe it or not, it's the safest place in the Amazon nation for you to be. There's probably hundreds of Amazons looking to gain Artemis' favor by killing you.”

He blinked nervously. “Hundreds?”

I waved it off. “Whatever, the point is they won't because Ephiny has her most trusted people guarding you—because she believes you.”

“She does?”

“Sure.” I had no idea *what* Ephiny thought, but what was the point of upsetting him?
“Now come on, let's go.”

Autolycus grabbed my arm. He looked serious, though uncomfortable. “Look, uh, Xena.” He swallowed hard and then drew himself up. “Thank you.”

I nodded. We moved through the forest for another quarter of a candle-mark. Soon we saw light through the trees, heard voices and singing, and could smell the enticing scent of cooking meat. It nearly distracted me from noticing the figures moving through the woods in our direction; a group of scouts by their formation. I crossed my arms over my head. After I nudged him, Autolycus did the same.

Ephiny stepped through the trees, shaking her head and crossing her arms. I thought I heard her give a soft snort of laughter. “Well, that's typical.”

“Huh?” I said, putting my arms down.

“The Queen was worried, she had me form a search party,” the Regent said wryly.
“We were about to come looking for you.”

“How sweet,” Autolycus joked. Two warriors grabbed him; one, a red head, rather roughly. “Hey! I'm surrendering willingly.”

“Dimitra!” Ephiny shot the young woman a look of warning. “Take him away.” I waved reassuringly to Autolycus as the warriors shoved him along and into the village. Ephiny moved in beside me. “And here I was starting to look forward to getting away from the guests for a while. Where've you two been?”

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.” I turned to Ephiny, deciding to change the subject. “What was Gabrielle so worried about? I'm not that late.”

Shaking her curly head, Ephiny pointed to the village. “Why don't you ask her yourself? She seemed pretty anxious to speak to you.”

“Where?”

“The Queen's hut.”

“Right, thanks.” I took a step then stopped. “Uhm, by Queen's Hut you mean—”

“My hut.” Ephiny rolled her eyes.

“And not—”

“Xe-na...”

“Right, thanks again.” I headed into the village, leaving the Regent behind me to grumble something as usual.

There were campfires everywhere, throwing flames and warm light into the sky, across the huts and over the bodies of amazons everywhere. The ladies were certainly in a “frisky” mood, no doubt the belt playing its part, as they danced and sang, pounding on drums and rolling about in sparring contests. The belt was obviously

continuing to play its hot, little part in everything.

To be honest, I was really tired. It had been a long (long) day. I had been attacked by fish, by crows, even by my own horse; found out that Autolycus was being accused of a crime he only sort of committed and was to be put to death; had to deal with that pointy-faced, tight-pants Artemis, who Gabrielle may or may not have a crush on; ran through the woods at all hours of the night; fought off a randy slaver queen; got my foot smashed by her jealous dope of a boyfriend; and now have to deal with a village of rutting Amazons.

To be even more honest, I don't like the Amazons. There are a lot of reasons why, all of which I won't get into here, but a major one is festivals like this one. Amazons have a festival for everything. *Oh, Artemis be blessed, it is the Festival of the Hanging Pine Cones! Oh, Artemis be praised, it is the Festival of the Falling Pine Cones!*

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for celebrating and libations and whatnot, it's just that the Amazons take it all so seriously. They have every little bit planned out. From the lighting of the torches, to every note in the songs, to the closing of the ceremonies—it's all so scripted and boring. No wonder Artemis is their Goddess-protector.

In the end, I come here for Gabrielle. Like it or not, it's something I have to do. They're like her family. Which, I guess, makes them *my* family. *Now, there's a thought ...* I looked around wondering if I could ever feel “at home” in a place like this.

Maybe we could just drop in on holidays?

I rolled my eyes, realizing how that would quickly translate into permanent residence since Amazons had holidays every other friggin' day. But then again: what Gabrielle wants, Gabrielle gets...

There was an increasing amount of laughter as I moved toward the Queen's hut. I had the sneaking suspicion it was directed at me. Sounds of whips being cracked and then snickers seemed to follow me everywhere. I shot them a pretty mean stare, but it didn't seem to work.

I found the Queen's (formerly the Regent's) hut empty. I was beginning to get frustrated. I looked longingly at the big bathtub, just wanting to soak in it and then go to bed instead of chasing everyone all over the place at all hours of the night. Gabrielle's staff leaned in the corner, she probably hadn't gone far.

As I left, looking around without any idea where to begin searching for Gabrielle, more Amazons strolled by with their whispers and their whip-sounds.

That was it. Tired and cranky, I snapped.

“Hey! You got somethin' to say, say it,” I hurled at the biggest one in the bunch as I approached. She turned her head away and the group quickly moved on.

I crossed my arms. “That's right.” Maybe it was the belt, but that felt good.

It didn't get me any closer to finding the bard. I'd had enough; I'd never find her this way. “Gabrielle?!” I yelled. That seemed a little silly, so I decided to do a perimeter search of the village. Gods, I love perimeter searches—they're the best kind of

searches.

As I fanned out (well, with my aching, swelling foot, it was more like limped out) to the edges of the village, I heard Gabrielle's voice on the breeze. I moved toward it. Soon, I could hear what was being said.

“Ow! Take it out!” It was Gabrielle's voice. She was in pain. I sped up.

“Breathe into the pain. It'll pass quickly,” Artemis said. If she was hurting Gabrielle, I'd—

“Aah...” A sound of relief. “Oh, that's better.” Gabrielle again. “Oh! You don't have to do *that* ...”

“Please, Gabrielle. I insist. It was my idea, after all.”

Gabrielle groaned.

I stopped.

“Is this better?” Was her voice muffled?

“Yeah.” Gabrielle's voice was almost... dreamy. “Much. I wasn't expecting it to be quite so large. I don't think I've ever had—oh, yeah—one that big before. What you're doing is helping a lot... so smooth and warm... feels really, really good...”

In a breathless kind of horrified daze, I moved through the woods towards the voices. Was that giggling I heard?

“These are not just the hands of a warrior, Gabrielle.”

“I can feel that. Oh! Yes... there...”

I ran through the woods to the voices. Crashing into a small clearing I found them. It took a lot, but I managed to make damn sure my eyeballs didn't bulge out like the slaver's did. Not sure about the facial redness, though.

In the clearing, Gabrielle sat with her bare foot in Artemis' hands. The goddess was bending forward, hovering closely above the bard's slender toes, her lips poised above them.

“What the—” It was simultaneously better and worse than I expected.

“Xena?” Gabrielle shook her head as though waking from a dream. “You-you're back.”

“Just *what* is going on here?” I demanded.

Artemis raised her chin, seeming simultaneously annoyed and satisfied at my interruption. I blinked at them, wide-eyed, able to feel the vein in my forehead throbbing.

Gabrielle looked dazedly between the two of us and withdrew her foot from Hatchet-Face's groping little hands. “I—I wanted to dance with the nymphs, but I took one step without my boots and got a really nasty splinter.” She held up the sliver of wood as

evidence. "She handled it for me."

"Mm-hmm." My jaw shifted from left to right in a tight grind. "That's not all she was handling."

I didn't miss the twitch of a smile at Artemis' lips. I glared. She glared back.

Gabrielle stood up, listing shakily to one side with her boot in hand until she caught her balance against a tree trunk. "Did you find the belt?"

"No," I said flatly, not taking my eyes off Artemis. "Why don't we talk about it in our quarters, after we get some rest?"

I watched in smug joy as Artemis surged to her feet, her eyes sparking fury in my direction. I smiled at her when Gabrielle bent down to clumsily put her boot back on, unaware of the silent battle going on right above her head. I decided against sticking my tongue out.

"Why not now?" Gabrielle asked, abandoning the now-tangled bootlaces in exasperation.

"Too many ears. Let's go."

She stood and blinked slowly between the two of us, and I wondered if I only imagined her hesitation before she followed me.

* * *

XVIII. Slam Dunk (or You Make Me Wet)

I didn't mean to trip, but the next thing I knew I was getting a close-up look at the path back to the village. "Damn laces," I muttered, trying blearily to look at my feet. A little challenging when sprawled on the ground.

"Gab-ri-elle."

Oh, yeah. She pulled me to my feet and then abandoned me to the swaying forces that had taken hold of the forest and threatened to trip me up again. "Oo, it's getting rough out here." I carefully felt my way back to the ground to wait out the turbulence. As it was, I felt as though a cyclops had clubbed me over the head, so sitting down seemed a good idea.

"What is the matter with you?"

"Get down." I waved my hand in the general direction of the forest floor. "It's safer down here. Doesn't move as much."

"Gabrielle, I do *not* have the patience for this."

I looked up and squinted, trying to focus on the angular face above me, half-bathed in a pearly moonlight that illuminated her eyes and set them aglow from within. How marvelous! I'd never seen anything like that before. "You're so *beautiful*."

She sighed and dropped her face into one hand. "Not again."

Again? Huh? *Oh, look...* I blinked slowly, distracted by the spider web next to me

with the moonlight caught in its strands. It made me happy, so I giggled.

“So not only was she feeling you up, but she got you drunk, too. Great. That's just great.”

It was? Wait, how did she know about my butt getting felt up? *Oh, yeah!* “You have *many* skills.” Happy that I'd solved my mystery, I sat there and snickered.

“Uh huh.” She reached for me again. “C'mere.”

I was hauled upright and found myself face-to-breastplate with her. Not a bad spot to be in but—

“Ugh!” Xena jerked away suddenly leaving me to cope with my change in altitude alone. “You stink!”

“Like dead dog?” I hazarded. “That's the ‘Hydra Piss’ I think. Or was it ‘Gorgon Gob’?” I tried to remember while I spread my arms out and bit the tip of my tongue as I concentrated on negotiating the path. I needn't have bothered; I was face first in the leaves a second later, thanks to my damn laces.

Actually, it was rather comfy right there. I scooped a couple of leaves closer to make a pillow. Yeah. Comfy. I was halfway into the arms of Morpheus before she grabbed me again.

“Ooooh, no, you don't.”

I whined, not wanting to move. My head had actually paused in its throbbing when I'd stopped moving. But Xena is not one to be denied. Certainly not by me. The next thing I knew, I was moving down the path, though definitely not under my own steam. Deep and considered analysis brought me to the conclusion that I was being carried. Lightly and easily, Xena had picked me up and cradled me in her arms, allowing me an unusual and fascinating experience in not only being that close to her, but also in that she had been the one to initiate it.

There was little I could do except hook my arm around her neck and lay my head down on her shoulder. I closed my eyes, unsure if the unsettled feeling inside was due to the discernible sway of Xena's gait or the feeling of power and strength surrounding me, tangible and visible in the feel of her muscular arms around me. From this close angle, I watched the way the line of her jaw tightened and relaxed, tightened and relaxed, the way her eyes moved restlessly across the path before us, and the way the soft light illuminated her nose and highlighted her cheekbones. So strong, so serious. Knowing her as I did, I thought she looked angry and tense.

That's the thing with Xena; she takes so much on herself when I wish she could find a way to let some of it go, to share it with me and maybe make the burden of her fears and regrets easier to bear. Idly, I slipped my fingers into her hair at the base of her scalp and felt the delightful sensation of soft warmth where her dark hair covered my hand. The locks were cooler near the surface, above my hand, and warmer beneath. Not too dissimilar from Xena herself, it occurred to me. I stroked my thumb against the nape of her neck where I know I sometimes get sore and figured maybe she did too, and was rewarded with a sound of muted surprise from her and a slight tightening of her grip. She kept walking, but it seemed the forest didn't rush by as quickly now.

I rubbed the tips of my fingers lightly against her skin, imagining the scattering of tingles it might cause. I liked them, personally. I'd discovered this one evening after we had spent the day helping a village to rebuild some of their homes after having been struck by warlords looking for food and plunder. Xena, in her usual silent and to-the-point approach, had sat me down in front of her and used those large, strong hands of hers to ease the muscle cramps in my neck and shoulders I'd been complaining about for the better part of a candle-mark. I still remember the final little scratch of her fingers across the back of my neck to let me know she was done and the shiver of tingles it had sent in a rush of goosebumps across my skin.

In languid curiosity, I did the same to her and flitted my gaze to her arm in time to see the fine hairs rise up, like wild grass before a wind. I looked back up at her face and noted a stillness there, a forced blankness, and knew she was shielding herself from me.

I knew how to fix that. So close already, I dipped my head forward, closing my eyes when long, dark strands brushed against my face as my lips found her ear. "You can't hide from me you know."

She jerked her head away from me and I found myself faced with a pair of hot blue eyes and flaring nostrils over a disapproving frown. "Stop it, Gabrielle."

"I can see you." It came out in a teasing sing-song way, soft and breathy, quite without my permission, but it was fun and it made me giggle again. Xena shot me another look, but snapped her lips tightly together and carried us faster. I resumed my comfortable spot against her.

My breath warmed her skin and when I breathed in, I could detect the scent of her; a mingling of leather, musk, exertion and the indefinable essence of everything I know as *her*. And was that perfume? I sniffed again, closer this time. When did she start wearing perfume? Sandalwood and spice tickled my nose and I pressed closer, the tip of my nose brushing slowly against the skin beneath her ear. A soft grunt of surprise escaped between Xena's clenched teeth.

I had no attention for anything around us. I was oblivious to the interested gazes and whispered comments as we passed through the edges of revelry and into the less traveled paths between the Amazons' huts and outer buildings. All my concentration was centered on the expanse of warm skin within my reach, wondering all the while if she might taste as interesting as she smelled? My lips touched her skin and I found myself squeezed in her arms. That was okay—I liked that. My lips parted to allow the tip of my tongue to delicately stroke the side of her throat. Distantly I was aware of a tremulous shudder that trembled us both.

Xena's warmth drew me in and I luxuriated in the closeness, tinged though it was with a sense of breathless danger. This close, I couldn't think of a reason not to do it as my lips found her throat again and traversed its length, bottom to top, pausing to paint her earlobe with the moist tip of my tongue.

"Gabrielle!"

Through slitted eyes I could see the world rush past us on the wings of a growl of frustration. It occurred to me that I could soothe her if only she'd let me...

We came to an abrupt halt. “You're dismissed,” I heard Xena say in a tight voice.

“Ma'am...” The voice of a reluctant Amazon responded. “We can't leave; Regent's orders.”

Xena stiffened; I knew she hated being thwarted. “Leave. Now.”

“Look,” the same Amazon replied, an edge to her voice. “I don't care if you're Zeus himself, we're not g—”

I lifted my head and, with effort, focused my eyes. “You two haven't been to the party yet. You should go.”

Their eyes looked from me, to Xena, to each other, then back to us and then as one they gave me a fist-over-heart salute before going around us and back towards to center of the village. “She *is* whipped, isn't she?” I heard faintly.

Xena spun and growled. They both cringed and hurried off faster. Then, we too were on the move again.

“You're not whipped,” I muttered and buried my face back into Xena's neck, my hand sliding into her hair with an increasing fervor. “No one owns you...” Gods, she felt good. So soft and strong and intensely alive.

She took a deep breath and I felt myself lifted closer and I smiled to myself until I suddenly realized I was airborne. I slammed into the frigid bath water with a huge splash, sending a crest of water over the sides to soak the fur rugs below. I gasped as I resurfaced; the shock of it ripping away the gauzy curtain of inebriation and sensual closeness, and leaving me in nothing but my sopping leathers and naked, open-mouthed anger. “Xe-Xena!”

Very deliberately, she crossed her arms and took one step back from the tub and then another. Only then did I notice the dark and murderously angry expression she turned towards me.

* * *

XIX. Hot, Wet, Girl-on-Girl Action

I stepped back from the tub. One pace. Two. I had to make sure Gabrielle was out of reach, before I did anything regrettable.

Had to control my breathing. Had to control my hands from shaking. Had to control myself, my emotions. My skin still tingled where she had touched me. Where she had kissed me.

Gabrielle had kissed me.

On my neck.

A lot.

I guess it wasn't that big of a deal, though.

Right?

Then why did I feel so many things? Why did I feel betrayed? Angry?

Aroused?

Gabrielle spit the cold water out, looking pathetic—but less drunk.

"Cooled off now?" I sneered. I was doing my best to control my temper, assuming a lot of it was that blasted belt raising my temperature. I still couldn't believe she was drunk and cavorting with that so-called virgin goddess.

"Xena...I...you...we..." she spluttered, her eyes confused, conflicted, their piercing green brought out by her now darkened lashes.

Gabrielle's inability to form a simple sentence only made me angrier. *Was she that smitten with Pointy-face that words failed her? Her, of all people?* I crossed my arms. "I expected more from you."

She looked confused, taken aback. *Hurt, even?* "I-I thought... I mean... I thought you'd...you'd like that."

"Like it?!" *Breathe, Xena. Breathe.* "Like seeing her rubbing her hands all over my best friend and getting her falling-down drunk?!" I threw my hands in the air. "I *knew* I shouldn't have left you alone with her!"

Something flared up in Gabrielle's eyes.

"Hey! You of all people should know I'm not a kid anymore. I can take care of myself." She raised her chin haughtily. "And for your information, *she* did not get me drunk."

"Oh?"

"That's right," she continued. "I managed to do it all by myself. Well...with the help of an Amazon drinking contest." Gabrielle quickly addressed my increasingly skeptical look. "Which I *won* by the way."

"That is and isn't surprising." I shook my head at her.

"The drink was horrible...smelled like a dog...tasted like one too..." She looked sheepish. "Not that I know what a dog tastes like."

She became glossy-eyed as she remembered, but then shook her head and cleared her throat. "Anyway, I needed some air, so I took a walk and went to see the nymphs." My lips tightened. "It's been a long day, Xena. I mean, I had to put up with Artemis on the way back—" I snorted at the protest. "—and then she tried to kiss me, but that's when the bear tried to kill us, so I had to save us since she couldn't—"

There was that vein in my forehead again. For a second, I couldn't open my mouth to speak because my teeth had clenched so tightly shut.

Gabrielle seized the opportunity and waved the whole thing off. "It's not as big a deal as it sounds. Anyway, I wandered off and was distracted by the dance of the nymphs and got a splinter in my foot." With an exasperated look, she pointed to her feet, submerged somewhere in the cloudy tub water. "Artemis was helping me. Did you see

the size of that splinter?"

This was ridiculous. Couldn't Gabrielle see what Artemis was doing to her? I had a right to protect my best friend from herself. Right? Goddess or no Goddess, belt or no belt—Artemis was going down. "How big was the splinter that she had her hands all over your legs?" I shook my head again. "Any higher and she'd be taking your temperature."

Gabrielle's face contorted with conflicting emotion. "I don't believe it." She said with incredulity. "You—you're jealous!"

I wasn't. "What? That's ridiculous." I paced away from the tub. "I'm worried about you. You don't know about the gods, Gabrielle." I turned for effect. "I do. They play twisted little games with mortals. They manipulate them. Then they throw them away."

"You are." Gabrielle grinned mischievously. "You're jealous."

I wasn't.

I *was* angry, however. "Fine. Whatever. Maybe you can rethink the whole thing between drinking contests and late night Nymph-dancing and erotic foot massages while I'm off finding that stupid belt for you and your tribe."

"What?" She crossed her arms, still standing in the tub. "I'm sure that's all you were doing."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, please, what? Did the trail through the woods lead to a band of Corinthian showgirls?" Her teeth flashed, her finger pointed accusingly. "I could smell perfume on you."

I smiled, remembering the run in Autolycus and I had with the moonstruck slaver queen. Maybe, smiling wasn't the best thing I could have done right then. I know what I said next fit squarely into that category as well. "Now, *you're* jealous."

Gabrielle sprang from the tub, water spilling everywhere. She moved angrily, coming nose-to-nose with me. She was shivering, from anger or chill I didn't know. "Y-you wish," she said.

Seeing her this passionate, this aggressive threw me off a little. I needed to gain the advantage again. "In that case, your highness, I could smell like a whole chorus line, why should you care?"

She looked away. It was for a split second, but she looked away. Was she? She couldn't be...

Right?

* * *

XX. At the Center of Things

Twice in one night words completely failed me. A sick feeling invaded my insides,

prompted by the image of some skanky, empty-headed, rank-scented woman writhing around with Xena, which only served to make me feel crazy and furious and way out of control. “Maybe I don't care if you do!” I yelled, getting right up in her face. “But if you're going to smell like some two-bit floozy hanging off the end of a bar, you'd better make sure to stay upwind from anyone you wanna sneak up on!”

The fracture in the expression of nasty amusement revealed a ripple of shock and astonishment, maybe even hurt, before it was gone. It gave me a surge of dark satisfaction to know I could get beneath her skin.

She put her hands on her hips and looked down on me, the corner of her mouth lifting in that arrogant, condescending way she sometimes has. “At least I can see what's in front of me! Your problem is you can't see the bigger picture; Artemis and the Amazons have you so bamboozled, you can't see how she's taking advantage of you.” At my fierce head-shake, Xena threw her hands in the air. “How can you be so blind? She's got designs on you, Gabrielle! Believe me, I can see it; the way she talks to you, the way she touches you, the way she throws it in my *face* !”

“So that's it?” I demanded, my eyes narrowing. I could have spit, I was so mad. “It skewers your ego that she's showing interest in me? What am I? Some *object* for you to fight over? Is that it? You think I *belong* to you, like your saddle bags and your horse?”

Xena's mouth worked for a long, soundless moment, but she rallied, her tone low and hard and very serious. “You're not to be alone with her anymore.”

Outrageous! “Xena—”

She grabbed me by the upper arms and shook me slightly, the palms of her hands a searing heat against my bare skin. “She's not touching you again!”

“Stop it! I'm not a child!” I wrenched myself free, throwing off her bruising grip.

“We're finished! Don't you argue with me.” She turned away.

I grabbed her arm hard and yanked her around to face me. “We are if you think I'm going to let you do this!”

“If that's the way you want it!”

We teetered there, staring at each other and breathing hard with emotion. Her eyes had darkened to a cool blue-grey slate, stony and inflexible, ringed with tension. There was surprise there, too—a vulnerability that reflected the faintest glimmer of fear. How did we get here? How had it gone so far? My heart was a timpani beneath my ribs, its out-of-control pace fueled by an almost nauseating mix of confusion, fury and dread. So many emotions, too many to make sense of. Was she really that jealous? Was I? It seemed inconsequential next to the threat of losing her, of losing everything that she was to me. *Nothing is worth that.* With effort I pulled myself back from the brink. “No,” I replied finally, the quiet of my voice falling hoarse in the taut silence between us. “I don't.”

She released a trembling breath, the spell of hostility abruptly broken, washing past us like a brief and violent summer storm. The dark head lowered, hiding her face from

me.

My chest loosened and I took a settling breath of my own, continuing on more gently. “I don't want that. *Ever*. But you have to trust me, Xena; Artemis can try as much as she wants, but she's not going to get anywhere. I'm flattered, of course—I mean, who wouldn't be? But I'm... I'm not interested.”

“Really?” Blue eyes gazed back at me from beneath the curtain of her bangs.

I nodded solemnly and pressed my hands against my belly, feeling the adrenaline aftermath wreaking havoc with my system. Whether from the cold bath water or from the intensity of our argument, I began to shiver. I stayed there, standing, just as she did, and I wondered if she felt as unsure as I did about what to do next. When she said nothing more, my shoulders slumped and I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to keep my teeth from chattering. “D-did...” I tried again. “Did you have any luck finding the belt?”

Xena retreated to a window that overlooked a view towards the center of the village where the party was still going strong. She leaned against the framework, crossing her arms over her chest, the outline of her body gilded in the soft golden glow thrown from the multitude of bonfires shedding light and warmth over the assembled. I wished I could feel some of that now.

“No,” she replied, distantly. “They never had it.”

I let out a disappointed breath. “What are we going to do? Brauronia is in two days. If the belt can make us act like this now, how much worse will it be by the ceremony? If the slavers didn't take it, then...”

I saw her give an almost imperceptible nod. “An Amazon did.”

* * *

XXI. (Not So) Straight to Bed

As much as I hate to admit it, I was trying to shock her. And in the end, I guess that's just another way of saying I was trying to upset her. *What was I doing?*

Gabrielle looked pensive for a moment then nodded. “It's disappointing, but not surprising,” she said. “Only an Amazon would know about the belt. Assuming the thief knew what they were stealing, of course.”

“Of course.”

She wasn't shocked or upset. I turned my attention back out the window. Maybe I thought if she didn't see my face, my eyes, she wouldn't see how low I was feeling. It wasn't the first time I'd underestimated her. From the first moment we met she's been proving me wrong, but I never acknowledged it, did I?

I nodded. “Also, the footwear, angle of attack and escape route, when taken together seem to point to an Amazon attacker.” It was hard to speak evenly. I was tired. I was not entirely myself thanks to the belt. What happened before—the yelling, what we said to each other—was getting to me even more than it normally would.

Gabrielle took a step forward. “Xena I—”

“Did you find out anything around here?” I looked down, bracing myself on the windowsill.

She paused. “Uhm...The belt is affecting everyone. But I think there's two we should keep an eye on. Shawna, she was with Ephiny; she had a studded chobo with her. Are you sure the weapon that hit Autolycus was from a slaver?”

I nodded. “I've seen the kind of chobo you mean. It's not the same. Slavers would want to disable or stun their targets; a studded chobo would likely crack your head open.”

She wiped water from her face. “Then there's also Mia. She came in with another woman last year from Pelos. From what she said, I get the impression she hates Artemis' guts.”

That made me chuckle. I guess not all Amazons are bad. “A point in her favor.”

“Xena, c'mon, she's not that—”

Not again. I whipped around to glare at her. “Do not defend her to me, Gabrielle.” My gaze held her for a long moment more and then I turned away again to stare out the window.

Behind me, Gabrielle looked away; reluctant perhaps to start anything more between the two of us—which was exactly why I had turned away. “Fine.” She took a few steps over to the desk on the other side of the room and lowered herself into the chair. “Mia seems to have a problem with Dimitra—the one who came with her from Pelosi. I gather Dimitra's got a crush or something on Artemis.”

I snorted. There's no accounting for taste.

“And there's some kind of tension between Mia and Shawna,” Gabrielle added. “I couldn't get anything further, but both of them certainly looked like they could have taken Autolycus down, especially if they managed to surprise him first.”

I turned to face her, trying to move the various pieces of the puzzle around in my mind. “So we have a goddess-hater who has trouble getting along with other Amazons.” I decided to try and lighten the mood a little. I winked at her. “Who isn't me, for once.”

“For once.” She didn't smile, but there was a glint of one in her eyes. Her body shivered visibly.

“We've got a hormone-imbalanced goddess who's on the verge of losing her powers and wants to have her way with you.” I wandered over to the side of the tub as I spoke and picked up one of the towels discarded after our bath earlier.

“Which is just not going to happen,” Gabrielle added firmly, her eyes avoiding mine.

“So basically, we have nothing.” I pressed the towel against myself, hoping to warm it up a little. “And that leaves Autolycus pretty close to nowhere.”

Gabrielle sighed, lost in thought. She left the chair and sat upon the bed, hugging herself for warmth. "I don't think Artemis or the Amazons will spare him for much longer. Not with the festival climaxing soon."

I moved in closer, the towel still warming against me. Gabrielle's brow furrowed in thought. "I wonder why an Amazon stole the belt in the first place. I would think most of them revere her."

"There could be any number of reasons. Ambition...power... I thought Velasca would have been a deterrent, but godhood has its draws. Artemis did say that whoever stole it would gain her powers." A thought occurred to me. I sat down on the bed just under an arm's length away from her. "Do you know the full extent of Artemis' abilities? What are we up against?"

Gabrielle's eyes faded into shadow as she leaned forward to yawn. She rubbed at them. "Hard to say..." She sighed as she continued to shiver, her hair and clothes still soaked. "Control of animals, the hunt, maidenhood and chastity... She transformed a man into a stag and had him ripped apart by his own hounds for spying on her while she bathed."

"She has a real thing for being seen in the buff, doesn't she?" I shook my head, not understanding the deity's inhibitions.

"Yeah." Gabrielle nodded. "Beyond what I've heard in stories, I'm not sure what else someone might be able to do."

That pretty much meshed with what I knew. "Here." I wrapped the towel around her shoulders and brought her close. She resisted slightly at first but soon, if reluctantly, gave in to the warmth both the towel and I offered.

We stayed like that for some time, the weight of unanswerable questions and Autolycus' fate hanging heavily in the air. Don't get me wrong; I love a challenge, but I can't say I'm overly fond of this "rock and a hard place" stage of problem solving. Maybe it was fatigue; gods knew this morning seemed like a damn long time ago. Just thinking about it made me even more tired. It had been an eventful, though not as successful a day as I would have liked. There was probably more than one moment I wouldn't mind having back to do over, fishy love-bites included. I sighed and then felt Gabrielle do the same.

"Xena I—"

"Shh." I moved closer, whispering, "I should have trusted you. I know better than that." She glanced at me in wary surprise, no doubt wondering if I was playing with her, but the truth was that I couldn't stand the tension between us any longer.

Gabrielle, now wrapped securely in the towel, looked at me carefully until the look in her eyes softened, and she gave me a small, tentative smile. "The, um, perfume actually isn't bad, but I probably still don't want to know how you got it on you."

I cleared my throat and looked up at the ceiling beams. "Probably not," I drawled as I leaned over to snag another towel and begin applying it to her hair, ruffling the long strands until they were a thick, wavy mass of barely damp tangles.

“So what now?” Her voice was muffled beneath the towel.

I drew in a breath and let the wheels turn a few times as I tried to remove the bedraggled decorative feather someone had twined into her hair earlier today. “I wanna get a look at these two Amazons you mentioned. If one of them thinks they're home free, they might lead me right to it.”

“What do you want me to do while you're skulking around?”

Here's where I put my dinars where my mouth is. “I want you to talk to Artemis. Find out what we could be facing if the thief inherits her powers. Try to keep her from following through on killing Autolycus, but keep it subtle.” My stomach tied itself in knots, but I had to let her do this. Artemis, at least, could be trusted not to physically harm Gabrielle, but as for the rest... I fought with the belt's influence, exasperated at the flash of jealousy eating at my insides again.

Silence followed my request. I grimly tried not to smile.

“You want *me* to talk to her?” Pause. “*Alone ?*”

The surprise on her face was almost comical, but I tried to hide my amusement with a shrug. “If you don't think you can do it...”

“If I don't think I can...” she trailed off and shook her head almost helplessly. “Did I miss something? I don't understand. I mean... you... are you sure?”

I knew what she was asking. “I'm sure. It's the smartest move anyway. Artemis would rather talk to you than me.” *Well, that's putting it mildly .*

Gabrielle snorted and rolled her eyes. “I think she'd rather chat up an entire legion of horny Romans while naked than talk to you.”

If she had the wherewithal to crack a joke, even a sarcastic one, maybe we were closer to being back on track with each other. “Like I said. At least I've made a memorable impression on her.”

She stood and squished her way behind the dressing screen to change out of her wet leathers. “Xena, saying you made an impression is like saying that Tartarus is kinda balmy.” A wet halter slapped over the top of the partition, followed quickly by her skirt.

I took it for a compliment and smiled toothily, pleased with her retort.

First one soggy boot appeared, followed by the second, the both of them tossed near the fire to dry. I winced in regret; wet leather tends to shrink and stiffen as it dries and my temper would probably cost her a few blisters tomorrow. While she continued to change, I started removing my own boots; an exercise in minor agony. My foot was a mass of black and purple bruises and visibly swollen. I winced and tried to flex it, annoyed at how much it hurt to move or wiggle my toes. Damn it. I hoped it wouldn't slow me up if I had to face off with either of our suspects tomorrow.

Sighing, I wrested off the rest of my armor and put it to one side of the bed next to my weapons before rising and limping like some kind of useless, klutzy old woman over to where our packs lay on the floor near the wall. I squatted down to retrieve a clean

shift of my own when I heard something.

Scratch.

An almost imperceptible thump followed it. From the wardrobe. In seconds I was ripping the door open only to hear a frightened squawk as a flailing figure landed in my arms. “What the Hades?!”

“Your majesty!” It was a woman. A short woman. Wearing too many feathers and too little leather.

I scrunched up my nose; the stench of mead came off her in waves. She stunk like a dead dog. I sniffed again. That had been peed on. “Nope.” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder towards the changing screen. “Over there.”

“Your majesty!” The woman swayed as she held out her arms towards Gabrielle who had chosen that moment to stick her head out from behind the barrier.

“Tula ?”

I looked back and forth between them. “Tula ?” I raised my eyebrow in the bard's direction. “Who's Tula?” The second Gabrielle's expression of surprise wiped to fragile innocence, I knew something was up. “*Gab-ri-elle .*”

“Your majesty?” Tula popped her head around me, looking somewhat concerned. “I thought I was only going to be pleasuring *you* this evening.”

“WHAT?!” My whole body whipped around to confront Tula who took one wide-eyed look at me and cowered back.

“But-I'm-sure-I-would-love-to-service- *you* -as-well,” she babbled out in a high squeak.

“Hey!” Gabrielle erupted from behind the screen, half-dressed in only her undergarments and the thin shift she held pressed to her chest. “You're not servicing her!”

Tula 's eyes widened further. “I'm not? But—”

“*NO!* ”

I winced; I didn't know Gabrielle could project with volume like that.

“Then *you're* servicing her?” Tula asked tentatively as she pointed at me, hopelessly confused now as to who was going to do what to whom.

I straightened to my full height and crossed my arms over my chest, unable to wait to hear Gabrielle's answer to this one. I raised my eyebrow and looked at Gabrielle expectantly.

“Erk.” Gabrielle looked up at me, her face a picture of flaming ruin, suffused with the most brilliant blush I think I've ever seen her wear. So much for bardic eloquence.

“Well?” I drawled, feeling a sublime level of angry betrayal and dark amusement at her predicament. “Apparently everything that moves wants *you* . Am *I* getting some?”

“Xena, this isn't what it looks like.” Gabrielle lifted her hand in a placating gesture. Too bad I wasn't in the mood to be calm. I hardened my expression. She'd have to do better than that. “I, uh, won Tula in that drinking contest.”

“So you entered the contest so you could sleep with her?”

“What? No! Are you kidding? I never thought I had a chance.”

“Well, this is your lucky day, isn't it? The Fates are smiling all over you it seems.”

Gabrielle was looking desperate. “Solari made me do it!”

“Riiiiiiight.”

“No!” she insisted. “Solari challenged the other queen.” She reached out and shook Tula ; a bad decision if the sudden lack of color in the woman's face was anything to go by. “You were there. Tell her.”

Tula 's eyes were a glassy sheen. “Oh, yes! You stood beautiful and proud before us all, gleaming in the firelight. You raised your hand high and challenged my queen for the glory of the Nation. She accepted your challenge and the two of you drank, your throat moving strong and sure as you drank her to her knees!” She swayed with the passion of her tale. I lifted my eyebrow higher and stared menacingly at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle stared at her in abject horror. “That's not what... Xena—” She looked at me, her green eyes wide, stunned. “—It wasn't like that at all!”

“Uh huh.”

Tula slipped around me and draped herself against Gabrielle's side. “Can we go to bed now?” she cooed as she rubbed Gabrielle's very bare shoulder.

I became dimly aware of the grinding squeal reverberating in my head, caused no doubt by the pressure of my jaw, as I bared my teeth at them both in the caricature of a smile. It must not have been pretty because Gabrielle blinked and jerked back from both Tula and myself. “I'm going to check on Argo.” I grabbed my things from the side of the bed, heedless of the clatter and the dragging strap on my breastplate. I just wanted out of there.

“Xena—”

“Enjoy your slave, your majesty.”

The slam of the wooden door was solid and loud, and very, very satisfying. I stood on the porch, looked around and then smiled. Maybe there was a drinking contest or two around here that *I* could enter...

* * *

PART 4

XXII. There Has To Be a Morning After

The birds roared on the branches outside my window. The sunlight—when I made the

mistake of lifting my head—cut through my eyes like shards of glass. My tongue, poisoned by the effects of Amazon brewing techniques, had apparently died in my mouth sometime during the night and proceeded to decompose into a furry, swollen thing that tasted both festering and rancid. In short, I was hung-over.

“Uck.” Keeping my eyes closed, I managed to sit myself up. Bad idea. I clutched my head with both hands to keep it from falling off my shoulders as I rolled very carefully off the bed. Oh, this was not good. Hephaestus's hammer was playing all of Olympus' greatest hits inside my skull. Even my eyeballs throbbed.

Staggering forward, I did the only thing possible: I squeezed my eyes shut and thrust my head into the chilly old bathwater still in the tub. It had worked last night, after all.

Ker-splash!

I gasped and whipped my wet head back, casting water across the room, the rest of it racing down my skin in chilly rivulets, washing away the lingering urge to sleep. My head still ached fiercely, but at least I felt a little more in focus. *What was in that stuff?* Just thinking about it made me feel nauseated. Planting one hand carefully against my forehead, I shuffled to the table and sniffed at the decanter sitting next to a small bowl of grapes and apples. It smelled safe. I poured some into a clean cup and took a sip. A light, tart cider coated my mouth to something far more palatable and I swished it around a few times before swallowing. A few grapes followed. Not great for my stomach, but someone might be willing to speak to me from a distance of less than ten feet now.

I detoured to nudge the shutter on the window to darken the room before dropping back down onto the bed. That's when it hit me; Xena had never come back last night.

I'd left space for her, thinking that she might return, but aside from where I had pulled the covers askew during the night, it was mostly undisturbed. My sigh was audible. I guess I couldn't blame her, but it ticked me off that she never even gave me a chance to explain properly, or gave me even the benefit of the doubt.

“This is so crazy,” I said, more comfortable working out my thoughts aloud. The belt was getting stronger, to the point I could no longer distinguish its influence from my own emotional impulses. “It's getting deeper... harder to resist now than ever before.” I didn't like what that boded. Xena and I had nearly parted ways over a simple foot rub. How much worse was it likely to get? The possibilities bothered me, not the least because our relationship was something that I treasured. Depended upon. I'd never felt the level of happiness and fulfillment I had now before I met Xena. A large part of my happiness rested on the foundation of our friendship and the thought of how easily that could be manipulated, how quickly my feelings and perceptions could be twisted and turned.

I dragged my fingers through my wet hair. “This is way past bad.” And the scene with Tula last night had only made it that much worse.

“More for me,” Tula declared after the echo of the slamming door had died away. I stared at her, not understanding, until she slid her hands up my side and across my midriff beneath the thin barrier of my shift. I pushed her back. Away from me. The room was too small, my chest too tight. I couldn't breathe. Xena had just walked out on me.

I felt my hand tugged. "Come to bed."

I stared at Tula as if I'd never seen her before. Everything had happened too fast; it was too much and it was all out of control. I shook my head and croaked, "Please, you need to leave."

Her fingers stroked unwelcomingly against mine. "But, your majesty, we're finally alone now. You don't need her. I can make you forget all about her..."

She smiled at me, but all I could see was that expression of stark pain and anger barely concealed behind that grimace of a smile Xena had given me when Tula had rubbed up against me. Her pain had wounded me too, scraping my soul raw inside. I was ashamed and sorry and not even sure how I'd gotten to this point in the first place. "You have to go." My breath was coming in whistling hitches.

"My queen—"

"NOW!"

I had paced the hut in agitation and trepidation, forcing back wretched tears, and hoping Xena would come back so we could work things out. Exhausted from everything that had happened, I sat on the bed to wait for her and never realized the moment when I had finally fallen asleep.

And now, in the cold light of day, my memories of the night before lay clear and sharp, distressingly unaffected by last night's excesses. Cringefully so. My face fell into my hands as I remember the overwhelming urge to touch Xena, to feel her skin beneath my fingers... to... Gods, I could feel myself blushing just thinking about it... to touch her and... I pressed my hand against my chest and felt my heart pounding wildly beneath the surface. I could barely even bring myself to think the words. The memory of it was an imprint on my lips; a touch of velvet, a taste of musk against my tongue.

"No!" I lurched off the bed, as if trying to physically distance myself from the memory would make it less true. Less real. "Oh gods, oh gods..." I paced the room, pressing my palms hard against my eyes, feeling embarrassed and confused and restlessly charged. Was it the belt? Was it me? Where was this coming from? Frustrated, I dropped my hands and stared sightlessly at a patch of early morning sunlight on the wall opposite the window, wondering if what I'd done was part of why Xena wasn't here now. "Could you blame her?" I asked myself glumly.

I knew she was angry with Artemis and, if I were honest, I knew the goddess' behavior had quickly become far more attentive and affectionate than was strictly necessary (even if there *were* too many precedents to count) or appropriate (gods didn't seem to have the same sense of social niceties) or, more still—appreciated (thank the gods for the bear!). But each time it happened, it almost seemed as if I were watching myself, letting it happen, rather than actively participating. "I wish you understood that," I whispered to my absent companion. To date, I hadn't encouraged Artemis. *But you haven't exactly discouraged her either, have you?* my conscience pointed out. And each time Artemis had stood too close, let her touch linger or sought some expression of intimacy I was fairly certain was only one-sided I had allowed it, somehow, to

happen.

Sunlight was pouring into the room and I knew that if I wanted to go and find Xena before she ran off on her mission, I'd have to hurry. But was there really any point? "Good luck finding out where she is now, anyway." Checking on Argo could mean anything from a quick grooming and sleeping in the hay next to her horse to disappearing for a couple of days and forcing me to sit tight until she returned. Given how close we were to Brauronia we couldn't afford for me to hang around doing nothing. Autolycus certainly couldn't. This meant I couldn't wait around for Xena to decide to show up again or to use time trying to find her for a "sensitive chat" regardless of how much I might want to. I sighed. "Time to get to work."

Okay then. I tapped my lips with one finger, thinking carefully. *So... step one in getting a goddess' most intimate secrets...*

* * *

XXIII. Rough Necking

Morning sucked already.

For starters, my neck was stiff. Sleeping on straw in a stable is highly overrated, no matter what you've heard. Even with the bedroll, something was missing—campfire maybe? Whatever happened, it did a real number on my neck. I could barely turn it.

My one consolation was that the night before seemed to score high casualties among the Amazons. Many lay on the ground unconscious. Many others, the unfortunate *awake* ones, groaned, face down in the dirt.

Did I mention that my back hurt, too? Maybe I'm getting too old for the whole traveling warrior thing, or maybe a chill messed with me, but I felt as though Argo had put the hooves to me in the middle of the night. Actually, considering how she'd been carrying on yesterday, that may be something I might want to take a look into after all of this...

Then there was my foot. To say there was swelling would be beyond my usual capacity for understatement. I would say it was in the painful neighborhood between ballooning and becoming a shorter, bloated, slightly-more-purple version of me. My mind (in an effort to protect me, no doubt) had erased the memory of slipping my boot on.

But you'd have to rip my toenails out before I'd ever admit to any or all of this. On my right foot of course, as the left one may be lacking in the toenail department—although, given the nature and ferociousness of the swelling, they may have still been there for all I knew. It was all I could do to disguise my limp as I moved gingerly through the village. There was no need to expose any potential weakness to our suspect. After all, they could be anyone.

One thing that kept me going was the good ole fashioned anger seething in the pit of my belly. Everything was feeding it. The birds. The bees. The flowers. The trees. Rhyming inside of my head. Everything.

What seemed to work the best was anything remotely related to and especially including Amazons. The way they built their huts, arranged them in stupid little rows

made me want to take a torch or siege engine to them. The feathers they wore, the weapons they waved around: don't even get me started. Then there were their customs, their games. I mean, a drinking contest? For the honor of the tribe? Body-slaves?

This brought me to the smoldering little center of my irritation—her highness. My foot seemed to throb an extra beat just thinking about her. What was she thinking? Drinking with Amazons? Dancing with nymphs? Getting her feet fondled by that Athena-wannabe?

Did she say that Artemis had tried to kiss her?

I shook my head in disgust. Bad idea when you have a stiff neck. In a word: ouch. Stars danced before my eyes as enough pain flooded my head to make my eyes water. Perfect, I thought as I wiped them carefully dry on my forearm. At least there wasn't anyone around to think I was crying.

What *was* Gabrielle thinking?

Then there was what happened on the way back to the hut. The kissing. On the neck. I'm sure the majority of it can be blamed on that stupid belt and the fact that if Gabrielle even looks at alcohol she gets drunk, but some of what she was doing had to come from somewhere. Didn't it?

How do I explain what I was feeling? I only have the belt as an excuse, and I wasn't going to give Pointy-face the satisfaction of admitting it anyway. Did I storm out of there last night because I was mad? Or was Gabrielle right? Was I jealous?

Or was I guilty?

The things I felt when she was doing what she was doing—Gods, I'd rather not go back there. I felt ashamed in a way. I'm not even sure how I resisted. Well, maybe I am. Gabrielle was such a dear friend, feeling that about her when she was in such an obviously vulnerable condition was just wrong. It was so Old Xena. So *Bad Xena* .

That's totally what it was, too. Succumbing to the spell of her supple body, exquisitely draped in the leathers of her Amazon outfit; the urge to slide my hand over the bare skin of her back into the hair at the back of her head; wanting to pull her head back and devour her lips with my own—those were all so Old Xena, Bad Xena.

Poor Gabrielle, this belt was turning me into some kind of menace. I was lucky to control myself last night, but what would happen if the belt's influence continued to strengthen? By tonight I might have to chain myself to a fencepost. Especially if Gabrielle continued to wear Amazon garb—it was just so revealing. In all the right places, too. I wasn't going to pester the bard about her morning exercises ever again; she had obviously been doing them and more. I had especially noticed the definition in Gabrielle's thigh muscles as that ditz Tula had run her hands all up and down them. My jaw tightened. Anger welled within me again.

Thinking about the night before, I was almost glad that I dumped her highness into that tub of crow-water. Things were too intense, too mixed up. I didn't know whether I would tear her apart or tear her clothes off. The moment needed to be broken, I needed space, needed to breathe. Gabrielle definitely needed the cold dunk.

I stopped. I was in front of the Queen's hut. There didn't seem to be any activity going

on from what I could hear. *Should I peek in the window?* I wondered. And what, catch Gabrielle snuggled asleep with her body-slave, or worse? It just didn't seem to be the best way to avoid what the belt was making me feel.

I sighed to myself. That damn thing could have cost me my friendship with Gabrielle. If things progressed who knows what would happen. I had to stop wasting time moping around the village and get this whole mess sorted out.

As I left, I did my best to catch a glimpse inside the hut, but I couldn't see anything. Maybe it was for the best.

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If there was ever a better time to attack the Amazons, I'd be hard-pressed to think of one. Many of the scattered tribes were gathered here in one place and many suffered the same problem: excess partying. Half the job was already done.

Walking toward the jail, I passed the unconscious and semi-conscious forms of countless Amazon sisters, strewn moaning and groaning throughout the streets and across the wagons. There was even one face down on top of a hut. Maybe it was just me, but for such a bleak image, it was all pretty funny.

Maybe it *was* just me...

What made it even funnier was Autolycus. I arrived at the jail and made my way past the groggy guards inside. There were unconscious and hung-over Amazons there as well, along with a myriad of signs that a huge party had taken place. In the midst of it all, at the apex of the feathers, and empty bottles, flagons and barrels, at the eye of the proverbial storm was the sulking and brooding face of Autolycus, the King of Thieves, who sat, arms on his knees, chin in his hands, on the floor of his cell.

Maybe it was just me, but for such a bleak image, it was all pretty funny.

I grinned as toothily as possible, after all, there seemed to be someone less enchanted with this place, this situation, than I was. "Well, look who's all saggy under the mustache this morning."

"Believe it or not, my friend," Autolycus began, never turning to look at me. "You've managed to find a way to not only make my life worse, but also—and here's where it takes real skill, so hat's off—also, you've managed to make me sympathize with Artemis." Finally, he scowled up at me

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, now *I* want to kill you, too." He smirked.

Maybe it *was* just me...

I leaned against the cell, gesturing to the Amazon shrapnel scattered on the floor. "Aw, come on, it must have been some show last night, huh?"

"You have no idea." He stood, stretching and groaning. "For such a miserable bunch, they really go squirrely after a couple of drinks."

I rolled my eyes, taking into account my own 'experiences' from the night before. "

You have no idea.”

Autolycus grinned. “What? Is there trouble in the Queen's hut?”

“What?” I crossed my arms and turned to face him.

“Y-you know.” He seemed uncertain. “With Gabrielle?”

I nodded, looking down. “Well, the belt is definitely having an... *affect* on her...”

“I'll bet!” He chuckled.

I turned, looking straight into his eyes. *What's gotten into him?* “It's not funny.”

He looked embarrassed. “Uh...sorry... it's just that...you know... what with what happened to the slaver woman and all...I just thought...”

“What Gabrielle does is her business, okay?” Pushing the image of Tula out of my mind, I gripped the bars and brought my face close. “Maybe you should shut up before I give you something worse than the wrath of a Goddess and her nation of bloodthirsty followers to worry about.”

Autolycus looked hurt—honestly hurt. “Hey...I'm sorry.” He blinked. “Sounds like the belt is affecting everyone. She can't be held responsible; no one can.” He seemed confused as he stared at me, trying to figure out what was going on in my head, presumably. Maybe he came to some kind of conclusion because a look of understanding dawned in his eyes and he seemed almost sympathetic.

I loosened my grip on the bars and realized I had been holding my breath. My anger rose again, this time because I let that stupid thing get the better of me again. Stepping back, I turned away and sighed. “No, Autolycus, I—I'm sorry. You're right, I was being...” I rubbed at my eyes.

“It's okay,” he said softly then cleared his throat. “So, any news? As much as I like hanging around here, I wouldn't mind leaving and never coming back. *Ever* .”

That made me turn and smile. “We have a couple of leads we're going to follow up on.” I leaned in to whisper. “It was an Amazon.”

“Really?” The King of Thieves' eyebrow rose in admiration. “Who would have thought? Makes sense though. Any idea which one took it?”

I nodded. “There're two we're looking at, maybe you've seen them. Mia's a tough looking brunette and Shawna's the sleek, dangerous blonde?”

“Yeah.” He smirked, coupled with a sardonic roll of the eyes. “*That* narrows it down.”

“Come on, think.” I looked around. “Maybe they were your guards?”

Recognition flashed across his face. “Oh yeah, I remember them.” He thought for a moment then nodded. “Yeah, now it makes sense...”

“What?” I was impatient. “*What* makes sense?”

“Well...they *were* my guards yesterday—both of them at the same time.” He nodded.

“They were the two assigned to watch me after I left you.”

“Okay. Go on.”

He chuckled. “They did *not* like each other, that's for sure.”

“How's that?”

“They had some kind of argument right in front of me.” He seemed disappointed. “I couldn't really hear what it was about exactly, but now that you mention it, it sounded like it could have been about the belt.”

“And?” Why, when people tell a story, do they have to take so long to relate it? My wariness of shortcuts did not apply when it came to information—the more succinct the better as far as I was concerned. I gave Autolycus the 'wrap-it-up' sign. “What did you hear?”

“Well, let's see.” He tried to remember. “One of them—the brunette, Mia—mentioned that what Shawna did wouldn't go unpunished.”

“Interesting...go on...”

“Then Shawna said something about how they both wanted the same thing and that she's been more than willing to share but...”

“‘But’?” This was taking too long. “Come on.”

“*But* —” he said, mocking my impatience. “Mia had been too selfish and wanted it all to herself.” He smiled. “Then they started trying to grab each other, you know, like as though they were about to start to wrestle or something? So I cracked a joke, like, how there was no need to start fighting over me and how there was enough of me to go around, you know, that whole bit?”

“I love that one.” I nodded, lying. “Then?”

His lips became a thin line. “Well, then they stopped fighting and uh...kinda stopped talking.” He shrugged. “They didn't say a word for the rest of the shift.”

I rolled my eyes. *Right back where we started...nowhere...* I reined in my compulsion to grab the King of Thieves by the scruff of the neck and sighed instead. “So... Autolycus...which one do you suspect has the belt now?”

“I have no idea. I would say that Shawna would be the best bet.”

“Wonderful.” I began heading for the door. “I'll let you know how it goes.”

“Hey wait!” He called from behind me.

“What?” Autolycus had a strange look then. I thought he was just going to wish me good luck or something along those lines, but he had this complex, concerned look that I would never have imagined on his face in a million years. “What is it?” I asked again.

He shook his head. “Nothing. Good luck.”

I smiled, though somewhat confused. “You too.”

Now all I had to do was find Shawna wherever she was hiding in the village and the half-naked, half-drunken rubble spread across it. Taking a breath of the crisp morning air I grinned widely. It was a tough job but someone had to do it...

* * *

XXIV. *Pretty Woman*

The mid-morning sun shone warmly against my shoulders as I took the steps down from my hut and strolled slowly towards the common area, my head high and my shoulders back, projecting a confidence and strength I had spent the last two hours talking myself into. I paused at the edges of the aftermath of last night's celebration, taking in the view of devastation. A slight exaggeration, I admit, but really, had I not known there'd been a party I might have yelled for the guard; with the bodies sprawled about in various states of disarray and everything else trashed, it looked like an invasion force had hit us.

With the exception of the occasional soft, muffled groan, the village was very quiet. “Looks like I'm the only one up so far.” That was okay. I could use a little bit more time to psyche myself up. One surreptitious glance down confirmed that the great pains I'd taken with my appearance still held; all the feathers, decorations and do-dads were in place. Conscious of the possibility of eyes on me, I deliberately paused, letting the morning silhouette me, catching on the highlights in my thoroughly-brushed hair and the shiny edges of the jewelry and feathers I'd carefully adorned myself with.

Then, taking a page from Xena's book, I added a swagger to my stride as I headed for Artemis' quarters. Two Amazons sitting slumped in the shadows of a hut watched my approach, their visibly bloodshot eyes avidly following the gentle sway of my body. Their faces grew more familiar as I got closer. Their eyes also grew wider as they identified me in turn.

“Good morning, Solari, Eponin,” I drawled, pleased with their unabashed admiration as well as the fact that I appeared to be handling my hangover better than they were theirs. I waved off their clumsy attempts to get respectfully to their feet. “No, no. Sit down. You don't look like you're ready to move around too much yet.” I smiled.

Eponin sighed in relief and gratefully resumed her spot on the ground, her head falling back to rest against the wall behind her. “No, ma'am,” she agreed very, *very* quietly. Her strong face was pale and tired, and I stared curiously at the freshly minted black eye she was sporting.

“Have either of you seen Xena?”

“Nope,” Eponin whispered.

“Not since she walked through here with you in her arms while you sucked on her nec—Ow!” Solari rubbed her arm where the other Amazon had elbowed her.

Oh my gods. Had I done that in front of the *entire* village? Any embarrassment I might have felt was immediately sidetracked when I noticed that Solari was wet from head to toe. “Um, partied hard?” I gestured to her soaking leathers.

Solari looked at me woefully. "I'm not sure. But when I woke up this morning I was lying on Cook's chopping block next to the tomatoes."

"In nothing but her top," Eponin added helpfully.

Solari elbowed her friend. "Hey!"

The weapons-master, however, was made of sterner stuff. "She was covered in honey and decorated with peeled garlic cloves."

I laughed gently. "After the trouble you caused me with that drinking contest, you definitely earned that."

Solari blushed and Eponin chuckled.

The red-faced Amazon poked her friend. "Laugh it up. Maybe I should tell her majesty where *you* woke up? And how?"

Eponin snapped her mouth shut with a click, her fingers going automatically to her face before she caught herself and lowered her hand.

"That bad, huh?" I asked, trying not to smile too widely.

"Let's just say she wasn't alone." Solari grinned. Eponin glared at her.

Heading off the imminent violence radiating from Eponin's bloodshot eyes, I leaned over and interrupted. "Have you seen Artemis?"

Both women shrugged and shook their heads. "Sorry, your majesty."

Damn. "If you happen to see Xena will you tell her that I've gone looking for Artemis?" At least that way Xena would know I was following through on her strategy from last night. Between the effects of the belt and the even more pressing run-down on time, I knew we were probably going to wind up cutting this one close. *Assuming we can solve it at all.* And where would that leave us? How far did the goddess' influence range? Would the Amazons be defenseless, caught in the trap of the belt's influence? Or worse yet, the machinations of someone with less than good intentions? *Crap* . "Is anyone on patrol or do they all look like you two?" Bad enough to have problems from within, but with slavers in the area, the last thing we needed was an outside incursion to deal with as well.

"I assigned a handful last night," Eponin answered, but her dark brows drew together in sudden thought and she looked far more alert.

"You're sure they're still sober?" I didn't want to question her guards' discipline, but this *was* the biggest holiday of the Amazon culture. Who wouldn't feel left out having to stand duty on the edges of the village while everyone else lived it up within your hearing?

Eponin opened her mouth to answer and then turned to look at Solari who raised her eyebrows in return. Eponin climbed to her feet with surprising ease and held a hand down to Solari while keeping her attention steady on me. "Are we expecting trouble?"

You have no idea . But I didn't dare tell her; with all the significance of the upcoming

ceremony the loss of Artemis' belt, and further—her powers, would be seen as the worst omen possible. “Let's just say that with the ceremony approaching I'd prefer we cover all the bases.” I looked off towards the treetops, wondering what else Xena might do. “I'd like a report in two candle-marks on our preparedness. What was our level of effectiveness last night? Do we need to make changes for tonight and tomorrow? If you can't find me, I want you to brief Xena. She may have further orders for you.”

“Understood.” Eponin inclined her head towards me and then slapped the back of her hand against Solari's shoulder. “Let's go.” I watched them head off at the quickest determined pace their individual hangovers would allow. As soon as they rounded the corner, I heard the beginnings of a fading conversation:

“Did you *see* the way she looked?”

“I know. Put your tongue back in your mouth and pick up the pace.”

I rubbed my nose and grinned. *Looks like the outfit was worth the effort.* But now it was time to see if Artemis would think the same thing and if I could turn that to my advantage. I squared my shoulders and headed towards Artemis' hut, hoping she was in.

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There was no answer when I knocked, so I poked my head in wondering if she might be sleeping. *Do the gods sleep?* The antechamber appeared deserted and the overall feel of the place was quiet and empty. If I was going to put my plan into play, it had to start now. I took one deep breath to get me going and then pushed the door wide open and walked into the room as if it were still mine.

My eyes roamed over the room, but little had been disturbed since I'd last been here. “Artemis,” I called. “If you can hear me, I'd like to speak with you.” There—polite, but firm. I stood expectantly in the middle of the room, adopting a dignified pose, my hands clasped behind my back. I had a feeling it displayed my front to greater advantage while still maintaining a regal profile. Given her recent behavior, I figured Artemis might appreciate it.

Having experienced it once, I thought that I was prepared for her appearance, but the wash of silky summer breeze over my skin was like a lover's caress, stirring the fine hairs across my body and making me shiver. A ghostly hint of strawberries spilled across my palate and I swallowed, feeling a subtle hunger in spite of my unsettled stomach. The air in front of me lightened, as if a sunbeam had tumbled through the ceiling, swirling inside with dancing motes and the shutter-quick flit of the suggestion of butterfly wings that drew both light and shadow. I was mesmerized. Her appearance was so gradual, I was almost uncertain when she finally stood before me, solid and still once again.

“Good morning,” I said, taking control immediately. Instead of fighting the effects of her appearance, I went with it and was surprised to find that I recovered my composure all the faster for doing so. Mind you, it was still rather intoxicating. I couldn't help but notice that she had changed her attire; leather boots over soft-looking, doe-colored leggings with a belted, sleeveless tunic overtop. A small silver torque rested in the hollow of her throat.

She remained exactly where she was, almost disconcertingly close. “And to you, Gabrielle. You called for me?”

I nodded. “I thought we could talk about your belt some more. Maybe go over the ceremony.”

Her eyes flickered over my shoulder. “Xena's not with you. Where's your so-called hero?”

Boy, *someone* was in a snarky mood this morning. “She's following up on some leads. I thought this would be a good time for you and me to get together. And talk.” Unlike our previous encounters, I didn't shy away or attempt to put distance between us. Instead, I lifted my chin and simply looked at her. From the way she returned my gaze, I wondered if there was such a thing as having a mission be *too* successful.

Artemis crossed her bare arms over her chest. “I fail to see what good it will do.”

Snarky *and* depressed. “Let's sit and work it through; you never know what bit of information might give us a new lead to work on.” I put my hand on her forearm and gently pulled her towards me. The muscles beneath my fingers tensed briefly, but almost at once I felt her give in. “C'mon,” I urged her with a smile. With considerable docility she trailed along behind me, a somewhat bemused expression on her face.

I led her to the fur-covered divan and let her sit first before settling myself close beside her, folding my legs beneath me and allowing the hem of my skirts to rise ever so slightly. She noticed. I watched her hard slate eyes follow the line of my legs, to my bare mid-riff, stutter over my cleavage until they found my face as I rested my arm along the sloping back edge of the couch. There was an edginess to her, an uncertainty and I smiled. I could feel the laziness of it, the curl of my lips. For the first time since I'd met her face-to-face I felt in control, and it gave me an unfamiliar surge of confidence and power as a result.

“We need to know more about the belt,” I began. “Is there anything you've left out that we should know about?”

“Why do you ask?” Artemis' brows drew together, her tone wary.

“Someone out there has your belt and, according to you, will inherit your abilities by tomorrow night if we don't get it back. We need to know what we'll be dealing with if that happens.”

Her face darkened at the mention of her loss and she turned her face away towards the window. “I can barely feel the forest anymore,” she said softly.

I put my hand over hers and was surprised to find it cold. It was an easy thing to tuck my hand around hers and the contact brought her attention back to me. “We're going to try really hard to get your belt back, but we can't do it without your help. So tell me; how bad could things get?”

Artemis gathered herself, but her eyes dropped to where my hand held hers. “Without enforcing control, all creatures will be brought to a baser expression of their emotions. Animals and people alike look to their own self-interests in their pursuit of survival...” Her brow wrinkled in thought. “I would expect violence, possessiveness

over perceived territory, a feral wildness that intensifies whatever people might be feeling at any given moment.”

Ah. “Like jealousy, for example?” I could still feel the residual churn in my belly at the thought of Xena with another woman.

Artemis smirked darkly. “Even the Warrior Princess will not escape its influence.”

It was no doubt a jab at Xena over her behavior last night. I decided not to address it. “Do we have any time before the thief figures out how to control the belt?”

Her jaw tightened and she shrugged. “I can't guess, but I suspect I'll lose my powers tomorrow, at moonrise, when we dance. How long it takes for them to figure out the trick of controlling things...” Artemis shook her head.

“And there's nothing else you can tell me? No other abilities that they'll be able to take advantage of? Something?” I pressed.

“No! I don't know!” she barked and rose to her feet. Artemis paced the room, worrying the tip of her braid between her fingers. “I've told you everything I can think of; animals, the woods, the hunt... I help mothers in childbirth and embody chastity and emotional restraint. These are my spheres of influence! Apollo outshines me and Aphrodite mocks me, while Athena and Ares each condescend to me in their own way; she decries my youth and he deems me undisciplined! And Zeus... Zeus is a negligent father. He'll only mark my absence when it occurs to him that he wants something of me.” She threw her hands in the air. “Is there a worse fate than this? I can think of no greater punishment than to be laid so low as to be forced to bestride the world in wretched humanity! It's unbearable!” Artemis snatched up the decanter from a side table and hurled it with shocking force to explode in a dangerous spray of pottery shards against the far wall.

I pressed back against the couch and gasped at her show of rage.

She tried to depart, then; the sunlit column of light enveloped her swiftly and I felt the wave of her power as it manifested itself, phasing her in and out of my sight before dying away and leaving her standing there in front of me. She tried again. And again. Each effort produced less and less a result until finally nothing happened at all.

Her power had, in spite of her best guess, failed her already.

“No...” The mask of desolation and pain was heart-wrenching and she turned wounded eyes on me, pale with shock and disbelief. “Not yet. Please, not yet...” Artemis looked to me and I was touched by her fear and her anguish, by her stark vulnerability. “It can't be gone, Gabrielle.” Her eyes glistened and before I could stop to think about it, I went to her and took her in my arms. She trembled as she clutched at me. “I can't live like this! I can't... Please, I beg of you... help me...”

All pride and arrogance had been stripped away right in front of my eyes. “I will. It'll be okay.” She leaned into me, her forehead falling to my shoulder. I could feel the hot-cold splash of tears against my skin and I hugged her tighter. “We'll find it.” I rubbed the back of her neck comfortingly, wishing I had the first clue of what to do for her. “The other gods won't help?”

Artemis gave a bitter laugh. “Oh, for certain; they'll help by destroying the thief and

taking my powers for their own. I dare not draw attention to myself.”

Power struggles. The push and pull of divine boredom taken out on the hapless lives of mortals. I couldn't see Aphrodite or Athena doing so, but Ares? I couldn't see him passing up the chance for a few extra followers. And something tells me he wouldn't mind adding the Amazons to his stable of warriors. *As if we didn't have enough reasons for getting her belt back already.*

Unlike before, in the tree, her weeping now was quiet and deep—the grieving of a very lost soul. I felt so badly for her. “Hey,” I whispered, drawing back to see her eyes. Her cheek was hectic and warm beneath my hand. “You can't give up hope. We have almost two days still. Something's bound to give, you'll see.” My optimistic nature couldn't help but look for the possibilities.

She nodded hesitantly, wanting to hope, but even still; I could see the doubt shadowing her eyes. “I want you to know...” She paused, swallowing, and considered her words. “I want you to know how much your support and your efforts have meant to me, Gabrielle. It is no small task you've taken on and... and I won't ever forget this, though I doubt my ability to repay the debt. Of a certain, just this would never be enough...” Smoothly, the tears still trickling down her face, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine. Goddess or no, powers or no, I was still shocked into thrall, unable to stop her and even less able to pull away. *Oh gods...*

Her mouth was warm and soft and I, even inexperienced as I was, could sense her own innocence and uncertainty. The contact was incendiary. I wanted to control her, consume her, to own her mouth, and the power of that longing—that on top of everything else—only heightened my desire. The hunger was a needful thing, demanding more as her lips found my jaw and then my throat. *Yes*. I slid my hands along her skin feeling the strong muscles flex and move as her hands found me. Gods, it felt good! I exhaled hard, my hands gripping her arms as my head fell back. I wanted her to kiss me again. I couldn't believe this was happening... *Finally...* Her mouth found mine again, more confidently this time, and I murmured her name against her lips...

Everything stopped.

Confused, I opened my eyes and was aghast to see Artemis staring at me with a blank, unreadable expression. Without a word she dropped her hands from me and left; her silent, accusing footsteps echoing the hollow pounding of my heart in the still and empty room.

It was not Artemis' name I had whispered.

* * *

XXV. Sometimes You Feel Like a Nut... (or Squirrel Interrupted)

I like to keep things simple.

Maybe that's why I found becoming a warrior so natural a process. It all comes down to skill versus skill, blow versus blow, tactic against scheme until, in the end, the better warrior is victorious. Someone wins, someone loses. Simple.

Sneaking around, getting to the bottom of things, that's not really a warrior's job. It's

unnecessarily complicated, vague work—not simple and straight forward at all. Oh sure, being a solitary warrior, you find yourself forced to do this sort of thing a lot of the time. Let's face it; a warlord's camp doesn't just up and scout itself. But I can't say it's what makes me get out of bed and do this everyday.

Whether I enjoyed it or not, I didn't have much trouble finding Mia. She was one of the only Amazons that seemed to be moving with any sort of purpose that morning. I spotted her heading in a straight line out of the village through the trees, straight toward the river. I followed at an even pace about a hundred yards away.

There are three rules to trailing someone. I know I said I didn't like doing this sort of thing, that doesn't mean I don't do it well. I have many skills. Anyway, the rules: first, no matter how far away you are, you want to stay in your quarry's blind spot—it just makes good sense and unless they get lucky, they won't spot you.

Second, be mindful of the noises around you. Are there buzzing bugs, chirping birds? Wind? Leaves blowing? A river? Take stock of them all and don't disturb their natural rhythms. Move steadily and with fluid movements. Don't upset the undertone of your surroundings, become a part of it. Sounds wishy-washy, but it works.

Finally—this rule sounds easy, but it's the one everyone always seems to break—don't get too close, don't get too far. The problem with this one is there's no one particular distance that is correct, it varies with any given situation and terrain. In a city, a crowded one like Rome or Athens, you can follow someone so close you could touch them—sometimes that's the best way.

Out there in the forest, a hundred yards was a better bet. Especially allowing for the heightened sense and familiarity of the woods Mia no doubt possessed. I also kept to the shadows as much as I could. The morning light cast them like dark spears through the trees, which served me well. I know a lot of people think I got it made just for the looks, but this armor and leather number is surprisingly invisible under the right conditions.

Mia continued on toward the river. Her pace remained steady, although she occasionally slowed before picking things up again. She seemed to be tracking someone, too. Pretty funny, I guess. Ironic, to be precise, or, Gabrielle-like.

With a sigh, I wondered if Gabrielle was even going to bother with her task for the morning. Then I thought better. It involved hanging out with Artemis, so probably.

As with the Amazons, I just couldn't see the attraction the goddess held for the bard. I mean, she seemed so un-Gabrielle. Artemis was laconic; an enigmatic loner more interested in hunting and war craft than literature or philosophy. A goddess who chose action rather than talk when it came to her feelings or problems. I couldn't see how Gabrielle would be interested in someone like that.

Suddenly, Mia crouched, so I did the same. Maybe her quarry had stopped or caught sight of her. The Amazon crawled slowly through the underbrush. I decided to hit the high ground so I could get a closer look. One good thing about this part of Greece; the trees were great for climbing. I was soon up in the canopy and moving toward Mia.

As I leaped from one large oak to another, my ears were filled with a loud, very

annoying chattering. I looked up to where the sound was coming from in time to notice a handful of hazelnuts headed straight for my face.

For some reason I was possessed to say: “By the Gods—” before I could catch myself, as the nuts ricocheted off my cheeks. I backed up and saw my attackers: a family of flying squirrels who appeared far more vicious than one would think possible. I waved my hand at them menacingly. “Beat it!” I whispered.

More chattering erupted from the things, a possessed look in their tiny eyes. I never understood why people thought they were cute; they were just rats with bushy tails to me. They pelted me with acorns this time. I growled at them, resisting the impulse to take the chakram to their little nest. Instead, I leaped to another branch, landing quietly. The slight jolt shook a hazelnut free from my hair and into my breastplate. I cursed under my breath, as it wedged uncomfortably in there against my skin.

I looked down to find my quarry. My eyes widened in surprise. Mia was standing over Shawna and another woman, who seemed to be clutching each other, in fear perhaps. I quieted my breathing (which was aggravated by the irritating nut chaffing around in my armor) so I could hear what was being said.

Mia moved closer to the prone figures. “—why I never trusted you.”

The other woman—Shawna's accomplice perhaps?—bowed her head. Shawna sneered up at Mia. “You never trusted her because you would have done the exact same thing if you had the chance.”

“Shut up, thief!” Mia raged, pacing oddly. This really seemed to be getting to her. *Shawna was the thief, then?*

“I only took what you could never appreciate,” Shawna retorted. *So, Mia took the belt then Shawna took it from her?*

Shawna began to get to her feet. Mia fell upon her and the two began to roll about on the forest floor. If one of them had the powers of the belt, they weren't using it. The two Amazons were clawing and biting and punching for all they were worth. It was a pretty vicious business, due in part, I suspected, to the influence of the belt.

“The weapons-master was no match for me, what makes you think you'll be?” Mia taunted.

Shawna flipped Mia over and punched her in the gut. “Eponin was drunk and half-unconscious already when you blind-sided her.”

The other woman got to her feet and, after biting at her hands for a bit, screamed, “Stop fighting over me!”

I blinked in disbelief and then scrubbed a hand across my face in disgust. “I don't believe this...” I whispered through gritted teeth. “You've gotta be kidding me...”

The battling Amazons didn't seem to hear the woman's cries, but I did. My blood began to churn as I started to get the picture. Plus, that nut was driving me crazy. I dropped down out of the trees.

“Okay, break it up, ladies.” I grabbed Shawna by the ponytail and Mia by the top of

her head and lifted them to their feet. Then I clanked their skulls together and let them fall to the ground in a daze. “Now, listen to me: Mia—” she blinked glassy-eyed at me, “—you're going to back off. Your little friend has moved on and you should respect that, right? And you—” I turned to Shawna. “You're going to stop acting so cocky; if Mia snuck up on me like that in my own neck of the woods, I wouldn't be so smug.” I nodded toward the other woman. “I didn't catch your name.”

She turned, slightly embarrassed. “Eserra.”

“Well, Eserra... *Smarten up!*” I bellowed. “Maybe if you actually respected yourself you wouldn't jump on everything with two legs and a heartbeat. It causes everyone headaches they don't need, especially the weapons-master, who's got more important things to worry about.” They were all blinking at me, mouths agape. I crossed my arms. “Now, you can pack things up here and go back to the village yourselves, or I can do it for you.” I gave them ‘the Eyebrow.’ “What's it gonna be?”

Mia got to her feet and dusted off her leathers, she had a big sulk on her face but seemed like she would comply. The other two preened each other lovingly, not paying attention to the outside world. Soon, they got to their feet as well.

I scratched at my breastplate, that nut was still in there causing a major itch. I couldn't take it anymore and began attacking myself, my armor, shaking it and pulling at it and jumping, until finally, by the Gods, that cursed hazelnut dropped to the ground. I punted it into the air in the direction of the squirrels. “Ha,” I laughed, fiercely, though quietly in triumph.

Looking up, I noticed the three women casting dubious looks my way. I cleared my throat. “Right,” I said by way of an explanation and stormed off toward the village. I could swear I heard chattering from up in the trees.

To say I was frustrated would be like saying Oedipus had ‘family problems’—I was livid. As I've said before, I like things simple and the situation was becoming more complicated by the second. We started with two suspects and now had none. In fact, we had no evidence at all, except that an Amazon stole the belt. I was still sure of that, at least.

I stopped in my tracks.

If the likely culprit was still an Amazon hiding in plain sight, what was I doing in the forest and not in the Amazon village?

I broke into a sprint, headed directly for the Queen's hut.

* * *

XXVI. Of Amazon Bondage

I couldn't tell how long I'd been standing there after Artemis left me. On wooden legs I drifted back to the divan and slowly sat down, my fingers going to my lips. My warm and traitorous lips. “I can't believe I did that,” I whispered. How could I have let that happen?

There had been no warning, no sense of crossing the line from right to wrong this time, no internal signal to mark the moment when I had somehow... *accepted* her

attentions, and worse... desired them. What unnerved me the most, however, was the sudden and disorienting warp in my perceptions of what had been going on—and what's more... who I was with. “I can't...” I covered my face with my hands and then ran them through my hair. “...can't believe this.”

Gone were Artemis' powers, and with it all *obvious* signs of the belt's influence as well. How could I know what I really was or wasn't feeling from moment to moment?

The ramifications of that were obvious. “Xena's gonna freak.”

Great. “So now I have a defrocked goddess wandering around all pissed off, with other gods likely looking to put her permanently out of the picture. This just gets better and better.” I'd have to go find Artemis and put her under wraps until Xena managed to find the belt before something bad happened—as if what had already happened wasn't bad enough. “Damn it.”

I headed for the door, thinking furiously about where Artemis was likely headed. Artemis, by nature, was too much of a loner to want to wander around the village, which meant that as soon as I could pick up my staff from my hut, I'd be heading out into the woods.

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I tucked my staff in the curve of my arm as I took a drink from my waterskin and listened to the quiet call and twitters of the birds in the trees overhead. An hour on the trail and I'd already managed to lose her. The tracks I'd picked up at Artemis' doorway that had led me into the woods had disappeared about ten minutes ago, but I'd kept wandering back and forth across my last sighting until, frustrated, I'd decided to stop for a break. The trees were empty but for the birds and the occasional squirrel, and nothing else around me moved.

“Just where did you go?” The goddess of hunting... reasonably, she could be anywhere given her ability to trail game and hide at will. It was beginning to look as though coming out here without someone more experienced in tracking was a mistake. I decided to give it one last try before heading back to the village. “Artemis!” I called. “Can you hear me?” Nothing but bird song. “Rats.”

A fallen trunk at knee-level beckoned to me so I crossed over and took a seat. Had I missed something? *Maybe there's a clue back along the trail, especially if she doubled back on me...*

“Now, who would've thought this'd be so easy?” A low and husky voice behind me asked and I immediately shot forward and spun around, my staff at the ready.

A man and woman stood before me. He was one of those long-haired giants who manage to avoid even an accidental acquaintanceship with a bath, and she... *My gods*. She had a stunning figure; full-breasted, rounded hips, both of which were barely covered by some impractical looking chain-mail armor. Her fall of auburn hair failed to cover a curiously spectacular looking goose-egg of a bruise swelling from her forehead. With the exception of that, she looked like something straight out of those pin-up paintings I've seen in blacksmiths' repair shops.

Now, usually it's the guys, but I felt her gaze like a greasy smear on my skin. Her

companion stepped forward, balancing the head of his club in the palm of his left hand.

“C'mere, sweetness,” she crooned through pouty lips. “We won't hurt you, a lot.”

“I don't think so.” I took another step back and took a firmer grip on my staff. Her accent was unfamiliar to me, but her companion's weapon made me suspect he was a slaver. Being so far away from the village—and on my own—I knew I was in trouble. I couldn't hear anything behind me so I took another step back.

“I don't think she likes us, Iskra,” the man said as he started swinging his club lazily at his side.

“Goodness, Nao, I think you're right. Pity that doesn't matter at all,” she replied. “C'mon, girl. There's a nice Amazon.”

I eyed the distance between us and noted how Iskra's buddy started moving to my right to flank me. “You don't want to do this. Really, I'm not even an Amazon. I'm from a sheep village.”

“Ha, ha!” Nao guffawed. “Hear that, Iskra? She tells jokes. She'll be great fun at camp.”

The other woman leered gently and ran her fingers along her chain mail bikini. “I'd think she'd be fun no matter what.”

I'd heard enough. Smiling as they sidled closer, I suddenly turned to escape, thinking to use my knowledge of the woods to get away. It might have worked too, if I hadn't run into someone's fist first.

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I drifted in the confusing memory of my mother's onion-y soup. Thick and savory, I could almost taste it on my tongue, but the coppery tang was wrong, the ache didn't belong. There should have been more seasoning. More salt, I thought. I licked my lips and twitched myself to awareness as my tongue hit a sore spot, and was startled to find myself in muffled darkness, my head and cheek pounding. Heavy cloth covered my face and when I reached up to get it off, I discovered that my hands had been tied behind my back. I was a prisoner. Again.

I'm so over this. Each mission wasn't complete unless I'd been captured, tied-up or held at knifepoint at least once. With this level of practice and experience, I'd come to the point where I could tell what was fashionable bondage material in the warlord community. Most seemed partial to a strip of leather or rope, perhaps the occasional rusty manacle and chain combination (usually for indoor use or dungeons), or maybe even someone's dirty shirt (hated that one, I couldn't get the smell off for two days). My skin's tough; I don't mind most of those, but there seemed to be a new rope on the market they like; this dry, prickly stuff that itches like a fiend and is harder to work free. Of course, it would figure that these people would pick it, right? I'd even started collecting knots, but disappointingly enough these people were only using a diagonal lashing with a couple of simple knots at the end. Just out of reach of my fingers, unfortunately.

At least they had only used woven sackcloth for the hood, thankfully letting me

breathe even if it *was* stifling and dark. Between the heat, the discomfort and the knowledge that not only was I completely alone, but no one else knew where I was, my anxiety was increasing and I started breathing too fast. Inside my hood, a sweat broke across my upper lip and forehead and I knew that if I didn't calm down, I was going to pass right out. My eyes blindly searched the darkness as I tried to visualize calming things—me on my bedroll next to the campfire; the reassuring sounds of Xena sharpening her blade before bed; the security of her near me. I indulged in a moment's uncharacteristically vicious, yet gleeful imagining of what she'd do to these guys if she knew what they'd done to me.

There. I let out a breath and then, feeling more focused and clear-headed, I strained my ears to listen to my captors.

“—cannot ex-cape! She is trussed like a pig.”

“Are you sure we can't have her for a while first?”

“Quiet.” A woman's voice. Soft and clear. I wanted to hear it again. “Get her up, Iskra. Nao, you're going to deliver the message.”

“Me?” Nao grunted in surprise. “You will need *me* to carry her back. You might be an Amazon, but you're way too small. Look at that—scrawny little muscles. Leave Iskra to deliver your message.”

I didn't hear the answer, but I jumped at the familiar hum of my staff whipped quickly through the air and the very moist and unpleasant crunch as it struck its target. A second later it was followed by a woman's scream and a heavy thud. A low, agonized moan began somewhere near my feet.

“W-why did you do that?!” Iskra demanded, her voice verging on hysteria. “Get out of my way!”

“No.” That same voice again, that tickled my mind. I wracked my brain, but couldn't place it.

“He's still alive!”

“I know. I'm surprised. Thicker skull than I thought.” A rustle of sound nearby made me tense. “Now, pick her up.” I felt hands grab me and lever me to my feet. My head throbbed at the change of position and I staggered in my captor's grip.

“I thought you were going to give him a message to give them,” Iskra said, all her earlier bravado gone. Her quick breathing echoed my own.

“Slut, his corpse *is* the message. And so is this.” Something else hit the ground and I wasn't sure, but I thought it might be my staff.

“Get the cloth.”

There was a rustle of movement from Iskra and I felt her lean away from me. “This is the one you meant?”

“Put it there—no, there, to your left.”

I was left to stand on my own as Iskra followed her orders. Suddenly I felt someone

close to me, in my personal space. Someone who felt different than Iskra did. I tried to remain calm, hoping to get a clue as to who this was.

“We're going for a walk now, your majesty,” the mysterious woman said to me. “I'd suggest cooperating; I'd hate to have you slip and injure yourself.” I felt the prick of a blade against my bare belly and didn't have to imagine what kind of accident they had planned if I tried to get away. From everything I've seen, gut wounds are the worst. Stiffly, I nodded. “Let's go. When we get back to camp, I want a word with Queen Gabrielle, here. I have some absolutely divine conversation planned for us.”

A hand in the middle of my back shoved me into motion, and I stumbled a few times until my arm was grabbed and I was able to steady myself on the path.

I wasn't sure which part scared me more: that the real thief we'd been searching for had just found me, or that I was about to be alone with her. Though blind and injured, I began surreptitiously trying to reach the knots holding me; depending on what she was after, I wasn't sure I was going to get any better chance than this.

* * *

XXVII. From Bad to Worse and Back Again (Or CSI: Mycenae)

Since I'm not easily winded, I could run and still manage to curse under my breath.

Hercules hadn't mentioned anywhere that part of the wandering hero gig involved sorting out Amazon love triangles on top of a regular day's work of fighting slavers and hunting down divine artifacts. This state of affairs was really making me think I should re-evaluate this whole reformed warlord kick I'd been on for the last couple of years. I mean, before all of this I had been “*Bad Xena*” for way longer—like, ten winters at least. What made me think I was *this* Xena and not *that* one? What was the point of all of this?

I knew what the answer was—or *who* it was, anyway.

When things were good, there was a lot to remind me that yes, I am a good person who likes good things, whoop-dee-doo! You don't have to be Socrates to see that it's easy to maintain positive focus when things are positive. The sound of Argo's footfalls on a dry road; the smell of really good stew boiling over a fire; fishing in a fresh stream—all of it could put a smile on your face and make you feel that no matter what could happen, the universe was a good and wondrous place.

On a bad day (and this one was currently writing the book on bad days), if I didn't have something—or someone—that stood out as a positive force in my life, well, let's just say a lot of people, in a lot of places could get hurt.

Who am I kidding? There's only one person who would be worse off and I knew it.

As I raced through the forest, I started to get that bad feeling that had been accompanying this whole mess since the beginning. It didn't go away really, it just ebbed and flowed in different stages of discomfort and worry. I increased my pace hoping that my bad feeling stayed in its current incarnation as a knot in my stomach, rather than anything more tangible.

On the edges of the village I noticed two figures racing through the woods. It was

Ephiny with a rattled looking Eponin in tow. Angling towards them, I nodded as I came to a stop in front of them. The worry lines on both their foreheads didn't inspire confidence.

"Fancy running into you two out here," I quipped.

Ephiny looked to where I had been running from with her signature blend of sarcasm and suspicion. "Where were you?"

"Finding out that everything we know is completely wrong." I smirked.

The two Amazons exchanged a confused glance then Eponin stepped forward. "Queen Gabrielle wanted you to know that she ordered a reinforcement of the guard."

"Good." The weapons-master seemed sheepish about what she had said. I tilted my head. "And?"

"And...well... It was a rough night for everyone... The tribe is looking a little green under the gills." She straightened. "But I'm doing my best to get everything in order."

"Let's hope it works out better for you than your love life," I said, indicating the faint shiner I assumed was a result of her encounter with Mia from the night before.

Ephiny put her hand in front of her face and coughed as the weapons-master blushed a very lovely shade of crimson. Eponin blinked. "Uhm... I'll...I... right." And she scampered off toward the village.

I turned to the Regent. "Where's Gabrielle?"

Ephiny shrugged. "I was hoping you knew." She half-turned toward the village. "She had intended to find Artemis earlier this morning, but I haven't seen her since then."

I didn't wait for her to finish the thought before I started up for the goddess' hut. We raced past several zombie-like Amazons before we reached it and stormed inside.

Empty.

Ephiny shrugged. "The Queen's hut?"

We ran across the village. I sprang up the stairs into the darkness.

The place was deserted. Nonchalantly I glanced at the bed-sheets. It appeared that only one person had slept in them. I beamed to myself. Ephiny poked around as respectfully as possible.

Then I noticed it. Gabrielle's staff was gone. *Good girl* ... I caught myself. Where was she going that she thought she would need to be armed?

"She's probably not in the village if she needed her staff," Ephiny conjectured answering my unspoken question.

I nodded then moved outside. The ground around the front of the hut had been relatively undisturbed so far that morning. The same could be said about much of the village. With any luck, I could pick up the bard's trail and at least have a general idea where she might have gone. I knelt close to the pathway.

In the dust I managed to find Gabrielle's prints, thanks to the small imperfection on the right sole of her boots, put there by a night she had decided to stand late watch with me and managed to not only fall asleep on the job, but lean her foot into the campfire. It was a good thing I've got an extremely sensitive nose or she would have melted more than just some shoe leather.

I started to leave. Ephiny followed. Turning toward her, I raised my eyebrow. "Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

"With you, to find Gabrielle," she said, crossing her arms with a stubborn scowl.

At that, I crossed my arms. "No you're not." I was getting angry, which is probably why I said: "You'll just hold me back."

The Regent's face reddened. She paused, taking a breath before answering. "You don't know the woods around here as well as I do."

"Look, I'll be able to find my friend just fine."

"She's your friend, but she's *my* Queen. So I'm coming with you." Ephiny looked at me with a strong, piercing gaze, her body postured for anything.

We were wasting time doing this. I smiled, shaking my head. "Wow, you really take that Regent stuff seriously, don't you?" She smiled, backing off slightly and relaxing. I shrugged. "Let's go."

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Ephiny followed as I traced Gabrielle's route through the village and out into the eastern woods. Here, the tracking became easier. I stopped and indicated the signs. "She wasn't trying to hide or sneak around at all."

Ephiny nodded. "These are the Goddess' favorite woods. Maybe Gabrielle came here to find Artemis?"

I walked over to a log. "Well, she stopped here." That girl never met a place she couldn't turn into a seat. My heart jumped as I looked beyond the fallen tree into a small, enclosed clearing. "Ephiny..."

The clearing was the scene of a recent struggle. As well as Gabrielle, at least three other people had been involved. There were some broken twigs and blades of grass. I crouched, appraising as much as I could. "Gabrielle was surprised by two people." I furrowed my brows. "Looks like slavers, judging by the footprints."

Ephiny stepped carefully around the clearing. "She adopted a defensive stance here." The Amazon looked curiously at the ground. "She seemed to be backing off. Trying to escape maybe?"

I nodded. *Good girl...*

I stood looking at the scene again. Flies buzzed angrily around my head. *Damn belt ...* I swatted at them and moved to the other side of the clearing. "It looks like she made a break for it here and—" My heart sank. A third set of footprints appeared, and a large void in the grass indicated that a body, unconscious or otherwise, had fallen into the

underbrush. There were tiny droplets of blood in the grass. I rubbed at my eyes. I had to force the visions of the three shades of death I was going to rain down on these people for hurting Gabrielle, and focus on the matter at hand.

“She was...she was knocked down here.” Ephiny stared at the ground for a moment before looking at me. Very gravely her hand lighted on my shoulder. “An Amazon Queen is worth more alive than dead.” I ignored the fact that Ephiny sounded as though she were convincing herself of that statement as much as me.

I knelt, looking at the new prints. There was something about them. Suddenly it hit me. “Gods.” I looked up at Ephiny. “These are the same footprints we found where Autolycus was attacked.”

Ephiny's face blanched. “But that means...”

I nodded. “The thief has the belt *and* Gabrielle.” More flies buzzed around my head, into my hair, my face. They didn't seem to be bothering Ephiny, who had followed some more of the tracks further into the woods. I growled and swatted at the stupid things. Fish. Crows. Cats. Squirrels. Flies. What next?

Ephiny had stopped up ahead, her body unnaturally still. “Xena...”

Parting the cloud of flies I hurried to the Regent's side.

At first I noticed that there were more flies here than where I had been before. This was frustrating. Then I noticed why Ephiny had called me. Based on the signs, this was where Gabrielle had been dragged by the slavers. I swallowed hard as evidence of another struggle was visible.

Most unsettling was the source of all the fly activity; the body. The slaver ‘King’ lay face down in the grass, the side of his head caved in. Based on the wound, he had been hit once (there's never much blood, if any, on the first hit) with a blunt object. I had an idea what that might be.

Looking around, the events became confused. The tracks disturbed and cluttered. “Maybe she...maybe she woke up...started struggling...even escaped...” I said, unsure.

Then I saw it, Gabrielle's staff lying on the ground. I picked it up to examine it and immediately my heart sank again; there were hairs and a bit of scalp and blood from the blow—the killing blow.

Oh, Gabrielle ...

“Xena,” Ephiny called.

I sighed. “What is it?”

“A piece of clothing...” She held up a piece of green leather. “Look familiar?” she asked sarcastically.

“Autolycus? But that's—”

“Impossible? What? The King of Thieves escaping from a jail he's already escaped

from?" Her face darkened. "Completely impossible."

I couldn't let this get carried away right now. "Look, we need to get after whoever has Gabrielle and we need to do it now." I gave the Regent a stern, but even stare. "They're still under an hour away."

Ephiny nodded. As we prepared to leave, we heard Eponin's voice calling out to us. She was racing through the underbrush like a dryad out of Hades. Ephiny stepped forward. "Eponin, what is it?"

"The village." The weapons-master had a bleak look on her face. "It's under attack."

* * *

PART 5

XXVIII. Through the Mirror Darkly

"Unh!" My breath vanished in a huff as I hit the ground, knocked off my feet by my captors. I panted in the confines of my hood, sweating as much from fear as from the heat. Sweat stung my eyes and I shook my head, trying to brush a lock of tangled hair out of my mouth.

"Stay still."

No problem. Just getting my breath back would have prevented me from moving too far anyway.

"Should I go back now?" Iskra asked. All semblance of her earlier leering bravado had disappeared, presumably with what I guessed was the death of her companion. Admittedly, I'm rather glad I hadn't had to watch.

"Oversee things there. I'll be joining you shortly."

There was no answer from Iskra; just the sound of quickly receding footsteps as she ran through the underbrush. I couldn't guess what her mission was, but I had no doubts it meant big trouble. Mindful of the fact that I was now alone with this person, I eased further onto my side, my fingers—a little numb and thick—hunting hopefully over the ground for a sharp chip of rock to use on my bonds. A boot caught me solidly in the ribs. "Uugh!"

"Stop that."

I had no choice; just having barely caught my breath from the last time, I was forced to curl around the hurt while my rigid fingers clawed themselves into the soft, vulnerable skin of my palms.

"Gaaaaab-ri-eeeelle..." Slow steps circled me while the woman's voice sang my name softly. "Tim e to play, Gaaaab-ri-eeeeelle..."

I let my head rest on the ground and panted for breath, my eyes searching blindly in the darkness for a glimpse of my captor. "Who are you?" I asked thickly.

Laughter. "Don't you know me? Or was I just not memorable enough for you? I guess

when you hang out with gods and the Destroyer of Nations everyone else pales by comparison,” she said scornfully.

“That's not true!” I argued, stung.

“Truth hurt?”

“I know you're an Amazon.” I knew that much for sure.

“I'm not giving you any points for that one. It was obvious.”

If I made it out of this, I wasn't going to pass that comment along to Xena. “Take the bag off and we'll talk.”

“No. You have no say here, or hadn't you noticed?”

The knife pricked my belly again. I needed a softer approach. “We only got to the village yesterday and I haven't had a chance to really talk to many people. All of it was kind of a whirl—”

“Don't give me that! I saw you with her! She had her hands all over you!”

All over me? Unaccountably I felt myself flush. What had she seen? When?

“I *saw* you,” she said. “I saw you with her. How could you?” An edge had entered her voice and I felt myself tense, wondering what she might do next.

“I'm... I'm sorry?” I said, feeling twice as confused. I was conversationally adrift with no port in sight and it wasn't hard to tell that her anger was growing.

“You should be.” Boots scuffed the dirt near my head. “You should be.”

I wasn't even sure how to respond. The woman's voice sounded angry, betrayed, hurt and threatening all at once. The hair on the back of my neck stood straight on end in growing dread. I swallowed to moisten my mouth. “I'm not... I'm... what was I doing?”

“You know what you did!”

I was grabbed roughly and shoved forcefully against a tree trunk, the unexpectedness of it knocking my breath from me in a coughing huff. I barely had time to recover when I felt the prick of a knife tip against my belly. I couldn't afford to panic; to breathe harder would make me move and I could already feel the point pricking into my skin with stinging results. My breath was a tight, shallow whistle between my teeth.

Conscious of the cold sweat breaking out down my spine at the tangible evidence of menace, I did my best not to react, to keep calm, while over and over again the broken thought in the back of my mind kept repeating itself: *...you're alone... and no one knows...* “Whatever you think I've done, I'm very sorry.”

“That's not good enough!”

A fist grabbed a handful of hair and sack and banged my head against the tree leaving me seeing stars. I felt a wave of nauseating vertigo hit me along with a sudden burning

frustrated anger. “Then what the Hades do you *want* me to do?! She likes me, I can't help it!”

“No!”

It was the most irrational, stupid, asinine thing to do, but I felt the overwhelming desire to piss her off. “Tough chobos. Get over it! In fact,” I added, trying to sound smug, “she's probably already looking for me right now.” Gods, I hoped that was true; nothing would be a greater relief than to hear Xena's war cry right about now.

“She doesn't ask about me? Doesn't she talk about me?”

Aside from cursing Artemis' name and generally disliking the Amazons as a whole? “She's never mentioned you in particular.” Crazy images filled my head again, of Xena with another woman. Touching another woman... kissing her... I shook my head roughly, blowing out a breath between my clenched teeth.

“Why doesn't she love me?”

Because she thinks all Amazons are ridiculous? “She doesn't love any Amazon!”

“She loves you!”

She does? “How do you know this?”

“It's obvious!”

It is? My heart fluttered crazily in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“It's there every time she looks at you, fool!”

Xena... I'd wondered about that myself, but I was never completely sure. Without her saying so, how could I have been? Despite the situation, I felt my heart expand with uncontainable hope even as doubt assailed me. “I...I don't know...”

My captor released an explosive noise and even blindfolded I could tell she was flinging her arms out. “She's tried to kiss you!”

Tried to... Xena never... At least not that I... That was a while ago and only Autolycus... In bewilderment, I blurted, “Waitasecond. Are we talking about Xena?”

“Xena?! What does *Xena* have to do with this?!”

“Then...”

“Artemis!” she shouted. Her hands slapped down on my shoulders and I jerked in surprise and then grunted as her grip tightened. She shook me hard, making my head smack against the tree. “She tried to kiss you! She wouldn't let me do that. No, never that! She pushed me away! ‘Filth!’ she said! ‘Slut!’”

“...stop...” I felt her blind rage barreling us out of control. The sackcloth did little to protect me; the bark bit into my skin as she repeatedly banged me against it.

“She didn't want me. I wasn't pure enough. But you... I see how she looks at you...” The woman sobbed and the shaking gradually stopped until I felt a pressure against my shoulder. She breathed against my skin, so close that her warm breath made my

skin crawl. “Why doesn't she love me, Gabrielle?” Her hand cupped the side of my face with terrifying gentleness. “Why can't she love me?”

Her presence, hot and sweaty against me, our skin touching, I was overwhelmed. I wanted to get away. I wanted to be anywhere else but here. I was trapped with no way to get away and she was touching me and this close I felt myself irrationally reacting to it and I hated it, hated her, hated myself... “I don't know,” I said, my breathing hitching even as my eyes prickled with hot, damp, fearful tears. “Did... did she say she doesn't love you?”

“She didn't want me.” Her hand stroked my hidden cheek, over and over again, in a fretful caress. “A nymph can't know the touch of men. She didn't want me. No one wants me...”

A runnel of perspiration slid down my face.

“Don't you?” she murmured. “Couldn't you want me? You love *them*. Can't you love me, too?” The edge of the knife trailed across my belly.

Oh Gods. *Xena, where are you?* “I-Is it still love if you command it with violence?”

The weight of her head disappeared as she roared her anger and I felt myself wrenched forward and tossed to the ground again, bruising my shoulder. This was it. *I'm going to die*. In spite of the pain, I levered myself to my feet and immediately had them knocked out from under me. The hood was ripped from my head and for a moment I was paralyzed with joy, oblivious to the imminent danger; the cooler air was a godsend and I could only lie there feeling the most delicious breeze dry the sweat and tears from my face. It was brutally short lived. A fist buried in my hair and used my pain as leverage to force me upright until my head was bent back to meet a fierce pair of familiar eyes.

“Dimitra!”

The Amazon whom I'd thought sweet and kind (apparently I needed more work on discerning the nature of evil) sneered at me. Her eyes glared into mine and I gasped when they altered, flattened, contract into unnatural slits and an inner milky lid blinked across them. She hissed at me and, right before my eyes, the tip of her tongue flicked out across her lips, narrow and forked.

“No!” I jerked back in reflex, tears springing to my eyes when her grip in my hair tightened and prevented my escape.

The dark of her eyes silvered and glowed like moonlight, her skin paled even as it took on a rippling hint of scale—snake-like and cold. Had I any doubts before now, this would have ended them... Dimitra had the belt.

She bent me back further and I struggled to breathe, struggled with the fear that threatened to overwhelm me.

“You *will* love me!”

My vision exploded in a shower of light.

* * *

XXIX. Sticks and Stones

Unless they're halfway up a tree, Amazons can't run worth a damn. I was at least ten strides ahead of Eponin through the underbrush and Ephiny was even further behind her. Pulling back a little, I let them catch up to hear what I had to say.

"How many of them are there?" I asked Eponin.

"At least a hundred."

I mulled it over. Sounded like the bulk of their group. Why? "Where are the slavers concentrating their attack; the southeast or northeast flank of the village?"

"Southeast," she huffed, leaping over a half-buried rock.

"Good." I thought for a moment as we sprinted along. "Take a group of your best archers and close-fighters and move in on their northwestern flank. My guess is we can push them back and they'll have to regroup around the river flats."

Ephiny grinned. "Where they'll have to fight uphill with water at their backs."

"Exactly." I shook my head. "Doesn't make sense though—why attack in the day?"

Eponin grunted her agreement. "Slavers are usually less direct."

"And less stupid."

Ephiny concurred, her breathing starting to roughen with the effort to keep up with my longer stride.

I exhaled sharply in resignation. "But they're there and we've got to deal with them." I caught Eponin's eye. "Take the northern path and collect your troops. We'll head through the center of the village and rally the main defenses there for a charge—wait for our signal."

She nodded and raised her spear as she headed to the north. "Good luck."

Ephiny and I continued along, straight for the center of the village. I felt her eyes on me, watching, appraising.

"What is it?" I demanded, not taking my eyes off the path ahead as we neared the outskirts.

"What are you thinking, Xena?"

"What?"

"After what we found back there—the staff, the blood—you're just going to turn back and help defend the village?"

The Regent was definitely good at her job. I sighed. "Whoever took her, took her alive—and they'll keep her that way." *At least for now*, I thought, my insides going cold. "With any luck we'll get our hands on someone who'll know where she is, or who has her."

Or they'll just beat her, torture her and then ...

I tried to keep my mind free of the images but they kept coming. Leaving the trail and returning to the village was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Under normal circumstances, Gabrielle would be able to take care of herself—but what if I was wrong?

“I hope you're right.” Ephiny exhaled. “After all... she's your friend... but she's our—”

Before the Regent could finish, I dove at her. Her eyes widened, mouth falling open in surprise. “Xena, wait—” Then I had tackled her to the ground. A rush of air streaked through where her head once had been and something impacted hard with a nearby tree. Lifting our heads, we saw a heavy stone slump from the crater it had left in the oak's trunk and thump to the ground.

“Well, well,” a man's voice said. “Looks like the cavalry won't arrive after all.”

Seven ragged looking slavers stepped out from the underbrush, brandishing various weapons. One had a dangerous-looking sling loaded and spinning at his side. They quickly formed a circle around the two of us as we got to our feet and stood back-to-back.

Ephiny chuckled mirthlessly, unsheathing her sword. “I'm really starting to hate the holiday season...”

* * *

XXX. In the Name of Love

Shattered light rained down on us both like sparks and my cries joined hers as she struggled and bent and whipped about like a tree in a storm. Her fist in my hair convulsed and I fought her enhanced strength, no longer a thinking being, but a terrified animal mindlessly seeking escape and preservation.

“You'll love me! I'll *make* you love me!”

Light burned beneath her skin and I could see her struggling with the power, almost as much a victim to it as I was. Her eyes bulged monstrosly and her skin marbled as the veins rose to distended prominence across her bare, sun-darkened skin.

“...Dimitra...” Whatever held her in its thrall, I couldn't get through to her.

Her other hand wrapped itself around my throat. “You'll love me and *not* her. She doesn't *deserve* to be loved.” Her grip tightened further. “I'll kill you first!”

“Kill me...” I gasped for air. “...you... can't force... my... heart...” Spots were prickling my vision. My thoughts reached for Xena even as my efforts to break free began to weaken.

The pressure ceased abruptly and I found myself on my belly, the throb of my blood howling in my ears. Gagging and wheezing, I laid there, tasting the dust and grass, unsure of what had happened.

Before I could orientate myself, Dimitra pushed me on my side; the fearsome signs of metamorphosis now vanished. Somehow Dimitra had regained control, but at the same time her stillness, the sudden calm, was even more frightening than before. “I won't kill you.” She leaned down over me and brushed her fingers along my face. “No. But if you don't convince the Amazons to denounce Artemis and worship me as their goddess instead, I'll kill *them*. I'll destroy them all. They're all here and in one move I'll crush the entire Nation as if it never was. The Amazons, Artemis, even Xena. I'll make you watch all of it. I'd rather us dead than worshipping *her*!”

Hundreds of women, hundreds of years of history and tradition, all proud and fierce and stubborn as stone... “I can't.” They accepted me reluctantly as it was. To attempt to force them to turn away from their beliefs... “They'd neve—”

“You will. Mia was right; Artemis is a self-centered, sanctimonious, two-faced windbag. She doesn't deserve the Amazons. We need better than her. *I* can be better than her. You make them love me or they die.”

She's insane. What am I going to do? My thoughts raced fruitlessly, panic setting in.

“What's it going to be, Gabrielle?”

What would Xena do? What would she come up with? *If she were here...*

The rules of survival... Xena's voice whispered in my mind. *Number two: if you can't run—surrender, and then run.*

In the face of such hard-earned and well-considered advice, I couldn't help but listen, especially considering the alternatives I was facing. On the one hand, she'd kill Xena along with the Amazons and their rightful goddess, or, on the other, likely my own gruesome death. The knife was sharp. Assuming she even bothered with it. I suspected she could make my death horribly painful without it. If that were the end of it, I could face dying, but there were no guarantees Dimitra wouldn't still try to wipe them out afterwards.

Which meant I had to get away to warn them. I made what was only partially a show of slumping in defeat. “I'll try.”

She stared at me angrily, suspiciously, as she pulled on her lower lip. “You'll do it.” The blood-stained tip of her knife stabbed at the soft grass. “You'll sacrifice Artemis during the ceremony. To prove you mean it.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she added, quickly, “Remember; I can kill you all. I can.”

“I can't do it from here,” I reminded her, trying to keep my voice soft and calm, despite the barely discernable tremble in it. “You'll need to let me go.”

“Maybe I should carve the message in your skin and leave you at the edge of the village.”

The curve of her eyes sharpened, silvered, and I felt a wave of nausea come over me like it did before. I swallowed and wiggled, trying to break her focus before the surge of raw power wreaked its havoc again. “Let me go and talk to them, Dimitra. You said

you wanted me to convince them.”

“Tell you what,” she countered. “How about I give you a head start?” Then Dimitra gave me a chilling smile devoid of the sunlight warmth glittering off her knife blade.

* * *

XXXI. Fight Club

Of all the many different variations on the theme of cutthroat ambush I've encountered through the years, you can really just boil them down into two types—well-timed and “not now.”

Sometimes a well-timed ambush by a bunch of trashy thugs is just what you need to get the juices flowing. Gods bless Gabrielle, but wandering around with the same person has its dry spots; things get stale and there are times when you feel like you're just waiting for something to begin. A brawl usually shakes things up nicely—and nine times out of ten it leads to some other kind of trouble. *Funny how that always seems to happen ...*

The first thing I thought when I knew that rock was headed straight for Ephiny's head was: *Not now ...* “Not now” ambushes happen when you're busy with something more urgent and important and you don't have the time to waste on a bunch of toothless, hairy types. Granted, this bunch was probably a part of the overall slaver attack, but Ephiny and I were still on the way to more pressing things and didn't have time for this.

“We don't have time for this,” the Regent muttered.

The fighting in these things didn't take all that long—especially if I had a little help—but the preamble ate up valuable time. These sorts liked a lot of buildup and they would want to trash-talk a little. Admittedly, during a well-timed ambush, I enjoyed it too—especially if you squared off against someone who was really good at it, like (as much as I hate to admit it) Ares for example. This wasn't a well-timed ambush, and these guys were certainly nothing like Ares, so, as I've said, things would have to be cut short.

The leader stepped up, passing to the left of the sling-twirler, ready to talk. “Well, well, well looks like we've got ourselves a couple of feisty ones.” He made his face “dangerous”-looking. “I wouldn't try anything, though, not with Fedris here.” He indicated the sling-wielder. “He's a master of the stone-thrower.”

On cue, Fedris stepped forward, twirling and spinning the sling over his shoulder and under his legs. I have to hand it to him, he was pretty good.

The leader thought so too. “Behold the skill, the precision, the mastery of—”

Before he could finish, I hurled the chakram at “Slingy.” The blade struck the leather of the sling, neatly cutting it as it was arcing back toward its user. The stone came free and slammed into the guy's face. He fell back onto the forest floor, out cold.

I saw Ephiny charge into battle as I flipped into the midst of the slack-jawed batch of slavers. These guys really needed to work on their reaction time. I suppose several blows to the head wouldn't help with that, but under the circumstances it couldn't be

avoided. That's what these guys get for starting a “not now” ambush.

Soon we had them all nice and incapacitated and, after tying them up (more wasted time we couldn't afford) we made our way into the village. Some smoke was visible from beyond the line of huts. The sounds of battle could be heard to the southeast and we sprinted for them. Thankfully, Ephiny remained quiet.

We arrived at the rear of the battle, just as an Amazon charge led by Solari had begun. Arrows hailed upon the blurry line of slavers, followed by a thrust from the spear-maidens who quickly gained ground. By the looks of things, the slavers weren't doing so well.

Ephiny made herself known to some of the war leaders and soon a scout had run over to us. She nodded to us both. “Eponin's group is in position and waiting for your command,” she said.

Ephiny shrugged. “By the looks of things we may not need to out-flank them.” She pointed to several lines of Amazon warriors still waiting to engage the enemy. “It looks like it's going to be a rout.”

None of this made sense. It was a distraction of some kind, but from what?

“Ephiny!” Solari came running in from the front lines. “They've called for a lull in the fighting.”

The Regent looked to me with a quizzical expression. I shrugged. “A what?” she asked.

“They say it's not a truce, or surrender.” Solari looked skeptical. “They have terms.”

I smirked. “I've got to hear this.”

We moved to the front of the battle lines, passing through the war-ready Amazons, most looking none the worse for wear. Standing across from us as we parted the warriors was the slaver contingent—three ragged and now bruised looking men. All around, the slavers were moving their dead and injured off the field. Whoever was behind all of this had this bunch paid enough to face off against the Amazons outnumbered at least seven-to-one—that, or scared them enough to do so.

Ephiny stood at the point of a wedge that had Solari and me at her flanks. She crossed her arms. “We're here to listen to these terms of yours,” she said—very nicely, I might add; with the perfect mix of haughtiness and condescension.

The slaver spat then shouted. “We ask that you release to us our leader then we will leave you in peace.”

“Your leader?” Ephiny tilted her head. “Who in Zeus' name is your leader?”

But I knew who he meant...

“Autolycus,” he yelled to the cheers of the rest of his men.

* * *

XXXII. There's Always A Catch...

I panted as I continued my headlong sprint through the blinding sunbeams and over the uneven terrain. I rubbed the angry, red abrasions on my wrists, now free of the rope. “‘More sporting this way,’ she says,” I muttered under my breath as I duck under a branch.

“Keep going, Gabrielle! I can still hear you!”

I cursed to myself, saving my breath for a harder push forward. My muscles burned with the effort and my mouth was as dry as the dust my boots kicked up in my wake. A bush exploded in flame next to me and I flinched aside from its heat, the young leaves and green wood giving off a thick, bitter smoke.

“You’re making this too easy!”

A tree to my left exploded in a shower of bark and splinters, and I threw my arms up over my face praying I wouldn’t be impaled on the spot. Somehow it shouldn’t surprise me that I was barely touched by the flying debris as I ran past; it would ruin the chase, after all.

I veered in another direction, slightly away from where I knew the village to be, hoping to tack back and forth to avoid getting singed by her instant bonfires or speared by flying trees.

A rock tripped me up—one I could swear wasn’t there a moment before—and I sprawled to my hands and knees, my skin stinging from the impact. There was no time to feel it; I scrambled to my feet and tried to continue. Branches reached for me and I could feel them raking over my bare back as I ducked low beneath them. *If she keeps this up, there’s going to be nothing left of me by the time I reach the village.*

I’d gladly sacrifice myself if it meant that Xena—and the others—would be safe, but I knew that’s not an option I could consider. *If I don’t warn them, we’ll never have a chance.* But I needed a plan. Unfortunately, the only one I could think of right now was to survive Dimitra’s little game of cat-and-mouse until I could get back to Xena. If we played along for just a little while—

The gully full of last season’s dead leaves rose up around me just as I made to leap over it. A growling wind churned into a whirling dervish, the edges of the leaves and the kicked up grit biting at my skin, choking me. I cried out before I could stop myself.

“This will be such a fun game. Better not let me catch you; you won’t like it if I do...”

Laughter echoed through the forest and over the scream of the wind. My eyes, wind-stung and tearing, were useless and I stumbled into trees and over jutting roots, desperate to keep going, to get as much distance between us as I could before—

“Time’s up, Gabrielle,” her voice carried to me. “Here I come...”

I fell into a muddy, water-starved creek and splashed my way across, harried by the winds and the prick and sting of dirt and twigs. Her words sliced to the core of my fear, and my heart throbbed with renewed terror.

“...Here I come,” she sang again. “Ready or not.”

* * *

XXXIII. Couldn't Stand the Weather

The slavers continued clanking sword against shield, spear against spear, all the while shouting for Autolykus; their “leader.” The Amazons stood firm in their formations, but a tension was building; I could see their knuckles tighten around their weapons. Clouds gathered in the sky, a storm building quickly over the village.

Impatiently, Ephiny pulled Solari and me into a huddle. I shook my head, indicating the slavers. “Autolykus isn't their leader.”

“I know.” The Regent nodded. “Maybe he took the belt, but this doesn't seem like his style.”

I scowled at Ephiny, my anger peaking quickly. “He didn't take the belt, either.” I crossed my arms and stepped forward. “I wish you would get it through that thick, bushy, Amazon head of yours.”

Ephiny didn't back down. She pointed a finger in my face. “Maybe you'd like to try and make me?”

There have been times, in the past especially, where I have been so angry that I actually saw red. I know you hear every second tavern tough-guy from here to Damascus say that they “just see red” and then all Tartarus breaks loose—but I'm telling the truth. I can't explain why, but it's happened, although not in a very long time. That's why it was odd that it was happening then, and because of what Ephiny had said. I was about ready to snap the Regent's arm like a twig—and for what? It must have been that damn belt again; its influence waxed and waned, each time growing in intensity. It was becoming hard to resist.

Solari stepped in, looking to soothe the situation. “Uhm, so, what about the slavers?”

I stepped back and exhaled, and Ephiny did the same. She looked to me with a grimace. “What do you think?”

“Eponin is still in position.” I shrugged. “Finish this.”

Ephiny nodded, sneering at me. “Looks like we actually agree on something.”

Storm clouds swirled overhead, blocking out sunlight. The Regent moved back to the front of the lines. “We reject your offer, prepare for battle,” she yelled at the slavers and moved back into position.

Thunder crashed above, the storm coming upon us with a strange intensity. The slavers reluctantly dragged their sorry behinds into position and tried to look ready, all the while passing unsure glances from the solid Amazon lines to the darkening skies. I drew my sword and fell into place alongside Solari.

It would be a huge waste of time to describe the battle in great detail. I'm not a big fan of that sort of thing anyway. I mean, war is so chaotic and one has to remain so focused that it's hard to remember and catalog every little thing that goes on. Too many times there are things you'd rather forget anyway.

What there was of this battle was straightforward and not of note. We pushed the slavers back with charge after charge, scattering them to the river flats with Eponin's attack. Archers let loose from the banks, felling many who spilled into the mud or the shallows. From the flats the slavers retreated into the water and across to the other side, which was probably for the best as they wouldn't have lasted too long had they stood their ground.

The Amazons celebrated and tended to what wounded and dead they had. Ephiny and Eponin moved off to supervise the clean-up, clasping hands and hugging with many of their sisters. I didn't share the enthusiasm; I had only one thing on my mind—finding Gabrielle.

We had wasted a lot of time with this attack and I tried not to worry about what that might have meant. Keeping the hundreds of possible horrors that might have happened to her was impossible, so I let them flash by and fade, one after another until I could focus on the task at hand. More thunder and lightning clashed above, and the air became ripe with the smell of rain. I needed to get back to the woods and resume the search for her, time was wasting.

Ephiny approached, looking as intense as always. I felt bad about earlier, so I started to work myself up for an apology. “Ephiny I—”

“Shawna is leading a large mob back to the village.” She seemed ambivalent about it.

“I'm sorry to hear that.” I shook my head. “But what's that got to do with me?”

“They're going after Autolycus.”

“*What?*”

She crossed her arms. “And they're pretty worked up about it, too.”

“I hate that damn belt!” I growled. “Come on.”

I sprinted past the stunned-looking Amazon warriors and headed straight for the village. Ephiny fell in beside me. “Don't do anything stupid,” she huffed.

I tried to stay focused. “Only if they don't.” I motioned ahead to the large crowd gathering outside the jail. They had spears raised and were shouting at the two guards who were doing their best to keep everyone at bay.

I pushed my way to the front of the crowd, having to get rough with a few people. With any luck, that would be the extent of everything. Ephiny shoved her way into place beside me. I put my hands up for silence and reluctantly, they complied.

“What's the meaning of this?” I demanded, looking straight at Shawna.

She raised her chin in that defiant manner all Amazons seem to have perfected. “You heard the slavers; the thief is their leader.” She turned to address the mob. “He needs to be punished for his crimes against Artemis! For the Amazon deaths—the deaths of our friends, our sisters—the deaths his men have caused!”

Cheers roared and the crowd surged forward. I pushed back, managing to stagger a group of Amazons away from the front of the jail. With a lunge, I brought myself

face-to-face with Shawna. “You'll have to go through me to do it.” I turned to the crowd. “All of you.”

Thunder slammed and clattered in the heavens. Ephiny stepped up beside me. “You'll need to go through both of us.”

Shawna narrowed her eyes and tensed. I shook my head. “Don't even think about it.”

Her breath stopped abruptly and before she could attack, I had grabbed her arm and spun it behind her back. With a quick pivot and thrust, I slammed her head into the side of the prison. I let her go and she slumped to the ground in a daze.

I tensed my fists, cracking my knuckles loudly, and looked out at the mob. “Who's next?” Ephiny remained where she was, ready for anything. With some grumbling and without apology, the soon crowd parted, spreading out through the village.

I turned to Ephiny. “Thanks.”

“The Queen wished Autolycus unharmed, I was merely doing her bidding.” The Regent was stone-faced and formal.

I scowled. “You still think he has the belt, don't you?”

“He *is* the King of Thieves .”

“Look, I don't have time to waste.” I motioned to the jail. “Why don't we go in there and ask him?”

We entered the jail as the skies continued to boom. I led the way through the neat, though somewhat cramped corridor. Before we got to the cell I knew something was amiss.

Ephiny sighed as she looked into Autolycus' prison. “Gone.” She nodded as if it wasn't much of a surprise.

“I'm gonna kill him.” I couldn't believe it. “Of all the times to break out, he picks now?”

Ephiny shook her head. “We can't bother chasing him, Gabrielle is—”

“My problem,” I finished. “You need to stay here and make sure things are under control.” I looked to her. “The slavers could come back and that belt is only going to make things worse.”

“Fine.”

“Look, Ephiny, I'm—”

She silenced me. “Just find Gabrielle.”

I smiled and nodded once. The thunder rattled the roof overhead and I rolled my eyes. “What *else* could possibly go wrong?”

Suddenly, there was the sound of something hitting the roof. Then another something. Then another. Soon, there was the steady sound of many of these somethings crashing against the roof and ground outside. It sounded like falling rain, only heavier. We

raced to the door of the jail to look outside. Our mouths fell open.

Falling from the skies in an endless and impossible torrent, were thousands of large toads. I shook my head in disbelief. "Remind me to never ask that question again..."

* * *

XXXIV. *Mind Games*

I was staggering, falling from the support of one tree trunk to the momentary brace of another. *...so tired...* My hair, wind-whipped and soaking, fell in my eyes and I scraped it back as I paused, trembling, to get my bearings.

I could barely tell where I was, having run blind or been forced off course by Dimitra's elemental pranks. Except for the sound of my heavy breathing, the woods were deathly silent. A poor choice of words, if ever I picked them.

"Do you know fear has a smell?" Dimitra's voice was everywhere, carried on some divine breeze filling the spaces between the trees. "I can smell your fear, Gabrielle..."

I shivered.

"...it's *delicious*."

My eyes desperately searched the horizon, but nothing seemed familiar and with the heavy green canopy overhead, I couldn't even get a bearing on the angle of the sun. She'd catch me for certain if I tried to climb a tree for a look.

"I'm going to love watching you betray your friends. Seeing Artemis' surprise and shock when her precious 'chosen one' hands her over is going to be almost as satisfying as when I start pulling her guts out of her belly."

My jaw clenched. I didn't particularly appreciate her effort at prophecy.

"Her wonderful Gabrielle, whom she loves so dearly. Can you imagine?" Dimitra chortled. "I can't *wait* to see her face."

There was no way to tell how close she was to me. As quietly as I could, I hunkered down and began moving with greater stealth from tree to tree, boulder to bush, concentrating on trying to control my emotions. *Focus*, I reminded myself. *You can't think if you're panicking*. Not an easy thing to do under the circumstances.

"She loves you so much." Dimitra's voice became harder. "Gods know why, cuz I sure as Hades don't get the attraction."

Me neither. Artemis' interest, while flattering, was utterly bewildering. But I wasn't about to say that out loud. I pressed my back against a broad trunk and peered cautiously around its edge. The trees were thinning out here, which was surely a bad sign; none of this looked familiar. *I can't believe I'm lost. What do I do now?* I had to stay calm. If she thought she could smell me before... I sniffed. Gods, I could practically smell myself. *Yuck. C'mon!* I admonished myself. This was no time to lose concentration.

The ground beneath me began to quake and the trees groaned at the roots; a low, cracking noise that made the hair on my stand up in rigid attention. I lunged to my feet

just as the tree behind me shuddered, its roots erupting, tentacle-like, from the ground to latch onto my arms and legs.

“NO!” I struggled wildly, barely managing to free one hand when more roots grabbed me and yanked me to the ground. Laughter filled the air, echoing hollowly through the woods.

“Stop fighting me, Gabrielle.”

“Go to Tartarus! Ughff!” The roots tightened across my chest and suddenly I found it difficult to breathe.

“Tsk, tsk.” She was there, above me, smiling down with a kind of malicious intensity that made my skin crawl. “Where're your manners?”

“...wasted... on you...”

Dimitra's eyes narrowed. I didn't miss the obsessive way her thumb scraped over the blade of her knife. In an instant she was hovering over me, intimately close, her hazel eyes lightening to a colorless hue and glinting with an almost metallic sheen. “I was willing to give you a chance.”

I wrenched at my bonds, frustrated, fearful and angry. “I was running,” I reminded her.

“No, you weren't!” She straddled me on her hands and knees, her body and mine separated only by the thick interlacing of roots covering my body. “You went to ground like some terrified rabbit. What kind of queen *are* you?” Her face twisted with contempt, the expression made all the more unnerving by the unnatural glow of her eyes.

“Evasion isn't going to ground,” I spat through clenched teeth. The harder I fought, the tighter the roots squeezed me. I had no choice but to relax. “Mindlessly running away isn't always more effective.”

“I still caught you!” she charged.

“By cheating!” I shot back.

“Shut up!”

“What kind of Amazon are *you* ?” I taunted her. “Can't even track a peasant girl without using your powers?”

She growled deep in her throat and for a moment I thought she would abandon her plans altogether for the chance to bury her knife in my throat. Dimitra regained control of herself, just barely—I could see the edges of that metamorphosis threatening again and somewhere, off in the distance, I thought I could hear a rumble, like thunder. “I caught you,” she said softly, ignoring my comment. “That means I get to say. I think we need to up the stakes here.”

Oh no. Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?

“Yeah,” she continued. “I caught you, so now I think we should make this a bit harder.”

Let's make you earn your feathers, *my queen*. ”

My breath caught. “What do you mean?” I demanded through numbed lips.

“I mean I think we should make things a bit more challenging. Yeah.” She nodded, thinking. “You have to denounce Artemis and get the others to accept me *without* telling them why. If you tell them, I'll kill everyone before your eyes. Slowly. And I'll let them know it's all your fault.”

An icy chill swamped me even as my heart lurched in my chest. It would have been a struggle before, but now it would be impossible. “Dimitra...” I barely knew how to begin to protest this newest restriction. The light around us began to fade, swallowed by encroaching shadow.

Her smile made me feel distinctly unsafe. “Wouldn't it be better to love me? I could be so good to you if you loved me.”

I couldn't pull away from her hand no matter how hard I tried, and I was forced to endure the sickening tickle of her fingertips gliding along my exposed skin. “Don't,” I told her, my breath faltering. “Please, Dimitra; stop.”

She yanked her hand back and glared at me, her teeth bared. “Stop. No. Don't.” She pressed a hand to her temple and rocked to one side, as if in pain. “It's always no! Why? Why not?! Why *not* me?!?” Her voice rose with each exclamation, her pain and rage etched across sharpening features.

“Dimitra...”

She screamed and it felt as though something inside my own head were being ripped apart, forcing my voice to join hers. Violent light pierced her skin, blinding us, and the thunder rumbled again. I could hear the whip-slap rustle of the leaves and branches overhead as things heavy and wet smacked hard against the unyielding earth. The sound of the sky ripping itself apart above us filled my ears, the lightning flashing like an extension of her fury.

Dimitra fell on me and crawled forward until she could press her forehead to mine. “You're mine,” she gasped. “You'll always be mine. Love me, Gabrielle... I want you to love me... Only me...”

My body arced even in the confines of the roots as ragged power surged through me, thick and viscous, like sludge.

--*love me*... it sighed through my veins, poisonous and cold.

I moaned and struggled, trying to avoid the blazing eyes that burned into mine even behind my clenched lids.

--*worship me*...

Her tears scalded my skin as she wept, her hands cradling my face. “Give yourself to me, Gabrielle,” she begged, her words hitching as the power washed through us both. “Love me... please, I want you to...”

It stabbed through me and I shrieked again.

“...yes...” she mumbled, her eyes falling shut. “...almost... I can feel it... your love...”

It moved through me, into me until even my soul trembled as her power threatened to steal my soul, consume my sense of self and rob me of my will. I battled to hang on, to find some shred of self, some moment or memory to cling to.

“Your love,” she panted, “it’s so beautiful... I can make you... love me...”

--give yourself to it...

The power flashed again, burning, searing.

I writhed inside, clinging to what she wanted, until finally the pain was so great it was simply easier to surrender myself to it, to give myself to what she wanted...

...and then everything was fine. Very fine, I realized, as the invasive battering faded as she felt my acquiescence.

After a time, my eyes blinked open and I watched her for a moment, her face pale and tear-stained. The weather raged around us, but we were left untouched. It didn’t seem important to me right then.

“...love me...” Dimitra pleaded through her quiet sobs.

I rubbed my cheek against her palm and watched her startled eyes flutter open. Carefully I examined her face, seeing the fine spray of freckles across her skin, the deep auburn tint of her lashes and the flecks of faded green and brown nearly hidden behind the silvered discs of her eyes. Such terrible beauty.

“Love you,” I answered and witnessed the dawning joy in her gaze.

* * *

PART 6

XXXV. Toad-al Disaster

Of all the things that could happen to me in an Amazon village, I’d have to say, this particular scenario never would have crossed my mind. Beating off bad guys? No problem. Rescuing Gabrielle? No sweat (and definitely not surprising). Dealing with self-absorbed gods? No worries (also, not surprising). Running through the village with a shield over my head to protect me from fat warty toads falling from the sky while trying to avoid slipping on the exploded remains of the ones not lucky enough to live?

No way.

It was enough to make me consider another line of work. Something quiet, peaceful, like blacksmith or gladiatrix.

If it was anyone but Gabrielle... Aw, who was I kidding? It wouldn’t matter who it was, but since it was Gabrielle, nothing—not a storm of toads, not even a storm of

hydras—would hold me back from rescuing her, wherever she was. I had to hurry.

On top of everything else, there was rain. It fell heavy and hard, quickly making the ground slick and muddy and difficult to negotiate. Of course, the toads loved it. They fell to the ground with a plop or splat and rolled around for a bit before leaping off.

Every once in a while there would be the odd mix of a splat and a clank as a toad would slam into the shield. Sometimes they would hop off a moment later, other times I guess they just stuck to the top in gooey clumps.

The Amazons, smartly, had taken shelter in their huts or pressed tightly against the trunks of the trees to avoid the tempest, their eyes round and their expressions disbelieving and disgusted as I ran by. A few cheered me on as I passed, whether for whatever they guessed my mission might be or just my brazen pizzazz in running through a storm of toads, I couldn't tell.

As I neared the edge of the village, I ducked into a storage shed; a brief respite from the storm and a chance to clean off my shield. I grimaced distastefully at the glob of remains glistening on its surface and I used a handful of hay to wipe the worst of it onto the floor. Outside, the sound of rain and toads was all I could hear; almost as soon as they landed—assuming they lived—the toads began to sing out to each other, so there was this resounding chorus in the background of everything.

To this odd musical accompaniment, I lifted the shield again and ran back into the storm, clearing the edge of the village in moments and entering the forest proper. In the woods the trees provided some shelter from the amphibian downpour, though some would still find their way through to the forest floor, or fell from the trees they had landed in. The rain still found a way to pass through, falling in a soft mist now. With less toads impacting with the earth, the space around me had become oddly quiet. I jogged through, being careful not to miss any possible tracks or clues to Gabrielle's whereabouts.

Soon, I had returned to where Ephiny and I found Gabrielle's staff. I bit my lip as I scanned the signs of struggle, the places where she had fallen or had been dragged. Assessing the area and the quickly disappearing tracks, I followed the trail for a short distance until something made me stop.

The sound of another's breathing tickled my hearing.

My gaze unfocused as I tuned out the rain, the crack-splat of the toads, their croaking song, trying to pinpoint the sound I wanted. My head tilted left, toward a large vein of stone, covered in moss and other small plants, which rose like a shattered bone from the earth. I placed the shield on the ground silently and flipped over the side of the rock, my sword drawn and ready. What I saw was a definite eye-opener.

There, sitting wet and covered in various bits of flora, was Artemis. She bit at a nail, unconcerned with me or my blade, shivering in the rain. I shoved my sword back in its scabbard. “Just what in Tartarus are you doing *here*?” Artemis continued to work her hangnail. I knelt closer and yelled, “*HEY!*”

She glanced over at me. “Oh, Xena, it's you.” She went back to biting. “Of course.”

“You wanna tell me what in Hades is going on?” This was my opening to a “sensitive

chat”—probably why I leave them to Gabrielle. Much better for everyone, don't you think? “What are you doing out here?”

The fallen goddess looked up at me, a miserable, resentful expression on her smudged face. “What do *you* care about my problems?”

“It's raining toads in case you hadn't noticed!” I said, exasperated. “Your problems are everyone's problems now.”

“Go away.”

“Gabrielle's been kidnapped.” Ah. I noted a flicker of response from deep in her eyes before they blinked and veiled themselves again. “Do you care about that?”

“Who I do or do not care for is none of your concern, *mortal!*”

I blinked at the ferocity of her reply, the way her mouth twisted on that last word. “What kind of goddess are you? Your Amazons just got attacked by a bunch of slavers trying to take the village and you were nowhere in sight. They've worshipped you for generations and this is the return they get?” I made a disgusted noise in the back of my throat. “They don't deserve that from you. What kind of goddess abandons her people?” I shook my head and threw my hands in the air. “Why did I expect anything different? You Olympians are all the same.”

She stared at me, her hatred of me plain. That's okay; I didn't like her either. “I don't have time to waste with you; one of your Amazons has your belt as well as Gabrielle. If I have to choose between saving her life, saving the Amazons or stopping the thief before you lose your powers, you don't have to guess which option's going drop to the bottom of my list,” I said, pointing a finger at her. “So if you're not going to help me, just sit here and stay out of the way. I don't need you making more problems for me right now, not when her life is at stake.” I flexed my fist as I adjusted my bracer and turned to go.

“What makes you worthier?”

I stopped abruptly, my back still to her. The thrum of my temper beat at me in time to my agitated heart. “What?” The question came out cold and flat, colored by my anger, but also my confusion.

“You're a killer. *A warlord.* How many have you murdered, innocent or otherwise, in your quest for glory and greatness?” She shook her head even as she examined me with her squinty little eyes. “What does she see in you?”

My brow puckered in confusion, trying to ignore the stab at my conscience. “What in Hades are you talking about?”

“She is your most stolid advocate,” the goddess said. “Your strongest defender. Yet, look at you. Look at what you've done. Even when I kissed her, it was still you she yearned for.”

Kissed... You kissed her? Why, you hatchet-faced—

She continued. “I was a goddess. All-powerful. The world and its people are mine. Yet she is... impervious. She still resisted.”

I lunged across the space between us and hauled a startled Artemis to her feet. “What did you do to her?” Emotion flooded my senses; whirling images of Artemis and Gabrielle—together—like so much flotsam through my mind. Artemis, forcing her; controlling her. “If you hurt her...” My hand fit snugly around the slender column of her throat, my fingers wrapping themselves comfortably, easily, just beneath her jaw and feeling a pulse beating beneath the surface. *It'd be so easy to—*

“Xena!” She struggled and choked, one hand pulling at my wrist and the other rose to fend off my other hand where it twisted in her shirtfront. In the reflection in her graying eyes I could see my wild expression, my bared teeth. How dare she lay a *hand* on Gabrielle, much more her lips? I didn't even want to think the word. It was almost enough to make me physically sick. How *dare* she?

The rage, the jealousy gave strength to my grip. “You'll never lay another stinkin' finger on her...” I'd crush her, goddess or not.

“...Xe—Xena...” Artemis sucked in a weak breath. “Swear... Didn't... hurt her... It's... you she...she loves...” Her eyes pleaded with me even as her hands batted feebly at my wrist.

The surprise of it, of hearing it come from someone else, froze me. How could she know that? For certain? Did Gabrielle say so? What had she said?

In the midst of my shock, I was only partially aware of Artemis pulling herself free of my numbed fingers. She fell to her knees and rolled to her back on the ground, rubbing her bruised throat as she gasped for air. I stared at her as if I'd never see her before. “She said that?”

“No.”

The knot in my chest dropped through my stomach, forcing out a breath of unanticipated disappointment. “Then how would *you* know?”

Slowly, she levered herself back into a sitting position and leaned against the rock. An air of haughtiness re-entered Artemis' face and she raised her chin. “She offered me comfort in my quarters, giving me hope for the return of my belt and... and my powers.” The goddess looked away for a moment, but I almost lost the significance of her comment in my impatience to hear the rest of her story.

“Wait. They're gone?” I squinted at her in suspicion. “Completely?”

“Yes,” she whispered. She shook herself and looked down at her tangled hands. “I was overcome with fear, despair, loss...and gratitude.” Artemis glanced up suddenly and gave me a beseeching look. “As I am, I have no way to repay her. In that moment I offered her what I could and I leaned forward to kiss her...”

It felt as though lightning had just struck my heart. I could barely breathe.

Artemis' eyes stared unseeing at the ground, no doubt remembering the moment. “I... have never kissed a woman so,” she said softly, her voice touched with awe. The hardness in her face softened perceptibly and I found myself hating her even more. “I have never known such passion, such heat...” Her voice trailed away and a small smile turned up the corners of her lips.

My hands clenched into fists. "Get on with it."

She smirked nastily at me, enjoying my discomfort now that she'd bothered to notice it. "She was a living flame in my arms, burning me with her touch. I would willingly have fed myself to her fire."

The muscles of my jaw were hurting and I forcibly pried my teeth apart.

Artemis looked at me then, a long and bitter expression in her slate-grey eyes. "I would have taken her for my own, but that she then whispered your name." She gave a rough, humorless laugh. "And then looked entirely surprised upon seeing *me* when she opened her eyes again."

Oh, Gabrielle. I hardly knew what to think.

Her fist tightened on her damp thigh. "I could not bear the hurt, so I left."

I didn't want to know. I didn't want to hear about it. Part of me was savagely glad Gabrielle had turned her down and, by doing so, justified my faith in her. But it still cut me to hear it. "Why are you telling me this?" Despite the heavy moisture saturating everything, my voice was a gravelly husky sound between us.

"You say she is missing. Was she taken from the village?"

I shook my head. "About an hour's travel into the woods."

Her expression became thoughtful and then concerned. "She was searching for me, wasn't she?"

My nod was sharp. This was getting us nowhere; the longer I delayed the greater Gabrielle's danger. I still didn't know the identity of the thief and while I might be able to deduce something of the woman's nature, I wasn't as confident as Ephiny that Gabrielle was more valuable as a hostage; for all I knew she might already be...

I stopped and mentally shook myself; I couldn't afford to think like that. "If she thought you were upset or hurting, Gabrielle isn't the sort of person to leave that alone, not when she thinks she can help." The rain, a light drizzle now, had thoroughly seeped through my clothing, making the leather chafe. "I'm going after her. Stay out of trouble."

"Wait."

I paused in mid-turn. "Now what?" I was never going to get out of here.

"I want to help."

That was the *last* thing I needed. "You?" I snorted in derision. "You said you'd lost your powers already." Though I didn't say it, the notion that she was useless to me was still conveyed with obvious clarity because she rose to her feet and moved straight into my space.

"You forget yourself, mortal; there is no better hunter or tracker than me."

I *had* forgotten. As much as I wanted to dump her scrawny butt here, I couldn't afford to throw away such a skill. Confident though I am in my own tracking abilities, the

ground conditions with all the rain would require someone with that extra bit of something. Still, I didn't have to like it—which was good because really, I didn't.

“Fine,” I conceded gracelessly in the face of her triumphant smirk. “But you do as *I* say, got it?” All that happiness evaporated in an instant and Artemis opened her mouth to argue, but I swiped my hand through the wet air between us. “You listen or you wait here and I'll manage without your help.”

The warrior in her didn't like that. I could see from the shift and flex of muscle beneath her shoulders that she was struggling to swallow her objections. She could see that I knew and even though I knew it wasn't going to help our working relationship, something prompted me to grin at her ever so slightly.

“As you say,” Artemis replied at last. She gave me a brittle smile in return.

I gestured toward the other side of the rock formation. “Let's start over here; we'll comb the ground for traces. At this point I don't hold out much hope for an actual print.”

She nodded and slipped past me, her eyes already ranging back and forth across the damp ground. Her fingers hovered above the grass and weeds, over the muddy terrain. I was impressed with how silently she moved, with how few marks she left in her own passing even as she searched for those of others. “Perhaps,” Artemis began, her voice sounding distracted, “we might consider a truce at this time?” Her eyes flicked over to me before returning to her task. “Harboring this animosity does either of us little good. Let us put it aside.”

I wanted to point out that she had started it, but that didn't seem quite in the spirit of her gesture. I shrugged instead. “It'd make Gabrielle happier.” See? I can do tact.

“True.” Artemis nodded, smiling a little at the mention of her name. “I am aware of how much her happiness means to you.”

I shot her a look, not certain how to take the comment. I grunted a reply and bent to begin my own search of the clearing.

“I also know how much your happiness means to her,” she continued, her body crouched over a sad looking fern as she investigated its fronds. “If I am meant to remain... mortal... I can only hope that I might find such cause to feel that way for someone, and they for me. Someone like Gabrielle, perhaps.”

I rolled my eyes. *Gods. And I thought Gabrielle talked a lot.* Was she trying to drive me nuts on purpose? “Find anything yet?”

“Uh uh.” She was blessedly quiet for a few minutes more. I thought I might have found something—a depression of sorts—when Artemis started up again. “When you kiss someone does it usually make you feel as though your soul has been caressed by a warm summer breeze?”

I stared at her in disbelief. A thief had her belt, she was powerless, the village had been attacked, Gabrielle was missing and this is what she wanted to yak about? “You're kidding me, right?”

“Not in the least.” She stared back at me, equally bemused. “I've never kissed anyone

before. Is my reaction common or is this a singular experience only to be found with her?"

You can't kill her. You can't kill her. You can't kill her... It didn't help. I took a deep breath. Another. Nope. That wasn't helping either. It didn't help that I wasn't entirely sure what the answer was; Dreamscape kisses through a male intermediary didn't make for a wildly breezy experience, regardless of how literally soulful it might have been. Artemis had kissed her. I hadn't. I was getting cranky .

"We have a mission to finish," I reminded her tersely. She bent to her work again and I followed a few broken stems for a couple of feet and then had to pause to consider the signs again. Focus kicked in and I could feel the intensity of my attention building. There—the hint of a fresh divot. Smiling grimly, I worked my way forward, concentrating deeply...

"Do all kisses taste of apples?"

I closed my eyes and dropped my head into my hands. After spending a few moments praying without luck for a toad to fall from the heavens and smash my brains from my skull—or at the very least deafen me somehow—I gestured to the earth. "Think I found something..."

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XXXVI. Mother Toad Me There Would Be Days Like This...

I threw myself into the small space between the roots and scrunched beneath the heavy overhang of leaves and branches, hoping for some respite from the freakish downpour of rain and toads. The trembling worsened and I tucked my hands under my armpits, seeking some kind of warmth and comfort from the nauseating residue of Dimitra's touch left on me both inside and out. I felt violated. I longed for soaproot and some searing hot water to erase her touch.

Even with her work done, Dimitra had continued to touch my face and stroke my hair, reluctant to let me go. She had stared at me avidly, her expression an unnerving blend of power-soaked triumph and wondrous awe.

She stepped closer and lifted her hands to cup my face, her thumbs stroking my skin. "I don't have to remind you what I'll do if you tell them."

I nodded mutely, still shaken to the depths of my being by her overwhelming power.

"You don't want me to do that. Not to you. Not to them."

Silently I shook my head.

"Go back now, Gabrielle," she murmured beneath another crack of thunder. "Convince them. Make them see how Artemis has failed them." She leaned forward and pressed her lips against my brow, and I gasped; they were an icy brand against my skin. "Make them love me."

"They'll feel as strongly for you as I do," I said gravely.

Dimitra gestured with her chin. "Go on."

I ran as quickly as my shaking limbs could carry me.

At the memory of her kiss, my stomach suddenly rebelled and I turned sharply, heaving its meager contents onto the muddy ground. I coughed and then, weakly, I slumped back against the tree and winced as the bark scraped the scratches Dimitra had given me earlier. I scrubbed my hand across my lips and tilted my head back, catching errant drops of musty tasting rain in my mouth. It helped a little, but it wasn't really enough. Not enough to dispel the raw feeling inside. The sense of feeling drained to exhaustion.

Part of it was relief. I couldn't believe I was sitting here right this second, the scrapes and bruises and aches a stinging yet welcome reminder that I was truly alive. I was too tired to congratulate myself beyond thinking back to Joxer's little run-in with Aphrodite. He'd been so depressed after she had removed her spell and turned him back into—in her words —“*the idiot full-time, again.*” But Xena, I remember, had disagreed, telling him that Aphrodite hadn't given him anything that wasn't already there. I don't know what had made me think of it with Dimitra. Maybe her efforts to make me love her had brought it to mind, but I'd wondered if the reverse were true as well; she couldn't take from me what wasn't in me to begin with. It'd had been a gamble. “But did it pay off?” I whispered to myself as I looked up through the canopy of leaves and the gradually gentling storm.

I don't think I love her. I don't feel like I do. When she had demanded that I give myself to it, that I surrender myself, I had given myself to the loves I knew, the ones I cherished most; my family, my friends... *Xena*. Her most of all. Just thinking about her now made me smile, in spite of my cut lip. The memories of her were the ones I had held to the strongest, most especially that moment when she had come back from the other side, when her eyes had opened and she spoke my name. She had come back—for me. I didn't want to do any less than that now for her. I had to get back.

Looking out from my shelter I could see that fewer toads were falling now. The ones that weren't exploding horribly on impact were wiggling grotesquely or attempting to hop off to shelter of their own. Seeing Dimitra's influence, feeling it so intimately, I wondered and worried if I really had managed to evade her spell. Was it more insidious than I realized. Would I do her will regardless?

I snorted. “You're still going to do it anyway, stupid.” It was that or she would kill everyone. Not much of a choice either way, but I hoped that I'd be going into it clear-eyed at least. *Speaking of eyes...* I pressed the palms of my hands against my eyes, feeling the beginnings of a headache coming on. *...so tired...* After a moment, I dropped my hands into my lap and stared at them, wondering how hands like these—strong, but small—were going to make this work. I laughed again, this time wryly. *What, do you think you're going to beat them into worshipping Dimitra? Get real.* I'd have to find another way.

Better get started. Taking a deep breath, I looked around with more concentrated interest. It was hard to get a read on the time of day with the heavy clouds overhead, but I guessed it might be close to mid-afternoon. It didn't help that I was completely turned around. Thinking back to the maps I'd seen of the area, I had to be south of the village in the forested area that sprawled for leagues until it tapered off to foothills

and mountains and inevitably the sea. As far as I knew I hadn't crossed the river; there were no signs of centaurs or the other human settlements I knew had sprung up on the edges of Amazon territory. So I'd start by heading north. I eased out of my protective crevasse and looked around. "Now, which way do you suppose is north?"

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I'd been so sure that the storm was letting up. Had I known the rain was going to come down so much harder I would have stayed put for a while longer. As it was, I was soaked to the skin and cold, the air—smelling green and lush—hung in thick clouds of mist. The toads started falling again, their terrible funeral song echoing in the air, punctuated by their abrupt and messy deaths as they crashed into the ground.

"Ow!" One smacked into my shoulder and I began running, hoping to find some kind of decent cover. The sky rumbled again and the rain fell harder. Barely able to see, I slipped and slid along; panting as I ran in the direction I thought the village might lie. Sliding down an embankment, I used a branch to swing around a tree trunk and smacked into something that appeared at the last second.

"Oof!"

"Ungh!"

SPLASH!

I fell butt first into a puddle of mud. Whatever I hit didn't fair any better, falling backwards into a bush.

"Begging your pardon!" said a voice, aged and cracking.

I wiped dirty water from my face and pushed my tangled hair away from my eyes. "What?"

A hunched figure levered itself out of the bush, the person covered in a heavy cloak, hooded against the weather. "I'm sorry, young lady. Don't mind me." My surprise and confusion melted, leaving me staring narrow-eyed at the hunched crone. "I'll just be on my way. It's such a horrible storm..."

I grabbed at the cloak as it tried to scoot by me. "Not so fast—" Uncovered to the elements, I could now see leather pants, a green vest and dark sleeves, topped by a floppy gray bundle of yarn, which didn't quite go with the neatly trimmed beard sported below. "—Autolycus."

He stood there in a frozen hunch, until one eye rolled back to look at me. "Why, hello Gabrielle. Heh, heh. Fancy meeting you out here."

For a moment I couldn't even speak, I was so overcome with relief at seeing a safe, familiar face. I took us both off guard when I wrapped my arms around him.

He stiffened in surprise. "Weee-heh-heeell. As much as I can understand your infatuation—and believe me, it's one I encounter quite often—it just won't work out; your goddess wants to use me for a new rug, and me? Call me crazy, but I'm partial to my insides being where they are. You know how it is." But he gave me a quick hug before firmly setting me away from him.

“What are you doing out here?” *Speaking of out here...* I grabbed his arm and guided us quickly beneath a tree where the two of us squatted under the knotted branches while the toads continued to fall.

“Looking for you, of course,” he said magnanimously before glancing not-so-casually over his shoulder. “The village really needs you. Slavers, mobs, toads...the party's really taken a turn for the surreal—they can't seem to handle anything without you. If you head in that direction, you should be there in an hour or two.” Autolycus pointed back over his shoulder. “You go on ahead and I'll bring up the rear guard in a bit.”

“And Xena—?”

He waved a hand in dismissal. “Bashing heads left, right and center. Don't worry.” His eyes looked me over. “You, on the other hand, look like something Zeus scraped off the bottom of his sandal.”

“It's been a rough day,” I admitted, my fingers finding the thin cut across my belly.

“You should get back to the village,” he said as he looked over his shoulder again. “Get that looked at.”

“Don't you mean ‘we’? Don't think I haven't noticed that you're out here all by your lonesome.”

Autolycus pressed a hand against his heart, his expression properly mournful. “You wound me. Here I am, braving a fierce, unnatural storm, endangering myself in enemy lands, all to come find you, and this is the thanks I get?”

“Meaning, you let yourself out of jail and decided to get away while you had the chance until you had the bad luck to run me over, huh?” I reinterpreted for myself.

“Exactly.” He threw his arms in the air. “Your crazy Amazons were going to string me up, you know? They were coming for me.”

“What?!”

“The slavers attacked the village saying they wanted their leader released.” He poked himself repeatedly in the chest. “Me. *Me*. As if *I* would work with such amateurs.” He made a conciliatory gesture with one hand. “Mind you, their profit goals are in the right place, and—”

“Autolycus.”

“—that Iskra is someone I could definitely see myself working with again; although—”

“Autolycus.”

“—perhaps in a less stressful capacity of course—”

“AUTOLYCUS!” I smacked his arm. “The village, what happened to the village?”

“Anyway, they attacked, Amazons died, and now half the Nation blames me. If Xena hadn't lodged herself in the doorway to hold them off when she did, I'd probably be

hanging like a pretty Brauronia piñata right now.”

“If you took off, how do you know this?”

He looked a little embarrassed. “Rooftop.”

“You stuck around?”

“Only until I knew Xena had things well in hand and then I made my break for it.” Autolycus looked defensive as he shrugged. “Hey, she kept them from killing me outright. The least I could do was watch her back for a couple of minutes.”

I could easily forgive him for trying to escape seeing as he had made the effort to look out for Xena first. Not that she would have asked for it, but I approved nonetheless. “I really appreciate that. I’ll make sure to clear you of any connection to the slavers when we get back to the village.” I reached out for his sleeve to tug him along with me and was almost hauled off my feet when he didn’t come along.

“Wait a second.” He planted himself and raised his hands. “What’s this ‘we’ stuff?”

“We need to go back.”

“You’re the queen; of course you do. Me, I’ve had quite enough of Amazon hospitality, thank you.”

“Autolycus!” I grabbed him by the arm, preventing him from walking off.

“Look, Gabrielle—”

“The thief is Dimitra and she has the belt. Up until about half a candle-mark ago, she had me too. Why do you think I look like this?”

His expression sobered immediately. “I thought you were clumsy.”

I smacked his shoulder again. Harder this time.

“Ow!”

“You’re coming back with me. If she finds you out here, she’ll probably kill you.”

He glanced up at the sky. “If the frogs don’t kill us first. What are you going to do when we get back?”

I shook my head, frowning. “Found a new religion. C’mon.”

He stared after me, blinked, and then followed reluctantly in my wake. “Okay, but as good-looking as I am, don’t even think of using me as a virgin sacrifice; white is not my color...”

* * *

XXXVII. Fatal A-Track-Shun

Even though tracking, like scouting, doesn’t rate high on my list of favorite warrioring activities, I would never argue that there is an art and science to it. Not just any Telemachus, Daedalus or Herodotus can do it. It takes a keen eye, an appreciation for

detail and an understanding of how your surroundings behave. It takes patience. And, if you're lucky enough to find that one pesky little print, that almost invisible clue, it requires speed and awareness to know how to track your quarry, how to blend in even as you pick up the trail. Put simply: an understanding and grasp of the value of personal silence.

So when I turned on Artemis and bellowed, “For the last time, I don't want to talk about how soft her skin is!” you can probably guess how well things had been going.

She chucked a pinecone at me in retaliation, but she clamped her mouth shut and got back to work.

“I hate that belt,” I muttered under my breath. The rain, which had tapered off for a while, was now falling harder than ever, albeit without the toads. It was a minor relief to deal with a regular annoyance for a change instead of a supernatural one. Three times I'd managed to find a hint of a trail and three times I'd eventually lost it again because of the rain. We had stubbornly kept at it for a candle-mark since the trail went cold and Artemis seemed more than prepared to try to out-do me for the *Most Skilled Tracker* prize. I couldn't care less—even if the score was two-to-one in my favor. I'm bigger than that.

Stumped for the moment I stopped and stood. “This is getting us nowhere.” I wanted to tear my hair out with frustration.

“What?” Artemis sat back on her haunches and gave me a look. “Don't tell me you're giving up already?”

Her mocking smile irritated me. “Of course not.” There was no way I was giving up; I wouldn't give her the satisfaction, not with Gabrielle's life in danger. But with the rain washing away all visible traces, we were losing our last hope of finding her captors' trail. I walked away from the clearing, shaking my dripping hair away from my eyes as I crossed my arms and leaned against a tree the better to work through what we already knew.

One, an Amazon had the belt. Two, that Amazon also had Gabrielle. The threat was dire enough that Gabrielle had killed someone to protect herself, someone else or the village. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, not wanting to imagine how she must be feeling after having done that. I was crushed for her, saddened and guilty for having led her into a life where she had been forced to get blood on her hands in order to stay alive. I could only hope I could help her through it, but the situation only reinforced how nowhere was safe, not really—not the village, not Potaedia, nowhere.

This isn't helping, I reminded myself. I stared off into the dripping foliage as I gathered my thoughts again. Three, the slavers had attacked the village and demanded Autolycus back, claiming him as their leader. I didn't buy that no matter what Ephiny thought, but his disappearing didn't exactly help matters. Having been inside his head, it's hard not to believe that I have a pretty good bead on who the self-proclaimed King of Thieves really is, outward appearances notwithstanding.

The slavers and the thief had to be connected. It was the only explanation for the convenient timing of Gabrielle's disappearance and the attack; which could only lead me to believe that the Amazon—whoever she was—had coordinated everything with the slavers. But why work with them? Money was the most obvious reason, but even

that didn't quite fit.

“I will not do this all by myself, Xena,” Artemis called from behind me. “I can see that Gabrielle's penchant for cooperation and teamwork is not a skill she learned from you,” she added snidely.

Harpy. I grimaced at the interruption. “The tracks are gone. Give it up; we'll need to find another way.”

She clenched her fists at her sides, staring at me haughtily. “Abandon your search if you choose. I shouldn't be surprised that you would give up when things become difficult.”

I whipped around and glared at her. “Take your passive-aggressive attitude and shove it up your feathered—”

“How *dare* you?”

“Me?” I hooked a thumb at myself. “Is this your definition of a truce?” Artemis turned away, her back a wall to silently rebuff me. That was fine by me; at least her anger would keep her quiet for a while. Hopefully long enough for me to find a different solution.

Where was I? The money trail. Nah. That just didn't make sense. A wannabe goddess wouldn't have any use for money even if that were the bait used to get the slavers involved. There had to be some other motivation. Time to look at it from a different perspective. If I was going to attack the Amazons and it wasn't for money, why would I do it? The timing of the attack was the answer. “A diversion,” I murmured. A diversion for her and—what?—a reward of a few captives for the slave-trade for them? Could be... Amazons were worth a lot on the open block, even more on the black market. *Clever, very clever.*

It felt right. So what would the next move be? She's got the belt, she's got Gabrielle... “She's feeling ambitious and grumpy.” If I'd made it that far, I might even be feeling a bit cocky. I might want someone to know that. I glanced back over my shoulder to where Artemis was still diligently, if sourly, crawling around in the bushes looking for some soggy clue. If it were me, I might want to take out the competition.

That, too, felt right. “She'll come back here,” I reasoned. To kill Artemis? And would this Amazon keep Gabrielle alive? Would I?

Definitely.

Even if the Amazon didn't bring her back to the village, she'd keep her tied up somewhere safe, which meant that I'd be forced to wait until she made her move. Tied up again, you'd think that girl actually enjoyed it. *Hmm ...*

I scrubbed my hair out of my face while I contemplated possible receptions I could plan for the Amazon's arrival. Gabrielle would be the key...

I was focusing so intensely on the bard that I thought I imagined her walking towards me from out of the sheeting rain, ghostly and solemn. The vision of her, soaked and pale, still made me smile. Softly, but still it was there. Maybe it was the influence of the belt, maybe it was the misery of being stuck with someone as disagreeable as

Artemis, but I missed her. Our fight from last night still bothered me; I know I was petty, I know I was unreasonable, but that didn't seem to matter just then. And now... she could be out there, wounded, scared, and perhaps having been forced to sacrifice her blood innocence...

“Xena.”

My awareness snapped into focus. “Gabrielle?”

My vision coughed a laugh and then stopped and covered her mouth with her hands, her eyes staring back at me in wavering tearfulness. Suddenly I could see the cuts and scratches on her, the bruising, the stark paleness that had nothing to do with the weather. This was no vision. “Gabrielle!” I lunged forward and caught her in my arms, feeling her solid and real against me. I felt her trembling like a frightened animal, stiff and unresponsive. Instinctively, I gathered her to me, cupping the back of her head with my hand, sheltering her from the rain.

“Gabrielle...” I rubbed my cheek against her head, trying to offer whatever comfort I could. Little by little she relaxed, settling beneath my touch like a skittish horse, but still she barely touched me. Her reluctance in responding was surprisingly hurtful. Was she injured worse than I could see? Was she still mad at me? “Let me look at you.”

Gabrielle drew back and I was treated to a tired face, one that was bruised and scraped, but whose eyes were bright and lit with some fierce emotion I couldn't interpret. It made me wary. “What happened to you?”

A throat cleared itself and I lifted my head to see a very wet, unhappy Autolycus looking back at me from over Gabrielle's shoulder.

I smiled sardonically. “I had a feeling I'd see you again.”

“Yeah?” He wrung out his shirtfront. “That makes one of us.”

“I know who has the belt,” Gabrielle said quietly, garnering my full attention again. I couldn't help but notice how her hands at her sides were knotted into fists. “I need to talk to you.”

“Gabrielle!”

Damn.

Artemis, her hard face completely transformed by a smile, appeared by my side and reached out to embrace Gabrielle. The muscles in my jaw clenched as she hugged my friend, but I guiltily admit to being glad to see Artemis get the same unresponsive treatment I did; Gabrielle didn't fight the embrace, but she stood limply, merely accepting the contact. Artemis drew back, a flash of confusion and hurt on her face before she composed herself. “It lifts my heart to see you back and safe, Gabrielle.”

“Thank you,” she replied, almost distractedly, I thought, before she looked back towards me. “We need to talk.”

I shrugged. “Go ahea—”

“Alone,” Gabrielle enunciated clearly and firmly.

“Excuse me?” Artemis demanded even as I could feel one of my brows lifting in question. “I protest this exclusion—”

“Please take Autolycus with you to your quarters,” Gabrielle interrupted her. “I want you both to stay in your hut, out of the way until I call for you. If anyone stops you or tries to get at Autolycus, tell them that he'll be facing justice at your hand tomorrow.”

“What?” Autolycus stepped forward and glowered at Gabrielle. “I knew letting you talk me into this was a bad idea!”

Gabrielle put her hand on his arm and I felt another flare of jealous hurt. She'd touch him, but not me? My eyes narrowed at him suspiciously. What had happened out there between them?

“Please.” Her voice was tired, but determined. I could tell he didn't like it any more than Artemis, but he screwed up his face for a long moment and then threw his hands in the air.

“This is insane.” He stalked off towards the village, stopped abruptly and then looked to Artemis. “Coming, your goddess-ness?”

“Watch it, mortal,” she growled. Artemis looked as though she wanted to say something else to Gabrielle, but she apparently thought better of it, choosing instead to glare at me and then follow Autolycus up the path. I waited for the sound of their squabbling to fade away and then reached out, tentatively, and put my hand on Gabrielle's shoulder.

“Now, what is it?”

She shook her head. “Not here.” She glanced over her shoulder and I followed her gaze, but found nothing out of place in the misty spaces between the trees.

“Then where?” Given the oddity of the situation, I was willing to let her call the shots.

“Our hut.”

“Good. We can get you cleaned up while you tell me what's going on.”

She nodded, but with an air of distraction as she looked back one more time.

“Gabrielle.” She looked up at me. Now that I had her attention, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to say—just something that would remove the weight of worry from her face, from the tense lines of her battered body. “It'll be okay.”

Gabrielle crossed her arms, hugging herself in the rain and shook her head slowly, sadly. “No. I don't think so.”

Taken aback by her uncharacteristic pessimism, I could only stand there and stare after her as she walked back towards the village, feeling the chill of fear and worry left she had left behind.

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I caught up with her, watching her instead of the path, but she kept her head down, her eyes on the ground.

There were so many things we needed to go over, but even in a crisis, I have my priorities. “You’re going to let me get you cleaned up when we get back.”

She nodded, but didn’t argue. Nor did she look at me. Her silence, the preoccupied frown on her face, was unsettling. This detachment was so unlike her that I felt almost off balance, ill at ease in her presence. “Gabrielle?”

“Mm?”

“Why did you let her kiss you?” I couldn’t believe I’d just asked that. With all the danger around us, everything we’d been through already, this is what I came up with? Mentally wincing, I rolled an eye towards her to see her reaction and I was surprised to see her shoulders slump further. After her reaction last time, I had expected fireworks, a shouted denial, protestations that Artemis had taken advantage. But this... this bunched shoulder, almost ashamed look was making me feel anxious, hurt—betrayed.

I reached out and stopped her. “Why?”

Finally she looked at me. “I don’t know.”

I stared at her, watching her look back at me with her sad, tired eyes. That was it? “You don’t *know* ?”

“I—Xena, do we have to talk about this right now?” she pleaded. “We need to get back.”

Grumpily, I let her set the pace again, stewing over her answer.

“You can’t tell me anything right now?”

She sighed in exasperation, but didn’t answer. I wasn’t used to expending this much effort to get Gabrielle—a bard—to talk. Part of me resented her reluctance to share. “She said you thought it was me.” There!

Gabrielle’s head whipped around and I could see that the color was high in her skin. Any feeling of triumph I felt in finally getting a reaction was lost when I saw how upset she was, how scared. I felt horrible. Awkwardly, I looked away, to our feet, which had stopped on the path, and finally back to her face. “Gabrielle, I—”

“We need to get back,” she said again. “Xena, please, we’ll talk later. But time is running short and we *have* to go.”

Chastened and self-conscious, I nodded. “You’re right.” We walked through the rain and I swallowed hard, realizing that, once again, I’d given in to the belt’s influence and over something so stupid and silly and annoying. Who cared if Gabrielle let someone kiss her?

But I couldn’t help wanting, still, to know why she had thought it was me.

* * *

XXXVIII. Love and Truth by Halves

Though she warned me just before we came to the village, I was still shocked to see what had happened in my absence; bodies of men and Amazons had been set in two piles and I could easily see the evidence of damage from weapons and fire, and further, the dents and breakage from the falling frogs. Decorations lay scattered and banners and ribbons hung limp and heavy with rain, others were ripped and ground into the mud. I wondered how this would affect this year's Brauronia.

With so much to do to recover from the battle, Ephiny appeared to have everyone mobilized and working that could still do so. Those who didn't have tasks requiring them to be in the rain had disappeared indoors where it was warm and dry. A pall hung over the village and in spite of my own concerns I could still sense the grief and anger that threaded through the community.

Slipping into the quiet stillness of the queen's temporary quarters was a relief; the sensation of constantly having an unseen pair of eyes watching me lessened considerably, but didn't disappear altogether. I couldn't fool myself into thinking I was safe. None of us were; Dimitra's control was growing. This thought followed me across the room like a pack of snarling hounds, nipping at me where I had stopped by the half-open window shutters overlooking the torn up common area. Behind me, I was vaguely aware of the sound of the door closing softly and the faint, waterlogged steps of Xena's boots as she moved about the room.

In moments, I heard the thin, sharp click of stones smacking together and then saw shifting light blossom in the room as Xena started a fire. It didn't matter; I doubted any fire could warm the chill I was harboring inside me. Absently, I rubbed my hands along my arms, hugging myself for warmth and comfort. It was a futile gesture.

I didn't want to break the silence, but I knew I had no choice; between Dimitra's demands and Xena's unvoiced questions, my time had run out.

"Gabrielle." Xena said my name quietly, perhaps thinking to avoid startling me. She came up behind me and I heard an indrawn breath. My shoulders shifted, wondering if the cuts looked worse than they felt. My body tensed for the onslaught of her questions—Xena's never been known for her patience, but nothing came.

The touch of something against a scrape on my shoulder made me flinch away and I turned around in surprise. "What—?"

Xena held up a clean cloth in one hand and I noticed a small liquid-filled bowl in the other. "Your back looks like you've been dragged through a briar patch. You can tell me what's going on while we get you fixed up."

Reflexively I put a hand across my midriff, covering the bloody pinpricks left by Dimitra's dagger. "Never mind. I'm fin—"

"Gab-ri-elle."

It sounded like her day had been at least as bad as mine if her limited patience was gone already. "All right, all right." I let her lead me to the edge of the bed. Sitting down on something soft was bliss and my sigh of pleasure was drawn out long enough that Xena's lips quirked in reluctant amusement.

After setting the bowl down, she retrieved several packets of herbs from the saddlebags and then knelt beside me. “Tell me,” Xena said simply, her head down as she set her attention to cleaning and binding the worst of the aftermath of my encounter with Dimitra.

Selfishly, I rather wished she could take care of the rest of the situation, but there was no way to sidestep this one. The game of deception and evasion was about to start and I already knew there was little hope of lying to her. I would have to take refuge in slim truths and gamble on Xena's trust. The task was daunting. *Make it good, Gabrielle.* I took a deep breath. “I went into the woods looking for Artemis after she disappeared this morning. Without her powers, it was pretty clear she'd be vulnerable.” I waited for her nod, but thankfully she didn't have any questions yet.

“I didn't think there was time to go looking for you to tell you what I'd planned and... I know I should have told someone.” Again Xena nodded, but declined to criticize me for what had proven to be seriously poor judgment. “I got jumped.” I could feel myself flushing. After all this time, I really should have known better.

“Happens to the best of us,” Xena murmured and switched position to start cleaning my back.

I snorted softly, knowing for fact that the number of times someone else had gotten the jump on Xena could probably be counted on one hand, but I appreciated the gesture of solidarity anyway. My fingers picked at a loose thread in the blanket. “Dimitra has the belt.”

Xena paused behind me and then sighed, continuing her work. “We were *that* close.”

“Yeah.” Trying to spot our target in a village teeming with suspects had been hard enough but to actually talk to her and then dismiss her to consider her companion instead... How different things would be now if only... *If only...*

With Xena unable to see my expression, I bit my lip and braced myself, hoping she couldn't feel my heart pounding where her free hand rested against my shoulder blade. “She and I talked for a while and, Xena, I think we're better off with Dimitra.”

All movement behind me stopped. “What?” She was incredulous. “You've got to be kidding me!”

“Artemis doesn't deserve to be a goddess.”

Xena came off the bed to face me and I could see how I'd taken her by surprise, her eyes glued to mine with an intensity that almost made me blow everything. How could I possibly lie to *her*? “Did you get hit on the head by a frog or something?” she demanded and reached out to check.

I held her gaze as I intercepted her hand, gently deflecting it away. I couldn't let her touch me any more than necessary. “Artemis can't be trusted. You were right. She's just like all the other gods; conceited and self-serving.” Xena shook her head and I leaned forward. “Of all people, Xena, you *know* what they're like. Didn't you tell me that?”

“This is crazy. I'm all for deciding one's own fate, but this? You'd have the Amazons

throw aside hundreds of years of history and tradition? Just like that? That's not like you."

It was an argument I might have made and I decided to sidestep it with one of my own. "She's irresponsible and careless, Xena. She lost her belt, remember? If that's the source of her powers and the crux of our faith, you'd think she'd take better care of it. If she treats something like that so shabbily, what about us?" I was so glad I was still wet from the rain; I could feel myself wanting to sweat beneath her burning scrutiny. "If she can't guard something as important as that, how can we possibly trust her to look after the needs of the Nation? The fate of these women is as much my responsibility as it is their own."

Xena looked at me for a long moment, silent. I was counting on her dislike of the gods and Artemis in particular to help sway her. My argument held *some* water, but would it be enough? She rose to her feet and went to tend the fire.

"Dimitra stole the belt," Xena reminded me as she fed more wood to the flames. "She arranged for an attack on the village as a diversion while she kidnapped you so she could use you as leverage against us." She turned suddenly and returned to my side, standing over me. "I think she's using you now."

"You can think that if you want to," I said evenly, being careful not to agree or disagree and hoping Xena would notice. "But this is *my* decision to make."

"Then you need to remake it! In case you missed it, there's a pyre being built out there right now for all the Amazons *her* slavers killed today!" Xena flung her hand out towards the window and the grim scene beyond. "Is that the kind of goddess you want instead?"

"There's no other choice if I want to see the Nation survive." Was she getting my message? "Continuing to support Artemis will only get all of us killed in the end. We need a solution, even if it's short-term."

Xena stood there, her lips pressed into a thin line. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from you."

"I *am* capable of common sense, you know!"

She shook her head at me, looking both angry and frustrated. "I never thought you'd betray anyone like this. I'm not going to let you do it, Gabrielle. We'll find another way and that's the end of it. I may have an idea—"

"No!" I pushed myself to my feet, trying not to wince as my stiff muscles protested. "Listen to me; it's for the best this way. Artemis can't help us and Dimitra will be far more powerful, more deadly than Artemis ever was. She'll wipe out anyone who stands in the way of what she wants for the Nation, which is something I don't think Artemis would ever do. We have to think about the future." *C'mon, Xena. I can't blurt it out.* "Please. I need you to believe me—this is the right thing to do."

The muscles in her jaws worked as she considered my words and, more importantly, me. I knew the mind behind those brilliant eyes was working as fast if not faster than my own. "What's going on, Gabrielle? Really?"

"The Nation is at a crossroads," I told her. "If I want my people to survive and

prosper, we have to consider a change, now, at the height of Brauronia. The ceremony will be the *Nation's* best chance to reclaim the future we want.”

She was silent a long time. “What if you're wrong?” she asked, finally.

I couldn't answer, but from the exasperated sigh she gave, she had read the answer in the expression on my face.

“Throwing one god over for another? That's a huge gamble you're asking the *Nation* to take.” She had said it the same way I had... did that mean she understood?

I could tell she was wavering, but I still hadn't convinced her. “Xena... I need you to trust me. To trust that my decision is for the *greater good*.” I put delicate emphasis on those last two words, praying that she'd get the hint. By the way she blinked and tilted her head I held my breath, daring to hope that I may have finally gotten through to her. Xena crossed her arms and walked a couple of paces before looking at the floor and then at me, sidelong.

“The other Amazons are pretty conservative,” Xena said slowly, with great reluctance.

The relief was overwhelming and I sank down on to the edge of the bed, almost lightheaded with it. She didn't understand completely, but she understood me, and that—for the moment—seemed to be enough for her. It took me a moment to get my mind back to the conversation and the veiled warning in her mild comment; it was one that had occurred to me already. “I'm counting on it. Dimitra's values will probably appeal to a number of them.” If our experience with Velasca was anything to judge by, anyway...

Xena nodded and came back to settle on the bed next to me. I could tell by the focused frown on her face that she was thinking things over carefully. “How will you convince the others?”

“I'm their queen. I'll order them.”

She snorted and shook her head. “You know as well as I do how far that'll go. You'll have to do better than that.”

It was truer than I wanted to admit; Amazons tended towards the aggressive, rugged individualist temperament—being told whom to worship probably wouldn't be popular, but I had to use every option or none of us would live to see the end of tomorrow. “I need your help. To establish the new faith,” I added quickly, hoping it still sounded natural to whoever might be listening. *Whoever* ... As if I didn't already know.

“It figures she'd do this right before the party,” Xena drawled, sounding far more natural than I. “Dimitra seems to like being the center of attention just as much as Artemis.”

“Yeah,” I said, drawing out the word, not quite sure where Xena was going with that.

“D'you suppose she's gonna want to dance with you instead?”

I wasn't prepared for the reaction I had. The thought of Dimitra being close to me again, touching me...

“Hey...” Xena's hand touched my forearm and I pulled back, staggering to my feet and away. I had to deny my feelings. I couldn't show anything—to anyone. I came to a stop against the tub and I leaned against its edge, blindly staring at a black feather floating on its dark, still surface while I waited for my heart to stop pounding in my ears. The bedclothes rustled behind me. *She's coming over.* I closed my eyes; I didn't want her near me. Not now.

“Tell me what's wrong.” The concern in her voice, the tenderness, made me grip the edge of the tub until my knuckles whitened. With effort I forced myself to relax.

“Performance anxiety, I guess,” I chuckled weakly, but I still couldn't bear turning around.

“You're a natural.” The smile was in her voice and, in my mind's eye, I could see it, that gentle turn of her lips revealing the rare beauty that time and healing was slowly coaxing out into the open. I didn't want to see it. I couldn't risk it.

“Gabrielle? Gabrielle, look at me.”

I resisted her, but her will, her strength is not easily denied. She turned me, gently, but firmly, until I faced her. I looked away.

“Gabrielle.” Her voice was a low, soft burr in my ear and I set myself against it. I felt her touch beneath my chin and I pulled away, slowly, but I met Xena's eyes as I did so to watch the flow of emotions across her face. Surprise, confusion... hurt again... Her brows twitched and furrowed and then her entire face darkened, like the shadows thrown by rapidly gathering storm clouds. “It's *her*, isn't it?!” she spat.

The ferocity took me off guard. “Dimitra?”

“Artemis!”

Was this part of the script? Suddenly I was floundering. “What are you talking about?”

“You wanted her to kiss you, didn't you?” Xena grabbed my shoulders and I gasped, feeling her fingers pressing into my cuts and bruises. “You did, *didn't you?*”

She flung herself away then, the contrast of firelight and shadow making her expression a twisted caricature of her normally beautiful face. An odd light touched her eyes and the shadows warped her smile. I found myself pressing back against the tub as she stalked back towards me. “I-I don't understand.”

“She was just toying with me, wasn't she?” Xena leaned over me and I felt small and uncertain, afraid to move. “She said you thought it was me. That it's me you love, but she was only saying that, wasn't she? It's her you want,” she accused me in a soft, dangerous whisper.

“Xena, no...”

Her hands clamped down over my arms, pinning me back against the tub until the wood bit into my lower back. “Don't lie to me!”

“I'm not!”

Xena tossed her head at my denial, her teeth bared. “I think you're lying, Gabrielle. I think you love her.”

I struggled, but she only tightened her grip. “Xena...”

“She tried to kiss you! Touch you! You won't even let me do *that*. You keep pushing me away!”

“Xena, stop!” It was like Dimitra all over again. I couldn't go through that a second time, not with Xena. Not with her. “Let me go!”

“I see how she looks at you...” She lowered her head to rest against mine and I felt the damp strands of her ink-black hair mingling with my own, casting both our faces in shadow, away from the light of the fire. Her hand, fever-hot, cupped my face. “Why don't you love me, Gabrielle?”

“It's the belt.” I could feel myself trembling. Her body was radiating heat, but all I could feel was the chill of my fear and the pebbling of my still wet skin. “Xena, don't let it do this to you...”

It was as if she didn't hear me, as if she didn't hear anything but whatever dark whisper had drowned out all but the rotting words eating away at her reason. “Just say it. Just once! Say that you love me.”

Was it the belt, or only my heart? I struggled not to give in. “Please fight it. Oh Gods, Xena, I need you to fight this... *please*.” She had to because I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep silent. For a second I thought I saw a flicker in the depths of her eyes, something there that heard me. Dimitra's threat hung bleakly in my mind; the death of all and I could love only her. I couldn't give Xena what she wanted without destroying us all.

Xena shuddered and then shook me. “*Say it!*”

“I can't!” Through tearful burning eyes, I saw her expression break as if I'd delivered a sword blow to her chest. A soft sound of agony slipped past her lips and, as if our souls were yoked by all the weight of our desperate emotions, we crumbled to our knees, still connected, still gripping one another. “...I can't...” I whispered between sobs.

Her whole body trembled and the curtain of her hair hid her pain from my eyes as she bowed her head, but I felt it nonetheless; I felt it in her fingers where they coiled around my arms, in the very air that splintered between us with each hitching breath she took.

“Xena...” How could I have done this to her?

She released me so suddenly that I was forced to catch my balance as she flung herself backward and against the foot of the bed. Her elbows came to rest on her upright knees, her face hidden in her hands. Even from where I sat halfway across the room I could see the silent quaver of her shoulders. I wiped my tears away with my forearm and swallowed. “I'm so sorry...”

She seemed to struggle with herself, lifting her eyes to the ceiling where the darker shades of rose and gold and umber shifted across the smoke-darkened timbers in

unpredictable patterns. A calmness had returned, but I couldn't guess what she was thinking. "I know," Xena answered, so quietly I could barely hear her. "I know."

"Will—will you still help me?"

Xena gave a soft, bitter laugh and ran a hand through her hair, tumbling it in tangled waves away from her face. In one smooth motion she got to her feet and I blinked at her, a feeling of uncertain fear growing in my chest.

"Xena?"

In silence she went to the door, opened it and paused at the threshold to glance back at me, her blue eyes hollow and sad. One corner of her lips lifted in a self-deprecating smile and then she was gone and the door pulled shut behind her, leaving me alone in the queen's quarters that was a shelter no longer. Leaving me alone with my fate and the fate of the Nation.

* * *

PART 7

XXXIX. Getting Some Tail

One of the things you learn as Regent of the Amazon Nation is that it's not that much different from babysitting. Age is irrelevant; all that matters is making sure everyone is fed, clothed, kept out of serious trouble and everything's cleaned up before the real authority comes home.

So it's no surprise that I was in the center of the mess. "No, Magdela, over there. We'll have a second detail take their carcasses into the woods. They don't deserve a pyre, but we'll have to give them one; it's too hot to leave them to bake in the sun. Take them as far as the white rock, just beyond the first sentry point."

"The wolves can have 'em for all I care," Magdela muttered, but she signaled to her group, leading them towards the stiffening pile of bodies to sledge them to the edge of the village.

I nodded and watched her go, conscious of the tired droop of her shoulders—the way they all looked harried and down. *This is so wrong*. We were on the cusp of Brauronia and everyone should have been celebrating—eating, singing, visiting with our guests and making plans for the whole of the Nation for the next four years, not hauling bodies around and praying some of their sisters wouldn't die of infection and disease. I regarded the torn strips of cloth lying on the ground, their vibrant colors dark with rain and mud, and sighed, miserable at the thought of the reputation we were going to earn among our sisters for *this* catastrophe.

"Hera's tits," I sighed again.

"Not worth the handful."

My head whipped around to find Eponin standing behind me, and a bevy of queens behind her. "So I've heard." I raised my eyebrows at the weapons-master, silently asking for some lead in what the other tribes' leaders were doing here en masse.

“They're planning on forming up their warriors and hunting down the rest of the vermin. They've courteously extended an invitation for some of our warriors to join them.”

Courteously, my feathers. Courtesy had nothing to do with it; well, avoiding rudeness might be part of it, but mostly it was a question of honor. Given who our queen is and, more to the point, who the queen's champion is, I'm sure they wanted to avoid anything that might legitimately smack of an insult. Because everything eventually comes down to Gabrielle and it's not hard to notice how close an eye Xena keeps on her. I couldn't see Xena putting up with insults to the queen for long before doing some smacking of her own if she thought it warranted.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don't think it's a good idea to send our warriors out and leave the village undefended. Besides,” I was quick to add, “our scouts reported that the other slavers have retreated even further away than their camp. I don't think they'll be back. After the losses we took today, it might be a better idea to stay close to the village.”

I hated how that sounded. We're warriors, not cowards.

“What?!” One of them gaped.

“That's ridiculous! Are we a bunch of old women?” another asked, derisively. “They killed our sisters! We demand justice!”

The queen from the eastern tribe sniffed and gave me a look suggesting she could hear my thoughts, impossible as that was. “Is this how your tribe does things?”

“This is how we do things when we've had a surprise attack and we've got ten times the number of children, mothers and elders in the village. If we all run off searching for glory, who'll defend them if they do, in fact, double back for a second go at us?”

A couple of them had the good graces to look abashed and the other comments dropped off pretty quickly. Before I could take my momentum and run with it, another voice joined the discussion. “I will *not* sit here like a child and wait for my enemies to come to me,” the northern queen said as she slid her hand along the side of her engraved axe head.

“Then take two dozen out into the woods, but leave the rest,” I suggested in compromise. “We might be better off if we check supplies, see to our injured and get everyone fed for the night. Some of our girls were planning a dance and sword display and I'd hate to disappoint them; they've been practicing for weeks now and I thought it would lift people's spirits. Have any of your people been doing the same?” A few nods here and there and soft comments of ‘music’ and ‘weapons demonstrations’ met my ears. “Then if you're all willing to loan me some of your remaining warriors we might be able to fix things up here and get it cleaned up in time for nightfall and dinner when your scouting party returns. We'll be looking forward to seeing your demonstrations.” I mentally sighed in relief when they latched onto the notion of tribal pride and the need to make sure their outfits were ready and the dancers warmed up and the instruments unpacked—

I left them to it and watched the diverted queens wander off in their slow moving clump, talking excitedly about songs. Eponin stood next to me, looking dour, but

somehow less threatening with her black eye.

“How do you do it?”

“Do what?” I asked, brushing some curls out of my face. The rain had finally stopped, but the relief from the heat had been brief before the humidity set in again.

“I spent an hour trying to tell them running after the slavers was a bad idea and here you distract them with thoughts of bright, shiny weapons and costumes.” She crossed her arms. “How do you do it?”

“That why I get paid the big beads.”

Her serious expression broke for a moment as she chuckled, the ripples of humor settling quickly into her stern expression again. “Gabrielle should promote you.”

I snorted softly. “She gets chased regularly by gods and monsters, copes with ‘Dark and Deadly’ and has to hobnob with the queens—no thanks.”

“Speaking of ‘Dark and Deadly.’” Eponin nodded with her chin towards Gabrielle's quarters where I could see the door open and Xena come out, her lithe form pausing on the threshold before shutting the door firmly behind her.

“Oh good. Maybe now she can tell me what the Hades is going on around here. Nothing makes me grouchier than being kept in the dark and fed centaur droppings,” I said, looking at Eponin. “Do I *look* like a mushroom to you?”

She pursed her lips as she looked me over and though her face didn't change expression, I could see her eyes twinkling. “No.”

“Good.”

“A head of blonde broccoli maybe.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said and turned my attention back to Xena. Her going somewhere without the queen wasn't odd, but seeing her slump against the wall right beside the door for a moment was enough to make me start in surprise. Like defeat, weakness or pain, this emotion, whatever it meant, was not the kind of thing she had ever revealed before, and yet...

I watched as Xena raised one hand to her face to cover her eyes, just a quick thing, but done nonetheless. I shot a glance over to Eponin and saw her watching too, her eyes a trifle wider than normal.

Turning my own gaze back to Xena, I did so in time to see the slow expansion of her broad shoulders as she took a deep breath. It was so out of character, so unlike her, that it actually scared me. *Is Gabrielle okay?* Gabrielle was the only thing I could think of that would make Xena look that way. I knew from a messenger that Gabrielle had made it back to the village a short time ago, but surely Xena would have sent word if the queen were injured? I took a step forward. “Maybe I should—”

Xena straightened up, looking abruptly as strong and proud as ever.

I stopped. “Or not?”

Beside me, Eponin shook her head. "Strange."

No kidding. "Quick; step side-on to me," I said in a low voice to Eponin. She gave me a perplexed look, but did so with studied indifference, as if simply shifting her position to take in a view to my right. Taking a cue on the fly with such ease in a sudden, clandestine manner was what made her the weapons-master, after all.

"What are we doing?" Eponin asked even as she nodded to someone else passing by.

"Something's definitely not right. Do you know that when I stopped by Artemis' quarters a little while ago, she refused to open the door?"

The weapons-master's brow furrowed.

"*And ...*" I paused to stoop down to pick up some broken shards of pottery. "...do you know that she has Autolycus inside? I could have sworn I heard his voice. Did you even see him return with her?"

She gave a low tuneless whistle. "This just gets weirder and weirder."

"Considering she wants to skin him alive, you're not kidding." As we spoke, I followed Xena's movements surreptitiously from the corner of my eye, watching her stroll away from the queen's hut, her body moving with the same lethal grace she's always had. Xena has always looked alert, but the way her eyes roved over everything... "When I point at the burned rooftop over there, take a long look at Xena and tell me what you see, but nod while you answer me." I lifted my hand and gestured to a spot where a fire set from within the hut by a raider had blackened and burned through the hut's planked roof.

Eponin followed my hand and crossed her arms. "I see her," she nodded. "Solari and her crew are working on the kitchen roof, by the way; I passed her on the way over here." After a moment, she shrugged and turned away, her back to Xena as the Warrior Princess continued her seemingly aimless walk.

"Well?"

"I can't be sure, but I think she's hurt her ankle or something recently; her swagger's a little off," Eponin began. "No other injuries that I can detect. Xena never just takes a walk like that. I think she's up to something."

I ducked my head, considering how that was pretty close to my impression as well. "Hm."

"She's casing the place."

I twitched in surprise, blinking at Eponin. "What?"

"Xena knows the village and she's not too fond of us, so why wander around? The only new thing here to see is all the people. If Autolycus still hasn't given up the belt, but is in Artemis' custody, Xena's probably looking for it. If she's still here, she must think the belt is here."

"Which means she thinks the thief is an Amazon," I finished, impressed with her deduction. I looked over at Xena before I could stop myself. Now that Eponin had

said it, I could just barely catch the clues; the way Xena examined her surroundings, the way she discreetly looked the Amazons over and how she seemed to take note of our depressed-looking, defensive condition. As if her feet were simply taking her in that direction, I saw Xena change course and amble off between the buildings and what I surmised was the edge of the village.

“Is she leaving or just checking out another part of the village?” I wondered aloud.

“If I were Xena I'd get a bead on who else is here.” Eponin checked her weapons. “I'll follow her.”

“No, I will.”

She looked at me as if I were crazy. “Ephi—”

“No,” I said again. “I want you to see if the queens are sending anyone out, make sure we've got defensive coverage here and check on Gabrielle to see if she's all right. Stay mum on anything else.”

“I can't believe you're gonna do this.”

“Why not?” I asked, slightly offended. “Regency hasn't made me soft.”

“That has nothing to do with it! This is Xena we're talking about; she finds you tailing her before she knows it's you and Gabrielle's gonna need a new Regent.”

“She won't know I'm there,” I replied airily, hoping I was still as good as I thought I was.

“She's gonna nail you to a tree, Eph. I'm serious. This is a bad idea. At least take a couple of weapons, just in case.”

I fumed. “Your confidence in me is overwhelming.”

“Damn it, Ephiny!”

“I'm going! I need you to keep an eye on the others.”

Eponin rolled her eyes and sighed grumpily, unhappy to have been drafted as my assistant babysitter. “I'll find you in a bit and give you a report. Just make sure I'm not bringing it to you in the healer's hut, okay?”

“Thanks.” I put out a hand to forestall her. “One last thing...”

She stopped, the muscles in her shoulders twitching with impatience to get moving.

“Gimme your sword... and wipe that smirk off your face.”

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Maybe it *was* crazy, but if Xena suspected it was one of us, then it was more important than ever to figure out what was going on before the rest of the queens found out too and the whole celebration got tagged as a disaster and ruined us completely. We'd be a laughingstock and a pariah among our own sisters. Who would be able to hold their head up under those circumstances?

Let them try to host something like this with Gabrielle in their village, I groused to myself and then felt immediately contrite; Gabrielle hadn't caused it, but it sure seemed like she attracted more than her fair share of trouble. As much as I cared for her and considered her a good friend, I couldn't help the thorny prick of bitter resentment I'd been feeling lately. I couldn't seem to help myself, but more and more often I found myself annoyed and angry with Gabrielle, the way she just shows up, causes trouble and then leaves it to me to clean up afterwards while she and Xena get the love and attention. It's enough to really get under your skin. I tried to keep my grumbling to myself as I stepped to the edge of the hut and watched Xena disappear into the stables.

It wasn't enough that Gabrielle had fallen into being queen—almost literally, when she dropped on top of Terreis to protect her—but she had this champion that, to the frustration of the Nation, could out-Amazon any Amazon among us and wasn't even an Amazon to begin with.

There she is. Xena stepped out of the stables, without Argo, and continued on her way, this time at a slightly faster pace. *Can she tell I'm back here?* I pretended to tidy up a strewn pile of fire logs until she was out of sight and then I meandered after her.

If the two of them were going to wrap the rest of us into a tizzy again, I wanted to finally get in early before the showdown. I was tired of being left standing in the back holding the queen's mask while she paraded around in front of us. *Gods, what's wrong with me?* I shook my head and, with effort, forced the sneer off my face, trying to get my mind back on what I was doing.

Xena wove her way through the moving current of women without hesitation and every once in a while I could catch a glimpse of her head turning a little further this way or that. *She better not be working for the other side. She better not*. As much as that was a chilling thought, it also made me grimly—even perversely—happy; we could take her if we had to. I was certain of it.

She took a left followed by a loop around the outer edge of the village and then Xena slipped off into the woods. The seductive thrill of the hunt, of trailing such a daunting target, was getting to me. Like taking hold of an old, familiar set of weapons, I could feel myself slipping back into form, dismissing everything but the task in front of me. I hung back to give her time and then gradually eased into the forest behind her.

The heavy cloud cover made it impossible to tell the time of day, but I estimated it was mid- to late afternoon. The woods were subdued and quiet, though I could hear bird calls off in the distance. I hunkered down, my eyes examining the ground. Even with the wet, muddy conditions, Xena still kept a light step; I could barely see where she had passed here even though I had seen her do it with my own eyes. The barest depression from her boots was visible. A little moisture had been wiped from a leaf as she went by.

My eyes flickered back and forth across the ground in front of me, occasionally looking up to make sure I was still out of sight. But the next time I looked down, all the traces were gone. Like she had simply vanished. *Uh oh*. I stopped in my tracks and squatted down, Eponin's warning echoing prophetically through my head. This *was* crazy.

“Forward or back?” I whispered to myself. The forest stilled itself at the mere breath of my voice and the hair on my arms stood straight up, making me wrestle with that instinctive need to fight or flee. Neither of them would do me any good right now.

As much as my fingers itched to draw Eponin's sword, the rasp of metal on metal would give me away for sure. *Crap*. My heart was starting to pound.

—*She's gonna nail you to a tree.*

I couldn't see Xena anywhere. The forest was so quiet I wondered if she could hear me breathe. *This is no good*. I glanced behind me where I'd done my best to hide my tracks. *Go back?* No, I didn't want to lose her. But I couldn't go forward without knowing where she was. My eyes strayed to the trees above and I felt an idea forming. *Okay, here's an option*. Settling myself, I edged closer to an ancient, heavy-branched tree and quietly levered myself up, hoping I was shielding myself well enough if she happened to look back this way.

It took only a moment before I was nestled in the arms of a couple of branches. I peered around, wondering if I'd catch a glimpse of Xena or if she had managed to elude me completely. Nothing moved. Everything was silent. “Well... damn.” I sighed, completely disappointed. I slumped against the tree trunk and silently banged my fist on the branch beside me.

“What did I tell you the first time about staring at me?”

I almost fell out the tree. “Xen- *mmp!*” A hand slapped itself over my mouth and angry blue eyes glared at me from a very short distance as another hand fisted itself in the front of my outfit and pulled me down and further out of sight.

“What are you doing out here?” she demanded in a near-whisper. “Why are you following me?”

The vise across my mouth was lifted and I swiped my forearm across my lips to give me a moment. “I wanna know what you're up to.”

“So I noticed. You and Eponin did a pretty good job of covering yourselves.”

My jaw sagged. “You *saw* us?”

“Fer cryin' out loud, I *saw* you as soon as I came outside. I didn't think you'd be foolish enough to come after me until you two argued about it.” Xena shook her head at me in exasperation. “You should have listened to her.”

“I-I want to know what you're doing, Xena.” I ignored her point in favor of trying to get the conversation back on track. “If Gabrielle's hurt or if you're planning on doing the Nation harm—”

It was her turn to look surprised. “What? No!”

“Is the thief an Amazon?”

She pressed her lips together, giving me a hard look. “Yes.”

Even having discussed it with Eponin, it still came like a blow to have it confirmed.

“Theirs or ours?”

“Yours.” Again that pause, but this one gentler. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” I gave a humorless laugh. “One of ours tried to kill the queen.” That brought me to my second biggest concern. “Is Gabrielle all right?”

A shadow fell across Xena’s face and she gestured to the ground. “Come with me.” With the ease of long practice, she pushed off into a lazy flip and landed lightly on the forest floor below.

I sighed and started down the long, old-fashioned way. “Showoff.” I joined her on the ground and followed her as we headed slowly back toward the village. “I’m tired of being left out. Given that I help run this place, you wanna tell me what in Hades is going on already?”

She gave me a long considering look. “Artemis has completely lost her powers.”

“What?”

“Shut up!” she hissed, grabbing my shoulder and shaking me to silence. “The thief is Dimitra and she’s out here someplace. I came out to see if I could find her.”

“*DIMITRA?!?*”

“Damn it!” Xena pulled me sharply behind a tree.

“Ohmigods.” I put my hands to my face, suddenly feeling sick and lightheaded. I was starting to think that I was better off being kept in the dark. Ignorance was bliss. “We took her in last year. She’d gotten herself into trouble with a married man in her village and they turned her out. I thought we were *helping* the kid. I thought she was *nice!*”

“Ephiny. Ephiny, calm down!”

“This is a disaster!” I was beside myself. “Brauronia’s ruined!”

“Would you get a grip?”

“This is *your* fault!” I stuck a finger in her face and she reared back to avoid being poked in the eye. “You two come in here and before I know what’s happened, the village is leveled! What is it with you two?!”

“Ephiny—”

“No!” I was too riled to take warning from the dangerous glint in her eye. “I’m sick and tired of being left holding the horse apples while you guys get cheered! What in Hades are you doing to us? We’ve got a murderer for a champion and a sheepherder’s daughter for a queen! She doesn’t even deserve it!”

Xena wrapped her fists in my leathers and slammed me back against the tree. “Are you *done?*” she growled.

The threat in her voice was, finally, enough to shut my mouth. Mutely, I glared back.

“It’s the belt,” Xena said. “It’s messing up everyone. I don’t have time to make you feel

better about things, so listen up because I'm pretty sure the entire Nation is in danger.”

“What? From Dimitra?”

“Yes.” She said it slowly, as if I were a bit slow.

“Hey, maybe having gods try to kill *you* all the time is no big deal, but I'm still kinda new at it. I haven't had any practice since Velasca.”

The warrior snorted and nodded in spite of herself before becoming serious again.

“Okay, I need you to follow my lead, but I think she's going to try to make a move—” She stopped abruptly, her hand dropping and pulling up her chakram quicker than my eye could follow.

“Ephiny!”

I turned and saw Eponin hurrying towards me. *What now?* Behind me, Xena was slowly lowering her weapon.

“Ephiny, you need to come back to the village.” She slid a stop and glanced in Xena's direction. “She'll want you, too, I think.”

“She who?” I asked.

“Gabrielle.” Eponin turned me around and pulled her sword out of the scabbard on my back. “I went to see her like you asked—she looks terrible.”

I shot Xena a look, but she didn't turn a hair.

“Gabrielle's called a gathering,” Eponin went on. “Everyone's to come to the dais we set up for the ceremony tomorrow. And Eph, she told me to get her a sword.”

“She *what?*” I blurted out. Xena and I exchanged looks; I was well acquainted with Gabrielle's non-violent preferences and this just made no sense at all. “What on earth would she want a sword for?” I walked a couple of steps trying to figure it out. “Xena, did she say anything about having to kill that slaver we found in the woods when we went looking for her?”

Xena shook her head. “It... it didn't come up when I talked to her earlier.”

Eponin caught my eye and I could tell we were both thinking the same thing: *Stranger and stranger*. Given the way those two are with each other, I almost thought that would have been the first order of business once Gabrielle's head-to-toe well-being had been confirmed. And given that Eponin said the queen looked ‘terrible’ I wasn't sure if Xena had done even that much. *What in Hades is going on around here?*

“We need to hurry,” Eponin said, looking more concerned than I've seen in years.

“She was on her way to Artemis' quarters with rope when I came out here.”

I was perplexed, but Xena's expression defied any type of description at all. I couldn't tell if she was worried or ready to kill to somebody.

“Xe—” I started, but she pushed past me and started back for the village.

“Waitasecond! You said Dimitra was going to try something...”

“Just follow my lead,” she said, leaving us to catch up.

The weapons-master gave me a look full of sympathy. “This is why they pay you the big beads, right?”

“Aw, Zeus,” I groaned and slapped at a nearby bush as I hustled to follow after the quickly disappearing warrior.

* * *

XL. The Medium is the Message

CRASH!

I flinched as the chair splintered against the wall and fell in pieces to the already heavily littered floor. Refocusing, I tried to concentrate on the type of knots I wanted to tie, ignoring the ongoing destruction.

“You know, of the two of you, my dinars would've been on Xena to be into this sort of thing,” Autolycus said, giving me a look, and then wincing as more crockery shattered into pieces against the wall. “I suppose I should be grateful she's not throwing things at *me*, but I still wish she wouldn't do that.”

I knew what he meant; Artemis, furious at my order to stay in the hut (for her safety and my peace of mind), had begun throwing things around the room like a four year old having a temper tantrum.

“I gotta give her credit,” he continued. “Only five minutes and it looks like a week-long Bacchanalia happened in here.”

“She's a little angry right now,” I conceded as I watched her launch some gaudily painted sculpture through a window.

Autolycus shifted a little where he was sitting on a table, muttering, “At least she's not getting tied up.”

“I told you; I have a plan. Just trust me.”

He rolled his eyes. “Where have I heard *that* before?”

“Everything... now, everything will be okay,” I said, attempting to reassure him.

His eyes narrowed and he wiggled his hands and suddenly the knots I'd tied magically came undone. “Nope! Uh uh. No way. If you don't believe that, then neither do I. Let me outta here.” Autolycus jumped off the table and started for a window.

“Oooh, no, you don't!” I grabbed him by the back of his shirt and dragged him to a halt just as he attempted to stick one booted foot over the sill. “Cooperate or I'll be singing the song of ‘How Autolycus Got Caught’ in every village and town between here and Gaul.” There was no guarantee I could get Xena to help me with anything at this point and as much as I hated to do it, threatening Autolycus' reputation as the King of Thieves was the only card I had left to play.

“Aww, Zeus!” He slammed the shutter closed and then shoved his hands in front of my face. “It's the leather, isn't it? You were so much more innocent and naïve before

the leather.”

CRASH!

Another piece of furniture went flying, and we both glared at Artemis who ignored us in favor of wrecking as much havoc as possible in caged defiance. A second sculpture bit the Grecian dust.

I shook my head and began retying his hands together. “Crybaby. I’m well aware you could slip any knot I could tie in seconds, so give it up.”

“Four seconds, thank you very much. Two if you’re going to be *that* sloppy. Gods, Gabrielle, can’t you do better... No! Around-around-around-slip-knot-tie, not under-cross-slip-knot-tie. Oh, never mind. Gimme that.” He rolled his eyes as his long fingers manipulated the length of rope right beneath my eyes, tying himself up for me. “Hera knows, the amateurs I have to put up with,” Autolycus muttered, his words somewhat muffled by the end of rope in his teeth as he tried to affix the final knot.

I took it from him and he winced when I pulled it too tight by accident. Mostly by accident. “Sorry,” I claimed over-sweetly with a smirk.

Autolycus smirked back, added a sneer for good measure and then dropped into the one remaining chair and glowered at the floor. “Bah.”

“I am *leaving!*” The last word was a bellow as Artemis strode purposefully past us and towards the door.

“No, you’re not!” Tired and hurt as I was, I still found the energy to scramble in front of her, blocking her way out of the hut. “We talked about this; you’re vulnerable and in danger. You’re staying here until I can get an escort!”

She drew herself up, her body tensing in a way that put all my instincts on edge. “Get out of my way, Gabrielle. I will not countenance this interference any longer, even from my Chosen. I am a goddess of Olympia and a warrior; I will *not* be treated like some empty-headed Hestian in need of protecting!”

“Do you *get* that there’s someone out there with your powers that probably wants you dead? You don’t want to go out there.” One thing about being a sidekick learning from a hero, you do tend to pick things up along the way, either through careful observance or deliberate instruction. In this case, I saw the way her eyes narrowed and the way she half turned her body as if she were giving up the argument, but I was ready for her resistance. Artemis spun back and tried to straight-arm me out of the way, using her considerable strength and agility as a lever.

Funny how everyone always assumes because I’m smaller I have no hope of coping. They also seem to forget who my teacher is and just how strong and agile *she* happens to be. Plus, after everything, I’d had enough of being pushed around.

The second her hand clamped down on my shoulder I reached up with both hands to grab her wrist. How did it go? *Step in. Turn hip. Grab her belt. Pull and—*

Artemis squawked loudly as she sailed through the air and crashed through the wreckage of rugs and furniture she had created earlier. I’d managed to throw Xena like that once or twice, but only as part of the lesson and, really, only because she had let

me, and all of it because she was tired of constantly having to rescue me from the men in the taverns we frequented. Why can't the people with the information hang out in high dives instead of low ones?

Autolycus whistled from where he still sat. "See? It's all about the leather."

I ignored him and hurried over to check on Artemis. "Are you okay? I'm really sorry, but I can't let you wander around out there. This is for the best." It was one of those oddly insightful moments, but once again I could sort of appreciate Xena's efforts to keep me safe by having me guard something in a village while she ran off into danger. It was frustrating, but I appreciated it.

Artemis pushed my hands away, quickly brushed herself off and hobbled to another part of the room, all the while looking stunned, disgusted and clearly furious. I sighed and looked longingly toward the door, hoping that Eponin wouldn't be much longer. My nerves were a mess with the waiting, but at the same time I didn't feel ready to go out there. Convincing the Nation that we needed a change in faith was surely an impossible mission, but with the alternative sitting a constant weight across my shoulders, what other option remained?

So tired. And achy. I absently touched a cut on my ribs as I wandered back to Autolycus' side.

"Nice moves," he said softly out of the corner of his mouth. He gestured to where Artemis was now sitting on the very rumpled chaise, her arms wrapped around her knees and a conspicuous bruise forming over her left eyebrow. Hard gray eyes stared fiercely at a far wall and regardless of whatever success I'd just had in tossing an ex-goddess to the floor I wasn't foolish enough to think I'd manage it a second time. "She looks like she's ready to start rearranging the room again. You better hope she doesn't get her powers back."

I chuckled hollowly. "I'm in trouble either way."

Autolycus gave me a calculating look that suddenly turned sly. "Something tells me you'd much rather be the one tied up and thrown to the horde of crazed Amazons."

He surprised a genuine laugh out of me as I imagined it and blushed. I reached out to pat his arm, in both sympathy and gratitude. "That might be only slightly better."

I heard a knock at the door and jumped, startled. The door swung open just far enough to permit Eponin to flow into the room and shut the door behind her. "My queen," she said, coming towards me. "They're gathering, just like you asked. Some of the other queens wanted to know what was going on, but I told them they would hear the news from you."

This is it, then. The sudden rush of nauseating adrenaline nearly made me gasp as it surged through me and produced the painful thudding of my overanxious heart in my chest.

Eponin's gaze sharpened and she took a step closer. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," added Autolycus. "You're the color of rancid goat milk."

"I'm fine, I'm fine." I waved them off. "Did you get it?"

I was surprised to see the look of disapproval flash across her face, but still she held up her hand and offered me the pommel of a sheathed sword. “Here. It's one of mine. I can't believe you want one, but at least I'll know you're getting a weapon you can trust.”

Gingerly, I reached out and took hold of the hilt, its leather wrapping darkened by age and use. I pulled it free and the immediacy and weight of the sword in my hand was unnerving, frightening even. My memory of the last time I'd held one flickered in my mind's eye and I remembered standing before Callisto, wavering upon the fragile line between conscience and revenge, wanting to kill her and finding out that I couldn't bring myself to do it. Not even to her. I hefted the blade and made myself examine its blade, seeing the well-maintained edge; its nicks and scratches carefully honed away, hiding the evidence of some earlier violence. I hoped to the gods I wouldn't need to use it.

“My queen?” Eponin's soft call broke into my thoughts. I couldn't help but notice the signs of tension in her; serious and stern as ever, there was a new undercurrent of vibrating energy in her, like I often felt in Xena right before a battle.

“I'm ready.” The leather grip in my hand felt slippery and I sheathed it again to hand it back to her. She moved around behind me and with skilled fingers began attaching it to the rings and hooks already a part of my regalia. “I'd like you to walk us over to the common area.”

Eponin looked Autolycus over, her broad features giving away nothing. “I'd like a few other guards with us,” she said, coming around to face me after finishing with the scabbard. “I won't be enough to hold them off if the others decide they want to kill him.”

“Don't hate me because I'm beautiful,” he muttered.

I'd forgotten about that. “Call whoever you need. They'll need to guard the three of us.”

The weapon-master's brow furrowed. “Three?”

I gestured to the chaise with its glowering occupant. “Artemis, too. I'm hoping we won't need all that many Ama—” I turned back and stopped, taken aback by the sight of a very flustered, very beet-faced Eponin. “What?”

But she wasn't looking at me. Her dark eyes were fixed on Artemis. Step by step, Eponin floated over to where Artemis sat and seemed utterly fixated. “A-Artemis?”

Artemis, still fuming from being manhandled, looked down her long nose at the weapons-master. “What do you want?”

Eponin suddenly didn't know what to do with her hands and she fidgeted, tongue-tied. “I... I mean...I'vealwaysadmiredyou!” she burst out.

Beside me, Autolycus groaned softly. “Gods save me from groupies.”

Eponin, now on her knees and struck by some kind of adoring rapture, didn't hear him. “When I was a child I wanted to grow up to be you; a strong Amazon, a great

warrior...”

Frustrated, but amused in spite of myself, I watched as Artemis began to preen beneath the attention. She reached out and briefly cupped Eponin's cheek in her hand. “You were always devoted,” Artemis murmured in regal tones. “Always. You are a credit to your tribe, Eponin.”

Eponin flushed with pleasure and ducked her head. “I wanted to live up to you.”

Artemis sat up straighter, the half-light of the room casting the hard angles of her face in nobler relief and I imagined I could see her mentally gathering the tatters of her shredded dignity around herself once more. “You strive for a higher goal, a more esteemed purpose. It is to be commended in one with such dedication and devotion.”

Eponin was positively breathless in the face of such overwhelming praise.

“I have seen your progress,” Artemis continued as she brushed her fingers lightly across Eponin's forehead. “And I am well pleased by it.”

The only things missing were an Elysian sunbeam and a celestial Greek chorus to frame the moment. I could be happy for Eponin; how many people come face to face with their god? And further, be happy about it? But I could have groaned aloud; Artemis had scored another follower with or without her powers at the worst possible moment.

Xena wasn't the only one who ground her teeth.

“Let's get going,” I suggested and waited for the others to file out before me.

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Even beneath the constant lull of voices, I could hear the lonely thud of my boots on the stairs leading up to the dais; a grand affair decked with flowers, its supporting beams draped with vines and branches to mimic the woods. Artemis took each step by my side, white lines pinching the sides of her mouth in barely controlled anger. I reached out and touched her wrist and saw her eyes flicker resentfully toward me.

“I'm sorry, but please... you can trust me.”

She pulled her arm sharply away from me and took the last of the steps two at a time to walk the line of the stage before I could say another word. Autolycus fell in beside me as the Amazons cheered their goddess. “If you can pull off this scam, you're a better thief than me,” he said from the corner of his mouth. “Not as dashing, but better...” Then he, too, brushed passed me up the stairs and to a spot as far away from Artemis as his guards would allow him.

I sighed and stared after him. It was going about as well as I figured it would.

“Gabrielle.” Eponin nudged me up the rest of the stairs, followed by nearly a dozen other women armed to the teeth. They fanned out along the edges of the platform, wary and alert; these strong, confident women, conscious of their position and responsibility, stood at the ready. I was proud of them, but pride is a flimsy shield. I glanced at Artemis, who stood in silent, magisterial fury beneath a thorny weave of summer roses, to Autolycus, whose heavy brow spoke wordlessly of regret and

worry... Both trusted me and I would have to do the unthinkable to give them even a hope of surviving.

I was conscious of the multitude of expectant eyes on me, their faces turning like flowers following the sun, finding me and watching my progress across the stage until I took a place at its edge. All of them assembled together, so many women, it took my breath away. Young and old, they stood before me, still unbroken despite noticeable injuries and apparent losses. How much could they take? And more, how much would they give? Even now I could tell that I had taken some of them by surprise. I could hear the murmurs; hear my name softly spoken and the word “sword” uttered in question again and again. Those that knew me had noticed and wondered. I let the mystery build a little longer as a light wind stirring my hair and brushed at the underbelly of the stormy clouds still threatening overhead.

I punched my fist into the air. “To a strong Amazon Nation!”

Hundreds of voices echoed me, fists raised to the sky, and despite my fears, my blood thrilled to the power of their energy. Somewhere in the back, I could hear my name being chanted and I raised my other hand in the air, hoping to still them, but it only spurred them to raise their voices louder.

“Sisters!” I held out my hands, fingers spread as if to hold back the wave of sound. “Listen!”

To my right, Eponin pounded the butt of her spear on the wood in a slow beat, the other warriors quickly picking it up until the pounding beat of wood on wood overcame the Nation's fervor. At my signal, Eponin and her guards stopped, and I looked out over them and wondered, briefly, what they saw when they looked at me. *This is it.* I felt my hands curl into fists at my sides and I consciously tried to relax as I breathed deep and began.

“A strong Amazon Nation,” I said again, pitching my voice to carry to them all. “My sisters, when I look at you I see that strength. Bound by our traditions and our lore, we have endured through the centuries, ebbing and flowing like the moon-touched tide.” A few, grasping my meaning, glanced to Artemis, making me smile.

“Every four years we come together to honor our past, celebrate our present and plan for our future. This past cycle since our last Brauronia we have been fortunate. With the ending of the conflict with the Centaurs, our border across the river is finally safe, but we still face the encroachment of others—other villages, other settlements, other cultures—not the least of which is Rome.” Some hissed while others cursed and I paused a moment to let them vent. “Some would poach on our lands, fish our rivers, cut down our trees and count themselves satisfied, but Rome ... Rome would take that and more, they'd take it *all*, and sell us for slaves, yoking us to the wheel that grinds the world beneath Caesar's might. We would be nothing but another conquest, another notch in Rome 's standard. Would you hear the march of legionnaires' feet through our woods? Will you bear the sight of our children and elders slaughtered and our sisters chained and sold?”

A resounding roar answered me and weapons thrust into the air formed a bristling response. I let my eyes sweep over them, collecting them to me as I stepped closer to the edge of the platform, lowering my voice a touch so that they quieted and leaned in

to hear me.

“Now, while we are here, while we're strong and prosperous, now is the time to think of our future. What are we? What are we to become? What is our vision of ourselves through the ages? Will we allow ourselves to huddle together in an ever-shrinking clump, easily picked off until Rome can crush us beneath her heel? Or will we go forth into the world once more and reclaim the lands of our foremothers?”

They cheered and I could feel the pain in my chest as I took Artemis' words from our walk in the woods and used them. I looked to her and saw such a look of pride in her face, such joy... I could have cried. She came toward me, her anger forgotten, and stood at my side making the Amazons cheer louder. Though her divinity was gone, she still struck a powerful figure; noble and wild, like an antlered stag in the deep, untouched woods.

And like an animal, she was still wholly unaware of the trap I'd laid for her.

“We must be strong, skilled and self-sufficient. We must be united if we are to overcome the odds set against us.” As I spoke, I could see movement far beyond the back edge of the crowd. From the row of the huts, I could see another figure approaching and I nearly faltered as I realized that Dimitra had come to watch. She sauntered to the back of the throng unchallenged, her arms crossed and a hungry smile on her lovely face. I felt a rush of goose bumps across my skin that had nothing to do with the moment. The moment I'd been dreading was here. I licked my lips and tried to pick up the thread of my thoughts as the women clamored for more.

“My sisters,” I continued, “even as we search for peace and prosperity, we must brace ourselves for war. To succeed we must be as one, strong in our convictions, in our beliefs—both in ourselves and in our faith.”

Next to me, Artemis looked over the assembled, confident and serene.

Gods, give me strength... “To that end...” I paused at the sound of boot-steps on the stairs. I glanced quickly and then did a double take; Ephiny, followed by Xena, came quietly up the steps and came to stand on the stage. Ephiny took my left and Xena stopped at my back, but not before her eyes met mine. Time held its breath for a space, capturing her in my eyes in an eternal moment. Her hair in a sudden breeze was like a horse's mane in full gallop, the scrape along the plane of her left cheek from a crow's claw stark against her unusually pale skin. Beneath her tousled bangs her eyes were a stormy grey-blue that matched the bruised clouds above us. Despite her lack of expression, my heart still leapt to see her; she had come after all. Now I could only hope she wasn't here to stop me.

“To that end,” I continued with greater energy, “I issue this call: who will join me? Who amongst you will help throw off our fears and our failings to make us great again?” Every voice raised itself in answer, their eyes alight with passion. “Our path will be hard, our choices harder. But there are things we must do for the good of the Nation, for all Amazons, everywhere!” I had them now. I could feel it. They wanted pride and glory and a sense of safety. They wanted what all people wanted: to live their lives with a realistic hope for a better tomorrow. Who didn't share that dream? Surreptitiously, I wiped my right hand on my skirt.

“We will shed that which weighs us down and rise to meet our destiny.” I reached for

the hilt of the sword on my back and ripped it free. “No one—no man, no god—will hold us back!” They roared their approval as I thrust it into the air.

From the edge of my vision, I could see Ephiny start and I knew I didn't have much time. “We will declare a new age and abandon the old!” I shouted. “A new destiny! A new vision! And a new goddess to lead us to it!”

With a flourish I stepped away from Artemis, raised my sword and braced myself as the entire crowd clamored in surprise and confusion. On the downward swing I felt a shadow fall over me, envelop me, as Xena's hand slipped over mine and took over the sword. There was no time to protest, no time to take it back as her left hand moved me aside to make room for her even as she completed the stroke. It happened so fast, no one had time to react to the hum of the sword as Xena slashed Artemis across the arm.

Blood splattered across the platform and the crowd gasped in shock as Artemis cried out and fell to one knee in pain.

“Artemis is no goddess!” Xena proclaimed and raised the bloodied blade for all to see.

She believed me. The relief went through me like a bolt and I swayed a little with the surge of emotion it generated. She looked to me, her expression urgent and I hurried. Gazing out into the sea of people, I felt the weight of guilt hammer into me; their shock and confusion and fear were palpable. Even doing it for the best possible reasons, I still felt dirty knowing I would prey on them in their moment of vulnerability and manipulate them.

“She's a fraud!” I shouted, trying to hide my trembling hands in tight fists. “Like the youth she appears to be, she is undisciplined and irresponsible! Like all Olympians, she is selfish and ignorant about mortal concerns, caring only for the struggle of influence over us between herself and her ‘family’. Dare we trust ourselves and our future to someone who can't hold onto her powers? And who, ultimately, will always put her own needs, and the needs of the other Olympians, before those of the Nation?!”

From her position on the platform, the blood leaking from between her fingers, Artemis stared up at me, her eyes wide and her mouth agape in shock. “Gabrielle... Why?” I heard her ask in a whisper, her heart breaking before my eyes.

She was not alone; there were murmurs and protests and calls of agreement. The crowd was adrift and lost; I had to give them a new focus. I steeled myself and grabbed the back of Artemis' top and wrenched her to her feet. Amazons, still struggling to accept the truth of their goddess' mortality, gasped again at her rough and profane handling.

“We should be grateful that a thief revealed the truth to us. Artemis lost her belt and her powers. She is undeserving of our worship, unworthy of our faith. We must look to someone new!”

“*No!*” Like a cornered animal, Artemis turned on me, her face twisted by the pain of my betrayal. She howled the agony of her loss and though my sorrowing heart cried with her, I once again managed to knock her down. Unbalanced as she was by the unbelievable turn of events, it was far easier than I would have expected to subdue her. Behind me, Xena stiffened but never stirred; this had been my decision and so it

was mine to do.

Artemis crumbled to her knees; the sound of her broken sobs carrying on the tense and fretful air. Breathing hard, I turned back to the crowd. They were upset and angry; I had shifted the bedrock of their very lives and it all hung in the balance. “Look to one who has a true Amazon heart,” I said, my voice carrying easily in this unsettled quiet. “Look to one who would put the Nation first, above all else. Follow the one who will truly fulfill our destiny and give to us *a strong Amazon Nation!*”

I could feel the Amazon's uncertainty and despair. I could feel their anger—both at me and at Artemis. They were an unformed maelstrom and my rapport with them was slipping. The level of murmur rose to pandemonium and I raised my hands to get their attention again, but they gave me no heed.

“What will we do?” one young woman cried.

“We must complete Brauronia,” an elderly woman shouted in a thin voice. “We will be cursed else!”

I scanned back and forth across the crowd unable to fix anyone's attention. “Listen to me!”

“We won't abandon her!” someone else yelled.

“She's a fake!”

A fistfight broke out halfway back in the throng and the women moved back like ripples in a pond.

Ephiny stalked to my side and glared at me. “Do *something!*”

Around me, Eponin and her guards had taken a more readied stance, the weapon-master looking pale from the revelation. I didn't know how much she knew, but I could see the conflict in her face. Xena was still behind me, unmoving, watching me with hard eyes. Starting to panic, I spun around to search the outer edges of the crowd. *Where is she?*

Dimitra's gaze met mine and even over the distance I could see her impatience and that constant, demanding hunger. She wagged her finger at me and silently tsked. Desperate now to reach the crowd, I raised my arms again. “Amazons! There is one who'll lead you!”

“Who?” someone called back.

Dimitra answered for herself denying me the chance to respond. Throwing her arms wide, she lit herself like a star. Blazing light erupted from her eyes and her mouth; her skin glowed white until it was nearly impossible to look at her.

“*I WILL LEAD YOU.*” Her voice rumbled with menace. She stretched out her arms further, as if to take us all into her blinding embrace. “*ABANDON HER AND FOLLOW ME...*”

Eponin, unable to take any more, shoved me hard and then hauled back and launched the spear she had carried over the heads of the crowd. “Never!” The spear hit the

ground before Dimitra's feet and quivered there. She leapt off the platform, drawing her sword as she went and pushed through the people to follow after it.

“Eponin! No!” I reached out to stop her, but Xena grabbed me.

“Stay here!”

“Xena!”

“What have you done?” Ephiny grabbed and shook me, looking back and forth between Dimitra and Artemis. “Oh gods, what have you done?” Despair cracked her voice. “Every time you come here! Every time!” She let me go and sank to her haunches next to her fallen goddess.

I looked to the confrontation again, finding others had taken up behind Eponin and she stood in front of the would-be goddess, a dozen more Amazons lined up along side of her. “Compared to Artemis, you're no Amazon at all!” Eponin yelled, brandishing her sword. “So take your ugly face and get outta here!”

That familiar twist of anger and pain curled Dimitra's mouth into a snarl. “*IF YOU WON'T FOLLOW ME, YOU WON'T FOLLOW ANYONE!*” She threw her hands forward and a blaze of fire took out Eponin's left flank. Screams erupted and the crowd was a sudden boiling mass of movement. “*LOVE ME OR EVERYTHING WILL DIE!*”

“Get out of here!”

“Get her! Get her!”

“Get who?!”

“This is *her* fault!”

I saw an arm lift and a finger pointed my way. I let out a ragged breath, knowing it for truth. A battle broke out before my eyes. With Amazons killed and huts on fire, more women joined Eponin's attack. Others ran for cover and still others, furious at the deception, stormed the platform intent on taking me. Eponin's guards, confused and torn but still at their posts on the edge of the platform, reluctantly engaged their sisters, to protect me, their queen. My pride in them was no shield at all.

If ever I had doubted the power of words, I never would again, nor would I think them any less dangerous than a sword. My mere words had ignited a war.

I stared dumbly into the face of chaos, the burgeoning glow of fires reflecting in my tear-filled eyes as Dimitra forced herself upon the Nation.

Xena's hand on my arm startled me and I looked at her, unsure.

“We're going,” she said shortly. “Help Ephiny with Artemis while I get Autolycus. We're getting out of here.”

“Xena, we can't—”

“We can't save any of them if we're dead! Come on!”

Leaving my guard to hold back the fury of my sisters, Xena guarded our retreat as we fled into the woods, and all the while I despised myself for my failure to keep them safe.

* * *

XLI. I'm Soaking in It

When you have a penchant for what might be described as a “bad temper” that often leads to, for lack of a better term: “outbursts of expression”, there's always this moment where you experience this floating feeling, as if outside your body.

Before you start thinking it's a pleasant, fluffy or peaceful feeling, it's not—it's lame. It's lame because it usually involves you looking at yourself and wondering how in Hades you managed to select the absolute stupidest words and ideas to come spilling out of your head in an order that somehow makes them sound even worse. It's not good. I guess for me, there's the added feature of floating outside my body and looking down to see me doing something as dumb if not dumber than what I might have said.

With that in mind, I found myself in that very state of disembodiment as Dimitra started up the fireworks and the Amazons started up a mini civil war. To be fair, I suppose it was Gabrielle that started that technically. She's come a long way; usually she just gets us caught in the middle of one, now she's starting civil wars all on her own. My little girl's all grown up...

Anyway, we were fleeing the chaos, Autolycus, Artemis and Gabrielle leaping off the side of the stage in front of me, when I looked back to get a focus on the situation and work out an escape trajectory. That's when I saw her—Dimitra. She was floating just above the waves of battling Amazons with this smug little look on her face, which would have been infuriating enough, but beneath her expression, I could see she was seething. She was furious because the Amazons were fighting. She was furious that they hadn't just dropped to the grass and began worshipping. She was furious and was hurling lightning and fireballs into the fray, not caring who was injured or killed. I watched her, my eyes never leaving her floating form.

Then something happened. I won't call it a loss of control, although to the untrained observer it might have seemed that way. If someone actually let me describe it, I would say that my emotions took the reins and I wasn't in a position to argue—or something. Regardless, I managed to turn what could have been a devastating situation into something that was basically just your run of the mill embarrassing mishap.

There was nothing I wanted to do more than take on Dimitra and tear her into little Amazon tatters, but there was no way to do that right now—no matter how much my guts were telling me to try. When you deal with gods as much as I have, you learn that the one thing you need when you do is leverage. If you don't have something up your gauntlet, you might as well pop the coins into your eyes right there because you're going to be the centerpiece at a good old-fashioned barbecue.

In this situation, I definitely knew I was lacking leverage. Any attack against Dimitra would be suicide and I needed to get myself and everyone else to safety. Also, I had to be sure not to attract attention to our escape—Dimitra was distracted and all drunk

with power, so she had forgotten about us for the time being.

All around the stage, Amazons battled each other in vicious combat. Ephiny and Eponin did their best to keep things under control, but it wasn't working. To make matters worse, Dimitra began destroying huts in the village, fire and smoke adding to the confusion. My emotions were scattered, my blood was thundering past my ears. I had to do something.

To my right was a large barrel of water. So, under the circumstances, I did the only sensible thing I could. I submerged my head and screamed into the leafy-tasting water. Between the comfort of screaming (a very underappreciated comfort) and the cool, soothing liquid, I felt my senses return to normal.

But there was that floating feeling, as usual. And there I was, looking back at myself, my head sunk in a barrel of water, my butt in the air and all these bubbles churning and spilling about.

What happened to dignity, Xena? I asked myself. *What happened to class?* One minute you're the Destroyer of Nations and the next you're yelling into a barrel in some village out in the sticks. *What happened, indeed?*

I shook water from me as I removed my head from the barrel. Gabrielle stood at the end of the stage not looking like she understood, or was interested in understanding, what I had just been through. "Well, what are ya waiting for," I yelled. "Run!"

Explosions grew in number as we ran from the stage and quickly moved into the forest. After some time, the sounds of battle grew further away and we could slow our pace. It had been my idea to keep running until we hit the river. There had been caves near there that might prove useful as shelter.

As we moved through the forest, Artemis approached me. "I know where we can hide."

"But—"

She glared at me, which normally would put me right off, but beneath the usual arrogance and anger was something else. There was a genuine pain beneath it all, a hurt that the goddess was unable to disguise. Having seen her abilities in the woods earlier, I let her lead the way.

Artemis led, in her sulky way, and took us in a wild and meandering route to the northwest. It still looked like she hadn't forgiven Gabrielle for what happened. It was actually quite remarkable how, no matter where the bard stood, the goddess somehow kept her back to her.

I wanted to do something to help Gabrielle, but the energy between the two of us continued to be uncomfortable. She appeared withdrawn and pale, staring sightlessly at the path beneath her feet. I would have talked to her, but she had somehow mastered the same ability to put her back between herself and me that Artemis had. As concerned as I was, I didn't have time to let my emotions get the better of me on that one.

Even Autolycus seemed weary beyond his physical body. I moved back to see if he might actually quip or banter, but it was no good. The two of us strolled in silence,

avoiding large roots in the underbrush. As we entered a small clearing, he blinked up at the trees. “Hey... this all looks familiar...” he said.

“It should.” From the lead, Artemis spoke without turning. “My secret grove was never meant for mortal eyes, King of Thieves, but its splendor is not easily forgotten. We shall hide here...”

* * *

XLII. Truth Hurts

The quiet burble of the idyllic river was comfortless. From my perch over it, my forearms resting on my knees, I fidgeted and fed pebble after pebble into the dark, swirling surface and wondered how I dared sit here while Amazons died.

Behind me, under the sheltering grove of trees, Xena or Artemis had made a small fire before Xena had disappeared back into the woods, though not before giving us all an irritable look followed smartly by dire orders to ‘stay put’. The last I’d looked, Autolycus had settled himself morosely before the fire, content to stare—if not at the flames—then somewhere beyond them in silence. Artemis, however...

I could barely bring myself to look at her.

Artemis paced for what seemed like hours, until the light had failed and the meager firelight had spilled past me to tinge the surface of the water white and gold with its light.

Xena still hadn't returned.

I can't take this any more. I levered myself up and walked quietly over to the fire, then settled myself hesitantly down next to Autolycus who grunted to acknowledge my presence. For a long moment neither one of us spoke; the sounds of the fire and the night enveloped us in an uncomfortable companionship.

I cleared my throat. “How are you?”

“Oh, not bad, not bad.” He waved a hand lightly in the air and leaned back. “I suppose I should thank you.”

I looked at him sharply, unable to tell if he was being facetious or not. “For what?”

“Thanks to you I'm no longer ‘enemy number one’. Whatever's left of the Amazons is undoubtedly arguing over who they'll wanna string up more: you or Dimitra. They've completely forgotten about me.” His expression darkened momentarily. “I know I shouldn't be hurt by that, but I'm positive I'll get over it the second I get out of here.”

“You're so welcome,” I snipped, raising my head to stare sadly at the lone figure continuing her pacing at the far end of the clearing. “At least there's someone who doesn't hate me.”

Autolycus followed my gaze to where Artemis stood, arms crossed and staring angrily out into the forest. “Something tells me you're not her most favorite person either these days.”

“I know.” I brushed my hair from my face, wondering how I would ever manage to

face her given what I'd done. If we were all to survive, I'd have to; if the tribe were to survive this, we'd have to stick together. "Wish me luck."

"May no one steal the coins from your eyes until an hour after you've left Charon's boat."

I gawked.

"Hey." He held out his hands and shrugged. "Do I look a rabbit's foot to you? A thief's mixed blessing is better than no blessing at all, right?"

On that suspect note, I left him by the fire. The distance between Artemis and me wasn't nearly far enough; I barely had time to collect the shape of my thoughts when I came to stand behind her. By the way her shoulders shifted in the firelight, I knew she could sense me there. "Artemis?"

The slap across my face rocked me sideways, the sting of it first sleeted cold, then prickling hot as I pressed my hand against my cheek. I stared at her in shocked surprise and, behind me, Autolycus jumped to his feet.

"How could you?" Artemis' voice was low, controlled, but her eyes... Gods, her eyes were hollow and sunken, flat with suppressed emotion. Her hand, the one she'd struck me with, curled into a fist at her side. "How *dare* you? To betray my trust like that..."

Her expression was at once both furious and beseeching, and I held out a hand to her, wanting to explain. "Artemis, I'm sorry—"

I saw it coming this time, but not soon enough to stop her as she laid the palm of her hand like a lightning bolt across the side of my face. The sharp report of contact was loud in the grove and I stumbled to my knees, but managed to throw out a hand to ward off Autolycus who had taken several steps toward us.

I knuckled the corner of my mouth and distantly noted that we all of us breathed as if we were running for our lives. *No blood*. A small mercy, that. "I'm sorry," I said again into the tension that sang between us.

"As you should be!" Artemis replied, her body quivering. "Consider yourself fortunate, Gabrielle, that I no longer have my powers. Believe me when I say the flat of my hand is the kindest, gentlest caress compared to what you truly deserve!"

"I know." Who had said, long ago, that the road to Tartarus is paved with good intentions? Knowing that I'd done this to her, so deliberately, was crushing me. "I led her right to us and used you all to give her exactly what she wanted."

"You betrayed me, Gabrielle. Me!" She reached out and grabbed my shoulders, hauling me to my feet before shaking me. "How could you? How could you do that to me?" Even in her anger, I could see the firelight's glow reflecting in the welling tears in her eyes. "Why? I trusted you!" Her eyes overran with moisture and still she shook me. "I trusted you, how could do this?"

I struggled with her, tired beyond words, but I tried to reach her—grabbing her arms, her wrists—not sure if I was trying to push her away or pull her closer. "Artemis—"

"I *believed* in you." She shoved me back in emphasis, yet never broke contact. "*You!* I

was willing to believe in your ideals, your diplomacy and non-violence—to see your vision, and you betrayed me! Why?! Why...” She sobbed a great heaving breath as if her heart were being torn straight from her chest. I couldn't stand the rawness of her pain. “Why? I loved you, Gabrielle...” Artemis dashed her tears away roughly, their presence making her angry.

Ah, Gods...

She shook her head and bared her teeth in a grimace of a smile. “Part of me wants to kill you for what you have done. Olympus help me, but I do.” The forced smile faltered and faded, leaving Artemis looking frail and defeated. “I loved you, Gabrielle...” she whispered brokenly. “I've never truly loved anyone before. I've... I've never known anything so beautiful...or so terrible before. How could you have destroyed that? And my Amazons! You've destroyed the Nation... and for what?”

I flinched at her words, barely able to bring myself to look at her. “To save us all,” I answered, knowing it to be woefully inadequate.

She laughed bitterly and finally let me go. “And what a great success you have wrought.”

I opened my mouth to explain further when I heard the sound of voices at the far side of the clearing. Shadows emerged from the woods, gaining likeness and form as the firelight touched them. Amazons by the handfuls—the warriors and elders, the mothers and children, the injured and the dazed—streamed into the grove, led there by Xena.

Autolycus made a beeline for her. “About time you got back,” I heard him mutter.

Xena gave him a look and then dismissed him, turning her attention to the tired, wary women following close behind her. “Set up here,” she called to them as they joined us by the fire. “Look after the wounded first and we'll get a sentry—”

“You!” A figure broke away from the rest and flung itself at me. Ephiny, curls in wild disarray, shoved me hard and Xena reached out to grab her by the shoulders, holding her back with obvious effort.

“Stop it!” Xena growled.

“Gods *damn* you!” Ephiny shouted, pointing her finger at me even as she grappled with Xena. “Are you cursed? Every time you come here you're a disaster!”

I held out a hand to her. “Ephiny, there's more to it—”

“Where were you?” she demanded. “When Dimitra was blowing us to Tartarus, you cut and run!”

Xena pushed Ephiny back, interposing herself between the two of us. “Stop it!” she ordered again. “I *told* her to stay here.”

Ephiny brandished the sword already in her hand. “After what she did, she should've been there.” She glared at me and took a step closer, her fingers squeezing the leather of her sword hilt until it creaked. “I want the mask back.”

I gasped, her words as strong a blow as the one Artemis had delivered earlier.

“Ephiny,” Xena looked quickly back and forth between us. “Wait; you don't know what you're saying...”

She sneered at Xena and then looked back at me. “She's a traitor to the Nation and either she gives up her right of caste or I'll challenge her for it; she's either outcast or dead. Amazon law demands it.” Beyond her, I could see the nods of agreement from the other Amazons, even from some of the visiting Queens. “You betrayed us, Gabrielle.”

I could feel how quiet everyone had become, watching the drama unfolding before them. The cost was so high... how much more could I gamble? With their lives? Mine, I knew, was already forfeit, but I had hoped to hang on just a little longer... “Yes.” Having even seen it for themselves, the women assembled still started at my ready confession. “But I did it to save your lives.”

Ephiny gave a rasping laugh. “Guess that didn't work out so well, huh?” She pointed her sword tip at the ragged gathering of women crowding the clearing. “They're all that we could get out that were still loyal! For all we know, the rest have gone to Dimitra if they weren't lucky enough to escape into the forest!”

“Dimitra would have killed us all!” I shouted back. “She wanted to join Artemis' nymphs and when Artemis rejected her, Dimitra decided to make her pay. The belt was her chance and now she wants to take away everything Artemis had, anything that she had as a goddess and make it her own—Artemis' belt, her powers, the Amazons, me—she wants it all! The belt's made her crazy; when she caught me out in the woods, she made a game of the whole thing; trying to force me to love her and saying that if I didn't find a way to make you all worship her instead of Artemis, she'd kill everyone! On top of it, I couldn't even *tell* anyone why I was abandoning Artemis, or she'd do the same thing.”

“And you went along with it.” Ephiny nodded, a look of contempt on her face.

“A real Amazon Queen would rather have died than give in to such tactics,” one of the other Queens said from behind Ephiny.

“I was ready to,” I insisted and saw Xena glance sharply at me from the corner of my eye. “Dimitra wouldn't even give me that; my death meant yours, my failure to convert you meant the same. Don't you see? My only option to buy us time was to do what I did. Please, Ephiny, you have to believe me.” I stepped around Xena to stand before my Regent. “I swear it's the truth.”

She was angry, upset, and given the circumstances I wasn't sure I could count on our friendship—whatever shape it might be in—to make her listen.

Ephiny gaped at me, incredulous. “You expect me to believe that you betrayed the Nation in order to save it? How do I know you're not in league with her?”

“You have to believe me... I'm not. After everything you've seen, I know it sounds crazy, but it's the truth.” I lifted one shoulder, not knowing how else to frame the situation. “I need one more day. One more day and then you can challenge me for the mask if you still want to.” *Assuming I'm still alive for you to bother.*

Xena, alarmed, put her hand on my shoulder. “Gabrielle, you can't—”

“No.” There was no possible way I could let her take the easy way out for me. “If I fail, she can challenge me—I won't hide behind my champion.” For the Greater Good of the Nation, I couldn't evade my responsibilities, even if the best thing for them was not the best thing for me. They needed their leadership intact. They needed to believe the laws of their society worked. I needed them to believe I wasn't a coward—for myself alone, if no one else. “Until then, I need you to listen me just a little while longer.”

Solari pushed through the ranks with Eponin at her side. “Listen to you? You've got to be kidding me!” Mutters of agreement followed, some of them outright shouts of derision.

Their anger and disgust flayed at me. After everything today, I could feel the last of my strength dissolving in the face of their rejection. Swallowing hard, I wiped the palms of my hands on my torn and filthy skirt. “Please, I want to help—”

“Haven't you done enough?” someone said sarcastically.

“We don't want your help!” another voice added from farther back.

“Okay...” As hard as I tried to hide, even I could hear the tremble in my voice. I looked to Xena who started back at me, her arms crossed over her chest and a leaden expression in her eyes. Autolycus looked at the ground, completely avoiding my gaze. “Okay.” My chest felt tight and each breath was a struggle. “Then... good luck... I'll just...” I gestured towards the woods, taking one step back, then another, and when no one tried to stop me, I turned and walked away, their silence beating at my back.

I headed away from the warmth of the fire; away from the group of women I had considered my extended family and friends for more than a year now. It hurt so much more than I expected, and after everything I'd been through to try to help them...

My feet found the shore of the river and I walked along it, its surface silvery in the near-full moon rising in the sky. Deceived by the depth of shadow and moonlight, I tripped and stumbled against a thick root half buried in the shallows and scraped my leg.

“Ow! Gods damn it!” It was my last straw. Tired beyond reason, hurting inside and out and virtually banished by those I held dear, I set heavily on the ground and pressed my forehead against my upraised knees.

The darkness and the quiet murmur of the river hid my tears.

* * *

XLIII. The Sensitive Chat

Things were coming along at the Amazon refugee camp. While battered and upset, there weren't many of them sporting serious injuries. Though, looking at their faces, you wouldn't know it. The cause of it all was pretty obvious in the end. Even when I walked past them, they mumbled in distrust and smoldering contempt. This was definitely going to be a long night.

I looked over to the stretch of woods Gabrielle had wandered off into. The scents of the forest told me she had probably met with the river and was sitting somewhere along its edge. Poor girl. So much of me wanted to go to her now, but there were still tasks to do.

At the far end of the camp, Ephiny was doing what she always did when it got to this point in our visits—bury herself in her work. This time she appeared completely submerged, as her face had a manic intensity to it while she dressed wounds or helped construct a makeshift pallet. I walked over to where she was working.

“Ephiny, we need to talk.”

“Unless it's about caring for my people, we don't.” She kept her eyes on what she was doing.

This was going pretty much how I imagined it would. “What a coincidence, that's exactly what this is about.”

Sighing, she stopped what she was doing and looked up at me. She scowled. “No it's not, it's about Gabrielle.”

I nodded. “And when did she stop being one of ‘your people’?”

“When she sold us out to that...that freak.”

Amazons were beginning to clue in to the conversation. Whispers traveled around us in the half dark. I crossed my arms. “Did you ever stop to think that maybe it really *was* the only way to save you all?”

Ephiny snorted. “Well, she did a great job of that, didn't she?”

As a military leader, there were certain battles where it was obvious the outcome was to end in a stalemate at best. In these situations, I always found it best to discover a way to plant some sort of seed that guaranteed future victory. Leaving a diseased carcass in a city's drainage ditch and retreating for a week or so, for example. In this case, I knew Ephiny wasn't going to forgive Gabrielle right now, but I thought I could plant a seed—a far more appealing one than a festering corpse, of course, but I've come a long way since those warmongering days of yore. “You're upset and angry not only because your people are hurt, or your lands stolen, but also because you feel betrayed by Gabrielle—someone who was not only your Queen, but your friend.” I made sure my voice was loud enough for others to hear, while remaining at a conversational level. “So what you have to ask yourself is: Do you think Gabrielle would ever consciously betray you, or anyone?”

The Regent softened a little, I could tell. “I hope you're right.” She even nodded warily, but then met my gaze before I walked away. “But there's a first time for everything.”

I walked away, giving the impression that I had no doubt she was wrong. In my heart, I wasn't so sure. I trusted my instincts and they trusted Gabrielle, but both had been confusing since we got ourselves wrapped up in this whole thing. In the end, I had to go with my heart—what else could I do?

Autolycus slunk in front of me. To say he was nervous looking would be an

understatement. I didn't have time for it. As he was about to speak, I put my hand up. "You're nervous being around all these Amazons and would rather take your chances out in the woods on the way out of here. No, I won't let you go. Yes, I think they'll leave you alone. I don't know what we're going to do next. Yes, I'll tell you when I do. And no—" here I grabbed his arm and walked him over to where Artemis sat moping on a rock "—I don't think you and Artemis keeping an eye on each other until I return is a bad idea." I plunked the King of Thieves on the rock beside the goddess. They both mirrored a look of surprise, then outrage, then distrust, then finally, grave indifference as they slouched beside one another. Perfect.

A tenuous kind of truce restored, I headed off into the woods. I wasn't too concerned about Dimitra coming after us tonight, not after the show of power she gave ripping the village apart. The sentries I'd ordered were more for their peace of mind than for any pragmatic reason; not unlike Velaska, Dimitra had weakened after having gone off like a Greek firecracker. It made me happy to think she might be lying under a bush somewhere too tired to move.

The moonlight was strong enough for me to see clearly as I followed the steady signs of Gabrielle's trail in the soft dirt and disturbed ground along the river's edge. I could hear her before I could see her, and her quiet crying led me right to where she sat with her back against a rock and her arms wrapped around her knees. She hadn't seen me yet. I stopped a little way apart, and watched her.

As far as sensitive chats go, this one promised to be a doozy. What was I supposed to say? *Sorry, Gabrielle, the Amazons took a vote and you're out? Tough break, they're going to feed you to the rampaging bitch you unleashed on them? You kissed Artemis, that granite-faced, arrogant know-it-all and it makes me feel like... like...*

Damn it. I scrubbed my face with one hand. I needed to get myself under control, but I could feel it slipping again and with it my ability to keep a lid on my temper. I tried to ignore the anger and jealousy and frustration, holding it in by the skin of my grinding teeth. Unclenching my fists, I took another step forward, pitching my voice to carry. "Gabrielle?"

She started, lifting her head sharply. I wasn't sure how I felt that she seemed so surprised and wary at seeing me.

"Gabrielle?"

"Xena..." She was looking back at me, hesitantly. "What are you doing here?"

There weren't any recriminations in her voice, no bitterness... just uncertainty and a lot of sadness. "I came to talk to you. Did you really think I was gonna let them run you off and not follow you?" The belt's influence wanted to turn my attempt at a gentle nudge—she's still my best friend—into a full attack. I mean, how little does she think of me that I'd just buddy up with the Amazons and drink ale and— *Argh.* Focus. Grind teeth.

"Oh." She pondered this and then smiled weakly at me, but still not looking too comfortable. Gabrielle shifted and then dropped her eyes. "I guess I screwed up pretty badly, huh?"

I wandered toward the shoreline, pausing to put my hands on my waist as I

contemplated the ripple of moonlight on the slow moving water. Whatever your opinion of it, the whole event had been pretty spectacular. I turned and hunched down beside her, waiting a moment and then saying, softly, “Actually, I don't know if I've ever been prouder of you.”

Gabrielle's jaw sagged ever so slightly. “What? How can you say that?”

I picked up a few pebbles and rolled them in my cupped hand, taking a moment to think. “It took a lot of guts to do what you did today. You took a big gamble; hoping I'd understand, giving your speech to the Nation, the fact that no matter what you did not everyone might live to see tomorrow.” I nodded at her solemn expression. “That was leadership, Gabrielle. You did what needed to be done, regardless of the risk, for the greater good.”

“I know.” She didn't look happy about it. A narrow line grew between her brows and I found myself wanting to brush it away. Seeing Gabrielle this way was churning my already confused emotions in different directions. I shifted, stilling the urge to reach out and touch her. I sighed and dropped the pebbles instead.

The situation must have really done a number on her; I wasn't used to this brand of quiet from her. “You handled yourself really well earlier. With me, I mean.” I watched her shoulders tighten and felt an uncomfortable flood of shame. Awkwardly, and in spite of my efforts not to, I put my hand on her arm, feeling the tension in her muscles. “I know I didn't make it easy for you, but you never wavered. Never gave anything away that you shouldn't have. You kept your focus and I got the message you wanted me to hear.”

She gave a short, tired laugh, seeming suddenly older than I'd ever seen her. “And it'll all be for nothing when Dimitra comes back tomorrow.” All humor evaporated and she turned to look at me, her expression serious and pained. “I'm sorry... for earlier. I... I couldn't—”

“I know,” I said quickly, wanting to stop her from saying too much. As much as I tried to ignore it, there was still a pang in my chest as I remembered her determined struggle not to admit any feelings for me. Did she have them? Had it not been an act after all? “I know you couldn't and...” Gods. How could I explain myself? “The belt, it...”

Gabrielle nodded, her lips a thin line. “It made you say and do things you normally wouldn't. I know you don't... feel that way...”

Don't I? The anger, the jealousy, the hurt and desire... all of them had stung so deep, how could it not have come from me? But I wasn't sure anymore. Even now I could feel the surge of my emotions threatening to overcome me. “I couldn't control myself. Whenever the belt's influence hits me, I can barely even think straight.” Despite the touch of moonlight, I wasn't able to see the bruises and cuts on her, but I brushed my fingers along her upper arm, wondering if any of them were from my hands. The muscles in my jaw jumped as I looked away. “I never meant to hurt you. I had to leave when I did.”

“Oh, Xena.”

The touch of her hand over mine drew my attention back to find her looking at me

with her knowing, compassionate eyes. I squeezed my eyes shut a moment. I found myself wanting to hold her so badly it hurt. "It's another thing I'll never forgive myself for."

"You scared me," she said softly, "but you didn't hurt me."

I wasn't sure I believed that. There was more than one way to inflict a wound. "How are you?"

Her sigh was barely audible over the sounds of the water. "Tired. Sore. I hurt... in here. She tapped her chest with her fist. "Those people died because of me, Xena. It's blood I'll never be able to wash off my hands."

I took her hands in mine; kneeling to make sure she could see my face in the gloom. "People died, but it wasn't your fault. Dimitra is the one to blame. If anything, you're a hero. How many people survived because you found a way to put Dimitra off, if only for a little while longer?"

Gabrielle bowed her head. "But I feel so responsible."

Using the tips of my fingers, I lifted her chin, willing her to believe me. "It's the mark of a good queen." The skin beneath my fingers warmed suddenly and I smiled to myself. It faded quickly, however, as something she had said triggered a memory. "I need to ask you something."

"What?"

"Ephiny and I followed your tracks into the woods earlier. We found a dead slaver. His head had been bashed in. With your staff." I braced myself for some kind of reaction; revelatory shock, tears, guilt. If Gabrielle had been forced to kill someone to survive and then go through all that she did to get where she was now, chances were she hadn't let herself deal with it. "I understand if you needed to, after all—"

"I didn't do it."

Thank the gods! Aside from Gabrielle being injured or killed, having her put in a kill-or-be-killed situation has been my worst fear. I sagged a little with the relief. "It looked like someone had cracked him open like a nut. I didn't wanna think it was you, but you've gotten stronger lately and—"

"Thank you."

"—I... what?"

"Thank you," Gabrielle said again. She squeezed my hand. "For worrying. It wasn't me, though; Dimitra did it, she wanted to make it look like the slavers had come after me, to throw anyone following off track. I was worried you'd find my staff and think I'd done it, I know how important my blood innocence is to yo—"

Unable to repress my feelings any longer, I pulled Gabrielle to me and wrapped her in my arms. "*You're* important to me." She stiffened in surprise, but almost immediately returned my embrace. My chest was tight and I felt myself filled with a kind of rough tenderness, tainted with other, darker things I was much less proud of. "I only want to keep you safe," I whispered against her hair.

“You do,” she answered softly and pulled back a little in my arms, the better to see my face. “Even when you're not with me.” Gabrielle visibly gathered herself. “Dimitra, she... She used the belt to try to force me under her control. She wanted my love, the love I feel for others, she wanted it for herself.” She shook her head in puzzled wonder. “I remember hanging on to the thought of you and then, suddenly, everything was okay. Well, not *okay*, but I wasn't under her spell and about to—”

I hugged her again.

“Uhph! Xena.”

Reluctantly, I loosened my grip. “Sorry.” There was so much to consider, if only I could stay focused. How to rally the Amazons? How to take down Dimitra? How to show hatchet-face she's out of the running. *Argh!* I scrubbed a hand over my face. “We're running out of time. If we don't get the belt back before the end of the ceremony tomorrow, Dimitra will take her powers.”

Gabrielle slumped. “I've been thinking and thinking...” Her hands fell limp into her lap. “I'm out of ideas, Xena. Before this happened, I was hoping Artemis would keep her powers at least until the ceremony, but since they fizzled out...” She sighed and propped her head on one hand. “It's over.”

I peered at Gabrielle, taken aback by the uncharacteristically pessimistic attitude. Was it the belt's influence on her? It stood to reason that everyone must have something the damn thing could exploit. Could it be that Gabrielle wasn't always as optimistic and secure as she seemed? I shook my head. “It's not over,” I said, rising to pace along the water's edge.

“She's practically a goddess,” Gabrielle argued. “What can we do against her? Is there even anything left of the village?”

“She's still vulnerable. Until she's confirmed at Brauronia, Dimitra can be beaten. We need to organize the Amazons.” I rubbed at a scratch as I pondered the possibilities.

“Since they won't even listen to me—good luck.”

I turned to look at her. “I'll work on them, but I can't pull this off without you.”

Even after two years—after becoming a queen, meeting giants and Bacchae and Hades, after nearly even dying—Gabrielle was still young enough and innocent enough and— Gods, let's face it—hero-struck enough, that the rare times I reluctantly but deliberately bring her into danger, she still gets this *look* on her face. Like I just gave her the best Solstice gift ever. It makes me feel funny.

Gabrielle gave me a shy and poorly disguised look of hopeful yearning. “You mean that?”

“Yeah.”

“What are we going to do?”

I paced some more, staring at the water, staring the rippling reflection of the moon in its roiling, unsettled surface. Seeing it, I lifted my eyes to the heavens, taking in the brightness of the nearly ripe, full moon. “How do you feel,” I asked her without

turning, “about dancing?”

* * *

PART 8

XLIV. The Show Must Go On (or Break a Leg and Some Other Body Parts While You're at it)

“You want us to do *WHAT* ?!”

I winced as the explosive sound of incredulity rang across the grove, turning heads in alarm and curiosity. Obviously Ephiny was still not completely behind the plan yet. I wasn't sure *I* was, but there weren't many choices left at this point.

“You heard me,” Xena replied calmly, as if she had only asked Ephiny to pass the salt and couldn't see the problem. She was using her breast dagger to clean her nails.

Ephiny threw her arms wide. “Are you *NUTS* ?”

Artemis, wearing an identical expression of disbelief, leaned forward as if getting a little closer might clarify what she heard. “You're telling me that you wish to lead us straight back into the fire?”

Xena examined her cuticles closely. “Yeah,” she drawled and then lifted her eyes. “Unless you guys are too scared?”

Oh, Hades. I heard the collective whooshing gasp of the Amazons as Xena managed to impugn the entire Nation's courage in one casual taunt. Autolycus, standing nearby, gave Xena and me one horrified look and then began backing away, clearly realizing we weren't going to be much further use in the way of protection in about three seconds.

Ephiny put her hand on the hilt of her sword. “You bitch.”

Xena grinned at her, not the least bit concerned by the name-calling or the implied threat of violence. She replaced her dagger, crossed her arms and then nodded towards the village. “What's the alternative? You gonna give up, slink off into the woods with your tails between your legs and hope Dimitra doesn't come back to finish you off? You know she's not gonna let things lie; she's too much of a whack job.”

“Amazons aren't stupid, Xena,” Ephiny shot back. “We're not cowards either, but I can weigh the odds just as well as you can and this is a losing proposition! You're asking me to mount a suicide attack!”

“I'm not—”

“You are!” Ephiny stuck a finger in Xena's face. “And in case you've forgotten it, Dimitra's not only got the belt, she's got the same training as the rest of us. What makes you think we could get the jump on her even supposing we could make it into the village without her flattening us?”

Xena tilted her head towards me, raising an expectant eyebrow. *That's my signal* . I came forward, trying not to show how their earlier rejection of me had hurt. “We'll

use that training against her.”

“Huh?”

Ephiny was right to be puzzled; I still couldn't believe we were even thinking of trying this stunt. “We'll give her what she wants,” I went on, “but everyone has to be in on this or we won't succeed.”

Artemis, unwilling to be duped a second time, shook her head. “This is preposterous.”

My Regent stared at me long and hard. “I can't believe you even have the gall to suggest this.”

“Do you have any idea how close it came to being complete annihilation? I did the only thing I could think of to buy us time. I'm sorry for failing to protect everyone. I know I can't bring back the dead, but I can damn well try to make sure there aren't any more. I'll prove it to you.”

Ephiny didn't want to believe me. She stood rigid and angry, but I could see she knew as well as I did how dire our circumstances were. “Yeah? How?” she challenged.

“She's gonna sacrifice herself,” Xena answered for me. “And—if you'd rather not get your hands dirty—all you have to do is watch.” This was delivered derisively. I had a feeling that if Dimitra weren't a threat to people beyond the Amazons, Xena might be just as content to walk off and leave the Amazons to fend for themselves.

“You expect me to believe you're gonna let her do that?” Ephiny gestured at me contemptuously, Xena's healthy protective streak very well known in these parts.

Her ugly tone was the last straw. “Fine,” I snapped. “You don't like our idea? What's yours?”

Faced with having to offer an alternative, Ephiny did a passable impersonation of a fish out of water, her mouth working soundlessly.

“Well?” Xena demanded.

Her curls shook like she was about to go off. She turned away, growled at the woods and then swung around, this time facing Artemis. “You realize what they're going to do if we agree to this?” For someone who had worshiped Artemis all her life, the reverence and deference sure had dissipated with familiarity over the last several hours.

“By midnight my fate will be sealed and with me the fate of the Nation.” Artemis looked at us all, her gaze resting on me the longest. She turned to Ephiny. “Unless you have some other course of action already in mind?”

Ephiny grimaced, but shook her head. “I couldn't come up with anything she wouldn't be able to counter. She's always been a fast learner.”

“Then it's settled,” Xena said. “We'll go over the strategy tonight and get organized to return to the village by morning.”

Ephiny nodded unhappily. “And this is going to work—how, exactly?”

“Pretend I convinced you,” I answered. “Happy or not about it, pretend Dimitra is the goddess you prefer.”

“And this is just for show?”

Tentatively, I put my hand on Ephiny's arm. “I promise you, the only trap here is for her.”

She gave me a conflicted look. “I want to believe you.”

“You can. Please, Ephiny, this is the only way. And...” I shrugged “...if it goes wrong and I'm still alive, I swear I'll submit myself to Amazon law.”

“Gabrielle...” Xena didn't look happy about that, but there was no way around it. None of it meant anything unless even the queen was subject to the laws and traditions of our society.

I ignored Xena. “I mean it, Ephiny. You won't regret this.”

“You better make sure I don't.” Ephiny sighed in dismayed resignation.

“That's it, then,” Xena said immediately, moving into action mode. “We've got a lot to do before morning.”

“What happens in the morning?” Ephiny asked suspiciously.

Xena smiled. “You should know; you planned the Brauronia party.”

I stepped in before Ephiny decided to try and clobber my friend out of angry frustration. “Maybe it would be a good idea to make sure the wounded are settled and prepared to move out at first light. In the meanwhile, you can talk to the others while Xena and our warriors figure out the best way to get us all back to the village and get the place ready for the ceremony.”

“We'll need to send out scouts,” Ephiny replied a little sourly. I suspect she was still angry enough with me that my using words like ‘our’ and ‘us’ were giving her hives.

“And I'll see what we can do about some food; we could probably all do with something to eat.”

“No.” Artemis shook her head.

“Excuse me?”

“Unless I am mistaken, Gabrielle, you still haven't learned the steps for the Brauronia dance. Or do you plan on improvising and hoping for the best?”

I gave her a pained, hopeful smile. “Yes?”

“No,” Ephiny said repressively. “If we're doing this, we're doing it right.”

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“Like this?” *Step-step-sashay-bump-step-step-cross-step-hunch-stand-* (grunt) *-arms-over-the-head-lean* (heavy breath).

“Almost. Don't neglect your posture. You should be like the wind through the wild grasses; sleek and graceful, not like a man whose donkey has kicked him in the particulars.”

We'd been at it for hours now and I was so tired I was practically tripping over my own two feet. Sleeping standing upright was beginning to seem not only possible, but likely. “Can we take a break?”

“One more time,” Artemis demanded. “Join me.” She held out her hand imperiously, the flicker of dying firelight staining her skin orange and red.

Biting back a yawn, I took my position, half-hearing the count as she began to move, her movement pulling me into the steps. *Step-step-sway-touch-hands-press-away-raise-arms—*

I stumbled and fell into her, and I felt her strong, calloused hands steady me. “Sorry--” Grabbing her in turn, I found myself slightly tangled in her arms and, whether as a result of the belt's influence or that of recent events, we didn't draw away immediately. Her face was controlled and expressionless, and I wondered what she might be thinking. “I'm sorry,” I said again, “for everything.”

Her grey eyes, half shadowed in darkness, examined me bemusedly. “Why can't I hate you?” she asked. “Everything that has happened leads me to feel that I should... but I can't.”

I bowed my head. “I'm glad you don't.” I eased us apart and wiped a damp tendril of hair away from my face. “I wouldn't betray the Nation – or you – maliciously... I wish you could believe that. I know what I've done and... it doesn't feel right to ask for your forgiveness.” It hurt that I'd hurt her so badly. Having been robbed of her powers and immortality, I could only imagine how scary and confusing everything must have been for her, first dealing with her loss and then coping, like the rest of us, with the insidious effects of her own belt.

“It feels as though I can deny you nothing, even forgiveness, no matter how angry I am with you. Even if failure tonight means my death, since I cannot see Dimitra suffering me to live any longer than necessary.” Artemis looked thoughtfully into the fire, contemplating the flames. “Is this what love is, then? This sense of confusion and helplessness? I can't think straight. My body feels awash in flame every time I think of your touch. I feel as though my heart has been set adrift and left to the lash of Poseidon's tempestuous wrath, and yet...” She shrugged and looked at me almost shyly. “...and yet, almost against my will, I am still gladdened by your presence.”

It was awkward and touching and horrible to me right now, but maybe – just maybe – the effects of the belt weren't such a bad thing for her to be experiencing. “I'm glad. This would be a lot harder if you hated me.”

“Indeed.” Artemis fiddled with her slender braid. “Especially considering the rest of the ceremony.”

“What rest of the ceremony? I wear paint, Dimitra and I dance, she makes an announcement and then we go eat, right? If we were actually going through with it, I mean,” I added hastily, not wanting to give the wrong impression.

“Gabrielle, the ceremony includes a sacrifice. Who do you think will be the first to be slaughtered upon her altar?” She gave me a wry, sad smile and for a moment I was struck by her courage. I had forgotten that part of the program; if everything passed as she had described to me in the woods the other day, then Artemis wouldn't even live to get her belt back, assuming that we succeeded.

“No, we'll find a way,” I promised her, though I had no clue how I'd fulfill it. “There has to be a way around that part.”

But Artemis stoically shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “The most important thing to me is deposing Dimitra. The Nation must endure. Promise me that, Gabrielle, and I'll be satisfied.”

I reached out, unthinking, unsure of how to respond. “I... I'll do everything I can. I know it's a long shot, but if I can't... I don't think I'll outlast you by much.”

She glanced down to where my hand rested on her forearm. “I do not envy you. In a way, my role will be easier than yours for all that my end is near certain.”

Frowning, I tried to see her point. “It's going to be hard, but Ephiny agreed to get everyone to cooperate. If we seem united in accepting Dimitra, then we should have a shot. I just hope I don't fall flat on my face,” I added, withdrawing my hand to gesture at my feet. “I'm not the most graceful thing on two feet.”

“Your grace has never been in doubt, Gabrielle,” she demurred. “I meant: I don't envy you the role you'll be forced to play. In your place, I can't imagine how I could bring myself to embrace and kiss a reptile like her.”

“K-kiss?” My mind stuttered to a halt within reach of the unpleasant memories of having Dimitra touching me, pressing into me, demanding that I love her. I felt decidedly sick. “You never mentioned that before.”

She tilted her head slightly, looking confused. “Yes, I did. In the woods, before the bear attacked.” Her expression soured a moment in recollection; I imagined her breakdown in the tree wasn't a fond memory. “I spoke of our unification: woman to nature, heaven to earth, god to mortal—”

I put my hands to my face. “Oh my gods.” Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse. “I have to kiss *her*?”

Artemis nodded in the firelight, somber with empathy. “I imagine I seem preferable, if only by comparison.”

I gave a hitching slip of laughter, gilded with a touch of hysteria. “So if we get through this with Dimitra, I'll be kissing you if we get your belt back?”

“Interesting question...”

I started as Xena appeared from behind me, her brows lowering like storm clouds over the stormy sea of her eyes. Caught in the unmerciful grip of the belt's hold, I could see how far gone she suddenly was, how ugly and deep its twisted influence had reached. How much had she overheard? I shook my head quickly, wanting to head off her rage. “It's not—”

“Will she?” she asked Artemis, stopping a pace or two away from us and settled her fists on her hips.

“Yes,” Artemis answered, unflinchingly.

Xena drew herself to her full height, looking down at me with an angry sneer. “And you can hardly wait.”

“No, Xena!” I protested. “That's not fair. I didn't ask for this.”

“You're just a victim, right? Spare me!” she snapped back before rounding on Artemis. “And you... I oughta just put you *and* Dimitra out of your stinkin' misery.” Her hands clenched into fists.

Artemis' stance changed subtly in the firelight, from calmly relaxed to a wary air of readiness. “Try if you dare,” she taunted, “but even if you do, it makes you no worthier of her than you are now.” Her left foot slid back a little, her body tensing, as she added, “Was I not right when I said Gabrielle has a gift for talking to animals?”

Oh, Kraken...

The inference was clear. I thought Xena was going to swing on her. I swear it looked as though she were going to; the two of them were locked in some silent, invisible battle of will and power. Another second and I'd find them throwing themselves at each other in an all-out fight. “Stop it!” I shouted and waded between them. “Stop it.” I stuck a finger in Artemis' face. “That was offensive and uncalled for and you know it. Is this how a goddess behaves? You should be ashamed! And you,” I spun to face Xena, “you promised to trust me. Is this what you call trust? I thought you knew me better, but maybe I was wrong. For Aphrodite's sake, you've no reason to be jealous, o kay ?!”

My outburst had narrowly upended their imminent confrontation and they both looked a little shame-faced, muttering and looking at their boots. If our situation wasn't so perilous, I might have found it comical. As it was, I just wanted to find a quiet spot and cry myself to sleep.

Sighing, I pushed my hair back out of my face. “Now, if you two don't mind, I need to practice the dance some more.”

“Actually, Gabrielle, I believe you are adequately prepared,” Artemis said and slipped away into the shadows, a fleeting figure weaving between the makeshift fires of the other camps.

“But...” I looked after her in surprise and then turned to Xena. “Is there anything you need help with? The injured? Weapons? Any—”

“No,” she replied curtly. “Just be ready to go in a couple hours.” Then she, too, turned and walked away, leaving me alone by the small fire.

“Great,” I huffed. “This is great.” I glanced towards the moon, now on the descent, and rubbed my eyes. I couldn't even remember how long I'd been awake. Beyond the boundary of my fire, women still bustled and worked, and as much as I longed to rest, I couldn't give the appearance of weakness. “Maybe I can help with the wounded.”

I headed toward the side of the grove where the healers had gathered to take care of the injured, all the while feeling the utter futility of it all. Sighing heavily, I couldn't escape the sense there would be no happy ending this time. Off in the distance I could see Xena moving stiffly away, pausing to talk with a group of passing warriors, and then moving on and into the mingling shadows. I hurried on, blinking back tears at the heavy thought of neither of us living past tomorrow night.

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“Well, I guess we're done here.”

I paused in the middle of pulling a bit of decorative metal back up into place on my costume, to see a very tired, heavy-eyed Ephiny approaching. The uprooted Nation had trekked back to the village in the earliest hours of dawn, taking in the full view of the damage as the sun rose bright and unforgiving over the char and wreckage. It could have been worse, I suppose, but the sight of the burned huts and trampled decorations was as disheartening to me as it was to everyone else.

The desire to give up then and there had been nearly overwhelming. I was on the verge of walking away when Xena had returned from wherever she had spent the remainder of last night and given me an arched look. Remembering my duty, I'd found the words to announce to everyone that Brauronia would go on and with a bit of effort we could make the village festive again. Hundreds of women had answered my call working relentlessly through the day in spite of a lack of sleep the night before. Mind you, they'd bitched and whined, but in the end they had thrown themselves into it, knowing, at least intellectually, their lives depended on masking our true intent.

Looking around now, I could see the banners had been hung again – maybe a bit dirty or torn – but still bright and cheerful in the evening sun. Fresh flowers had been cut and set about in baskets. The savory smell of cooking meat and spices filled the air, as did the scent of a freshly tapped keg of something strong and malt-y. Somewhere in the distance over conversation and – amazingly – the first soft sounds of laughter, I thought I heard the musicians warming up. Had the threat of Dimitra's madness not hung over us, I could have almost enjoyed myself. “It's incredible what everyone's accomplished since this morning.”

She looked around, too. “Women are stubborn creatures; you can't make us and you can't stop us. Some of them are so tired I think pride is the only thing keeping them on their feet.”

I tried out a smile on her. “Pot? Meet kettle.” Ephiny snorted softly and I could almost believe things between us might someday heal, if we were given the time for it. *Not that it's all that likely now*, I thought morosely. Which made the effort now all the more important to me.

Ephiny seemed to feel the same way, the corner of her mouth quirking into a slight smile. “You should talk,” she replied and then looked me over. “I'm glad to see the outfit survived.”

The ‘outfit’ in question was the new queen regalia three women had helped me into; a bold, young girl, a woman who had become a new mother barely even two seasons ago, and one of the council elders. The skirting was the softest doeskin I'd ever felt, as were the boots that hugged my calves just beneath my knees. A belt of smooth river

stones, polished bone and beads circled my waist, sewn delicately into the leather to depict leaping antlered deer and complicated floral patterns, the craftsmanship and care evident in its precision and artistry. The top was knotted with leather and metal and chain, with clever interlocking pieces from my left shoulder down to my forearm, like a protective piece of armor. “It’s beautiful,” I murmured, touching the belt. “I’m glad I had the help; I don’t think less than three people could have gotten me into this thing.”

Her fingers reached out to stroke the leather of the shoulder strap above a swirl of blue body paint. “We spent the last two months putting this together for you.”

“Thank you,” I said with heartfelt sincerity. “It’s always such a hard thing believing I’m a queen. I mean: *me*? A sheep farmer’s daughter?”

“Yeah,” Ephiny replied drolly. “I know what you mean.”

There was an undertone to her comment I couldn’t quite get a read on, so I tried not to make anything of it at all, instead turning to look around the common area with its myriad of decorations. “Everything looks great.” I stopped a moment, realizing with sudden clarity that time – my time – was running out. I probably wouldn’t get another chance at this. I cleared my throat. “No matter how things turn out... I want to thank you for how much effort you put into trying to pull this off, for what you’ve done for me—for everything. I don’t think I could have asked for a better Regent... or sister.”

Some kind of struggle was going on behind her eyes, but her gaze lowered to the ground and she nodded. “We were lucky too.”

“I wish we—”

The howl of a sudden wind through the village drowned me out. The banners furled and cracked in the air, the wind hissing and biting as it kicked up dirt and pebbles that stung against my skin and pushed Ephiny and I back from the dais. I struggled to stay on my feet and crouched, shielding my eyes with my arm. Women cried out around us and the children were gathered and hastened to safety, but in the midst of it the storm abruptly settled and died to a disquieting calm.

I surged from my feet and blinked the grit from my eyes, sucking in an alarmed breath. Dimitra, whose eyes glowed like silver-disked reflections of the moon, was slowly descending the stairs of the platform.

“*Gabrielle*.” Her voice rolled like fog over the intervening space, thick and heavy, saturating my hearing, my being. “*Come to me*.”

I turned back to find Ephiny wide-eyed and staring, and I mouthed, “Find Xena” to her. She nodded ever so slightly and started moving back toward the edge of the crowd.

With a last adjustment to my attire I turned and approached Dimitra. She stood at the base of the stairs leading to the dais, her eyes and skin and the folds of her leathers, shot through with glistening silver. Framed as she was by the flames of the bonfires set earlier in the day and the flowers woven into the frame of the platform, she made a striking sight. It was terrifyingly beautiful. Suppressing my fear, I came to a stop and dropped to one knee, hoping the show of respect would start us off on the right note.

From beneath my lashes I examined her closely, seeing the belt wrapped firmly around her waist. *Xena, where are you?* I knew there was a plan, but she hadn't seen fit to give me every detail.

“Rise and approach,” she bade me.

How is it the bad guys always seem to get the snooty attitudes down so quick? But I did as she asked, getting back to my feet and coming to stand before her.

“Is everything prepared?”

“Yes.”

“And Artemis?”

“She is our prisoner,” I answered, turning back to see Artemis pushed forward into view, bound and gagged, and surrounded by a host of Amazon warriors. “Her fate is yours to decide.”

“I want her sacrificed, Gabrielle.”

I'd been dreading this possibility ever since my talk with Artemis last night. I'd spent most of the day trying to figure out a solution. I bowed my head to show acceptance of her decision, but then cleared my throat. “May I suggest waiting until the end of the ceremony instead? Seeing you raised to godhood will make her fall and humiliation complete.” I winced inside, knowing this had to be hurting Artemis. A look back confirmed the complete absence of expression as Artemis stared stonily at her nemesis.

“Perfect.” Dimitra smiled at me. ***“See to it.”*** This close I could feel the swirl of power around her; dark and tainted, like filthy water; like mud—deep, sucking, lethal mud. Gods, I wanted to get away even as part of me wanted to let it pull me in. I nodded, not trusting my voice.

“Then let Brauronia begin.”

Deep breath. Square the shoulders. *You're on*. I turned and signaled to Eponin. She nodded and beckoned to the rest of the Amazons. The musicians and dancers took their places, and everyone else streamed slowly out into the common area, their faces solemn. The little girls looked frightened, clutching their petal baskets to their chests. Some of them had even begun to cry. I smiled and walked back to the edges of the common where the little girls were huddled. I crooked a finger at them and squatted, holding out a hand towards them. “It's okay. Everything's fine. Just do like you practiced and then back with your mothers for some sweets.”

Hesitantly, they trooped forward in a single file, stiffly tossing petals across the ground, staring widely at the menacing figure at the foot of the stairs. Surreptitiously, I scanned the crowds, searching for Xena, but still there was no sign of her. *Where are you?*

Somewhere behind me, the drummers began a stately rhythm, picked up by the woodwinds and passed on to the dancers who swayed like willows in a soft breeze. Following the slow procession, I reached out my arms from my sides, palms up and then brought them before me, an empty-handed gesture of offering, of request.

...Step-step-hip-sway-raise-arms-overhead...

Voices rose in song, giving words to the ancient Amazon tradition as I danced my way slowly towards the dais... and her. How she knew the steps to the dance I had no idea, but she began a mirror to me, her body moving sinuously to the haunting music.

...step-step-dip-spread-fingers-over-face-reach-for-the-moon...

Step by step we neared one another, the drumbeat joined by the stomp of booted feet against the earth. I could feel all of them through the vibration joining the Nation together beneath the emerging stars in the darkening edge of sky.

...twirl-bend-stand-join-hands-in-a-circle-sway-left-and-right-step-step...

Whether from the fires, the effort of the dance or my fear of failing, I could feel perspiration break out across my skin, between my shoulder blades. So close now. The knowledge that she would be touching me again almost broke my concentration, and I struggled not to think, not to give myself away...

...step-step-sashay-bump-step-step-cross-step-hunch-stand-arms-over-the-head-lean - and-turn-

Her hands came around my waist and my skin crawled in revulsion. A run of goose-bumps radiated from her cold touch and I shivered as I completed the turn until I faced her, her hands on my bare sides, mine on her upper arms.

...dipped-backwards-her-hand-on-my-belly ...

Gods, please hurry, I begged my missing friend. Dimitra brought me back up and her hand cupped the side of my face as we leaned first one way and then another, like reeds in the wind.

I pulled her to me, squeezing my eyes shut as she draped her arms around my shoulders, her breath urgent against my ear. I swallowed hard, breathing through my bared teeth, fighting the desire to be sick. We parted, spun and she took my hand again, twirling me. I closed my eyes, going with the motion until her hand on my shoulder brought me to a halt and joined us belly to belly in a close, intimate undulation. *Keep going, keep going*, I told myself. One way or another, this would soon be over. The music hit a crescendo and I opened my eyes, preparing for the moment I was dreading more than anything. And that's when I saw Autolycus just behind her. Hanging upside down by his ankles.

I almost blew the whole thing right there. This? *This* was the plan? *Oh my gods, we're all gonna die.*

Autolycus' expression indicated he probably felt the same way. He held a finger to his lips and I made a face at him. *Hurry. Up.* I mouthed. His long fingers reached out for Dimitra's waist and I tensed, preparing to do... something.

Dimitra turned us and I stumbled, sure she was going to see Autolycus hanging there like a fish on a line. Panicked, I risked a quick glance and nearly fell over, seeing him gone. I dropped my head back and reached for the sky, nearly poking Autolycus in the eye. He jerked his head back, making him swing and, beyond him in the branches, I could see Xena, looking more pissed off and strained than I'd seen her in a while. I

had to get Dimitra turned around again and fast. Desperate, I improvised; I ran my fingers up her arms and up the column of her neck, disgusted by the raw flash of unwanted arousal I felt. She smiled, the cold glint of her metallic eyes staring back at me, unblinking. She went with it, letting me lead.

...step-step-turn...

Autolycus dropped back into view, grimacing as he was jerked to a halt. He reached out again and I pushed her back. Too far. His hand struck her back and Dimitra's eyes widened as she jerked in surprise and started to turn.

Panicking, I grabbed her shoulders, pulled her to me and pressed my mouth to hers to keep her from turning around. Power surged through me. Every nerve ending burned. Above me I heard a gasp of shock, followed by a thud and groan of pain.

Dimitra pushed me away and turned. “*What is the meaning of this?!*”

Autolycus lay sprawled on the ground, rubbing the back of his head, the belt of power gripped firmly in his hand. Slowly, he looked up as Dimitra loomed over him, his expression changing with ample speed from annoyance to suave charm. “Oh, sorry. Mind if I cut in?”

* * *

XLV. Amazon Not Calm Slash Xena

After I left Amphipolis I came to know an old, beat-up fighter by the name of Alcebeus. Hard times and poor judgment had rendered him unfit for his job as captain-of-the-guard in Athens and somehow he found a way to add himself to my slowly growing army. Something about him made me think of a gruff uncle—I don't know why; I've never had one—but on occasion, late in the night after too many mugs of something nasty, we'd get to swapping tall tales and heavily fertilized boasts. I soaked everything up like a sponge, wanting to know more, know it all, and be better than anyone in battle. Masking my curiosity in arrogance, I waited for him to finish another of his outrageous stories and then asked him what he thought was the best strategy in combat.

“*Go with what you know,*” he answered, and winked at me before finishing off his ale.

I suppose, at the time that seemed like sound advice; in the same vein as “play to your strengths” I would imagine. Take what you do best and just keep doing it, rather than confuse things with something new and untested.

When the centaurs first sent their scouts against my army to press my defenses, Alcebeus rode out with a force to meet them. Using the standard Theban wedge attack he was definitely going with what he knew. From behind the lines I watched as he lay dying, having been easily unhorsed and trampled several times, and I thought that if I lived through any of what was going on, I would aim for the exact opposite of his advice. I figured that even if I never got close to the other end of things, it would at least be away from the philosophy that led to his messy demise.

Gabrielle may complain that I always have to find new ways to take out my

opponents, but there's actually a method to my obsessions.

That said, I was so stunned by the sight of Gabrielle kissing Dimitra, I hadn't a clue what to do after I dropped Autolycus.

Maybe it didn't matter. Enraged, I dropped to the ground in front of them and roundhouse kicked Dimitra in the chest. She flew—back first—into the dais, sending kindling and Amazons everywhere. Behind me, Gabrielle and Autolycus remained frozen in place, gaping. “*MOVE!*” I bellowed.

I should have been more specific.

The bard and the thief, shocked into motion, promptly crashed into each other and went sprawling. Disgusted, I grabbed the thief by his jerkin and was about to shove him towards Artemis, but the sharp crackle of fire jerked our attention back toward the dais where the wanna-be goddess had leapt back onto the platform looking miffed to say the least. The silver of her eyes dilated and she bared her teeth, stalking toward us. Any hope I had of a complete fizzle of her powers was vanishing rapidly. She raised her arms and the fire brightened.

“GO! GO!” I shouted. We scattered in three different directions, fireballs exploding into the ground at our heels, scorching wet earth and flower petals. “Get the belt to Artemis!” I flipped over another volley and taunted Dimitra with a smug grin as I twisted out of the way of her furious barrage. “That the best ya can do?” I demanded, trying to keep her attention on me. “C'mon!” Keeping her busy was the only shot we'd have of setting things right. A quick glance towards the crowds showed that Ephiny had already taken the precaution of pulling the fallen goddess out of view. The last thing we needed was Dimitra torching Artemis before we could even get the belt back to her.

I changed direction, pulled out my chakram and let out a war cry, building enough speed to meet her when she continued her advance.

“*Give it back!*” she screeched. “*Give it to me!*” She threw her hand out at me viciously, a giant swiping at a fly, and I found myself thrown backwards, sliding on my back through the mud. All of which went straight down the back of my skirt. Damn Amazon leathers.

Dimitra dashed by me, throwing flames and force erratically across the common area and sending everyone for cover while trying to knock down or fry Autolycus who was proving too agile so far for her aim. She gave chase and Autolycus exercised his better judgment instead of his mouth for a change and high-tailed it in the opposite direction. He veered around a tree, the angry goddess in tow, and then, just as she was about to grab him, he ducked under her arm and threw the wadded up belt at Gabrielle. Dimitra wheeled around and prepared to toast the bard.

As stealthily as the sucking mud would allow, I angled myself behind her and leapt on her back, locking my arms around her neck and riding her. She screamed and clawed at me, trying to pull me off her back, even as she threw the odd fireball or bale of lightning around the clearing. I tried to ignore the singes. This wouldn't have happened if I'd just been allowed to keep my leathers, fish smell or not.

“Get it to her!” I yelled at Gabrielle. “Now!” I watched, incredulously, as she wavered

on the point of indecision. “What are you waiting for?!” Dimitra ignored me in favor of pointing at Gabrielle in preparation of roasting her. I chopped down hard on her forearm, spoiling her shot. The piles of ale casks didn't fare so well, unfortunately, blowing apart in chunks of foamy wood.

“Give it to me or I'm going to kill all of you. Give me... betraying bitches... I'll rip your skin off!” Dimitra screamed and then followed it with a hair-lifting giggle. I felt her grab hold of me and suddenly I was airborne again, crashing shoulder first into a tree, stunned from the impact. I pressed a hand to my numbed arm and winced, struggling to my feet, but making it only as far as one knee.

“I'm gonna hang you from a tree and carve your guts out for boot laces.”

That didn't sound promising.

She ripped a wicked looking knife from her belt and came at me, the blade in her fist glowing as an extension of her power.

“Leave her alone!” **CRACK!**

Oh no.

Gabrielle, the belt wrapped around her arm, slammed someone's spear down across Dimitra's back again.

Dimitra shifted her shoulders, the maniacal grimace still in place as she slowly turned around to face Gabrielle. **“Give me the belt,”** she said slowly, giggled again—just once—and then went deadly serious again. **“You lying, tainted, worthless piece of trash. You said you loved me. Loved. Me. Why, Gabrielle? I could've been good for you. For all of them. But you've ruined it now. All ruined. All bad, so sad. But Gabrielle, when they're all dead, I'm going to cut your heart out and keep you alive long enough for you to watch me eat it.”** Dimitra rubbed the back of her hand against her mouth, stifling another laugh and turning it into a muffled sound of pain. Her eyes were wild, white around the edges. I wondered if she was going to froth at the mouth next.

Gabrielle, stunned by the verbal attack, took a small step backward.

“Give it to me, or I swear I'll gut your champion first.” Dimitra's empty hand closed in a fist; a brightening glow of flame she then pointed at me.

I saw Gabrielle's hands tremble on her make-shift staff and her eyes met mine for a brief, flickering moment before going back to Dimitra. She squared her shoulders. “Wait. All right.” Unwrapping the belt from around she had wound it around her wrist, she held it out in offering.

“Gabrielle, no!” I shook my head. What was she doing? Even with the threat to my life... Could I be worth so much more to her than even the Amazons?

“You want it?” Gabrielle asked, holding the belt out further. “Here.”

Dimitra reached for it and grabbed only empty air as Gabrielle pulled back and launched it over her head and straight into my lap. *Oh boy...* Dimitra immediately turned on me and fell face first in the mud, tripped up by Gabrielle's staff between her

feet.

“Run!” Gabrielle yelled at me like the idea hadn't already been foremost in my mind.

“Here!” I threw the belt back at her and got to my feet almost at the same time as Dimitra. *Her Vileness* shrieked and flailed in the air after it and missed, so I clipped her again. Gabrielle ran past me, handing off the belt once more even as she tucked her hand against her middle and headed towards the woods as if she still had it.

Too bad Ephiny had been right; Dimitra wasn't stupid. She took a couple steps after Gabrielle, but turned immediately to find me edging back toward the crowd as I tried to spot Artemis.

Frustrated and angry, Dimitra raised her hands toward the sky and let out an ear-piercing shriek. I stumbled, pressing my hands over my ears as others around the perimeter dropped to their knees in pain. The sky above flashed with lightning and the dark clouds moved in, darker and darker, until I wondered how the storm couldn't break right on top of us. My eyes widened as they tracked the cloud coming in faster and faster until...

My eyes widened. “That's no storm cloud...”

Glossy black wings carried the deadly wave of crows into the village, sharp beaks and beady eyes flashing as I ducked under one and pulled out my sword to defend myself against the rest. Children screamed and Ephiny's voice rose over the mocking caws of the crows to bark orders to the village to take cover. Slashing at the hail of beaks and claws, I dashed beneath the attack and found Dimitra in hot pursuit again. I took off; leaping over a barbecue pit and dropping to a sudden stop as a sixth sense warned me of Dimitra's desperate tackle. She flew over my head, knife in hand—going with what she knew, apparently—and crashed gracelessly into the mud as more rain began to fall.

Lightning was followed sharply by a growl of thunder. A heavy *THWAP!* splashed at my feet, followed by a half-hearted *Ribbit* as a toad scrambled in the mud.

“This just gets better and better,” I muttered and turned to run toward the throng of armed Amazons pretending not to be guarding Artemis. I got one step and found myself tripped up, Dimitra's hand on my ankle.

“*Gotcha!*” She giggled shrilly, raising the hair on my arms, and started dragging herself up my leg even as I repeatedly kicked her with my free foot. Even more annoying, she kept trying to stab me with her knife. *Damn useless Amazon leather...* I pushed and pulled and held the damn belt over my head to keep it out of her grubby little hands while holding her off with my chakram as she tried to make good on her promise to fillet me like a fish.

“Xena!”

The sound of my name came from overhead and there, sitting safely in the branches, was the King of Thieves. Dimitra, seeing him there, intensified her attack, scratching and growling like a crazed animal until I wrenched myself sideways and threw the belt into Autolykus's reach. She was off me in a shot and it was my turn to take her down into the mud. “Oh, no, ya don't!” The moment we hit the ground, the mud oozed over

me like a living creature, gripping me in a wet, dirty hug and pulling me off of her. She yanked free and followed hard after Autolycus who was making a beeline for the guards, and the second her attention left me, the mud dripped to the ground, letting me go.

Now, I'm ready to admit that I don't really number the Amazons in my list of favorite people for reasons I've already gone into and a few more I haven't. Feathers, parties and blue paint in the moonlight just ain't my thing. That said, I have—reluctantly, surprisingly, and gratefully—discovered that Gabrielle *is* on this list, which explains why I was willing to commit the following indignity to my person.

Dodging falling toads and flying crows, I sprinted after Dimitra, coming around in a broader angle, timing things just right—*Left foot rock, right foot tree stump, leap*—and I crashed into her headlong, knocking us both airborne and into the massive Brauronia cake. In retrospect, I rate it highly; softest landing I've ever had. Dimitra cried out in frosted disgust as I slammed her face-first into the strawberry filling. Icing and mud mixed quickly into a slimy, beige mess as we wrestled. “Hurry!” I yelled over my shoulder. Damn stuff was getting all over me and down my top. The five-tiered dessert must've taken the cooks days to make and Dimitra and I managed to destroy or wear most of it in seconds. Dimitra slipped as I punched her again, falling back on her butt and apparently straight down onto a hard candy figurine of an Amazon holding a spear. She yelped and danced around, trying to pull it out, and I spared a second to take stock.

From the corner of my eye I saw Gabrielle quickly pull Artemis free of her fake bonds behind the wall of Amazon defenders even as Autolycus was sliding to a halt, his precious, trouble-making swag extended. Reverently, Artemis accepted it, closing her eyes in profound relief, the belt knotted in her grip.

“This is no time to commune with your clothing!” I shoved cake up Dimitra's nose and then punched her again as hard as I could; dodging what I hoped was a weakened fireball as she went down.

Artemis wrapped it around her waist, making a sound of triumph as she set it snug around her hips.

Dimitra suddenly reared up like an animal in pain, arching in some kind of agony just as Artemis was gripped in a similar vise. Dimitra's eyes, first silver then translucent, shuttered cat-like, and then she wailed again, thrashing as the ground rumbled around us. The wind howled and the sound of the crows joined it in a painful keen. Trees bent, creaking under the strain, and the fall of toads intensified. Wiping icing from my eyes, I peered upwards, frustrated by the clouds as I searched for signs of the moon. Had it risen already? Were we too late?

Her skin, tanned from exposure to the outdoors, burned from within and I drew back, feeling heat coming off her in waves. The ground heaved, tossing me away just as Artemis collapsed, caught by Gabrielle and Autolycus while the ground shook again, this time knocking us all off our feet.

I fought against the wind, trying to get back up and using my chakram to block the odd crow or toad. Squinting, I could barely make out Dimitra's form as the glow around her brightened and I raised an arm to shield my eyes. She screamed and thrashed, and I could barely see her as she lurched to her feet, her body a living flame

as she tottered toward us. The heat pushed me back, pushed us all back, except Artemis, who, having finally come around, pulled away from Gabrielle and Autolycus and placed herself directly in the nut job's path.

Gabrielle reached out for her, but had to step back or risk being burned. "Artemis, no!"

Again I searched the sky, but the clouds were too thick.

I'll give her some credit; Artemis is no coward. She met Dimitra head-on, the two of them merging in a molten, white-hot light, struggling for dominance. Over the howl of the wind, I could hear them shouting at one another, fighting for control.

"...kill you...!"

"...Stop!"

"...mine, it's *mine!*"

I ducked another crow and retreated to stand beside Gabrielle, keeping her balanced against the tremors as we helplessly watched them battle. Dimitra threw wild punches, flailing, until Artemis could get a grip on her.

"Dimitra!"

"...should *never* have loved you..."

"I know... I understand."

I could have sworn I saw the bright outline of Dimitra pause before trying to gain an upper hand again.

"Listen to me!" Artemis shouted. "I was wrong!"

I stuck a finger in my ear and wiggled it around. "Did I just hear that?" I muttered under my breath.

Autolycus nudged me in the ribs. "Amen, sister."

"You're just saying that!" Dimitra cried, the two of them ranging back and forth like a small sun in the clearing as the leaves and branches whipped and clacked.

"I was wrong to treat you as I did, wrong to spurn you and the gift you offered me."

I heard a great, wracking sob, and through the glare of light, I could begin to see the outline of Dimitra locked as she was with her hands on Artemis' arm and wrist. "I don't believe you!"

"You can. Dimitra, you *must*; for your sake and the sake of the Nation... Would you destroy us all for your pride? I'm sorry!"

The blaze weakened further, revealing a distraught Dimitra who was as much leaning on Artemis as she was fighting her.

"My objections in the face of your earnest dream were baseless," Artemis went on. The crows were able to settle as the gale lost force, and the rain of toads abruptly

stopped. "Cease this needless attack, Dimitra. What is there to gain in destroying what you wanted most? I didn't understand... but I do now and, child, I'm so sorry for hurting you."

The buffet of wind dropped to a breeze, the light dying as Dimitra sank to her knees, sobbing as the fight went out of her completely. Artemis, acting with more maturity than I ever thought possible, knelt beside the defeated woman and pressed a kiss to her forehead as she hugged her. Around us the early evening settled, with only the soft rustle of leaves and the occasional croak of a toad to disturb the moment. Even the crows had fallen silent.

"I didn't mean to," Dimitra said over and over again, crying. "I swear, I didn't mean to... I-I couldn't stop it. It wasn't supposed to be this way. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..." As she spoke, Ephiny stepped forward and signaled to her warriors and dozens surged forward to surround Dimitra and Artemis, armed with spears and swords to keep a wary watch on them both.

Beside me, Gabrielle's head tilted to one side, listening. A familiar look of concentration surfaced on her face and I waited, wondering what she was thinking. "She wasn't in control either," she murmured finally, a hint of surprise in her voice.

"Like it matters," I replied.

"Yeah," Ephiny added, overhearing. "Just look at this place."

"But it does matter," Gabrielle insisted quietly, her eyes still on Artemis as the goddess rocked Dimitra and—I couldn't believe my ears—crooned to her. "I won't deny she's guilty of theft, but I don't think mortals were ever meant to wear her belt. Dimitra wanted to be one of Artemis' dancers so badly and when Artemis turned her down the way she did, she felt angry and hurt and rejected. Who wouldn't?"

Reluctantly, I nodded, seeing the logic of it. "So she wanted to get back at Artemis, but when she took the belt from Autolycus, it probably fed on and amplified what she was already feeling and locked her into a cycle of emotional backlash."

Ephiny looked back and forth between us, and then around the village, her mouth hanging open. "And this means, what, exactly? We're just supposed to forgive her for razing the village and killing our sisters?" A low murmur of agreement came from the crowd re-gathering behind her.

I could see this turning ugly, so I cocked an eyebrow and put a supportive hand on Gabrielle's shoulder, reminding them who stood behind their Queen. "No. She's saying that if Dimitra's to be punished, the sentence has to fit the crime." It was more leeway than I would have given her, but I trusted Gabrielle's sense of compassion, especially given how Dimitra had treated her out in the woods. She wouldn't let Dimitra off completely.

"Indeed," Artemis spoke up. The warriors backed up a little as she stood, Dimitra leaning heavily against her, still weeping. "Justice must be done. I want her placed in custody; her fate will be decided after Brauronia." Amazon guards came forward to take Dimitra away. "I'll not have her ill-treated before her trial." I could tell the guards were disappointed, but they followed orders and led an unresisting Dimitra away to a cell.

Autolycus cleared his throat as he fingered his moustache and eyed the clouds now giving way to a clearer night sky. My lips twitched and I smirked at his unsubtle hint.

Artemis smiled too. “I’ve not forgotten you. I said justice must be done, did I not?” She turned to face the Nation. “Let it be known that all charges against Autolycus the thief—”

“King,” he murmured. “*King of Thieves.*”

“Autolycus, *King of Thieves,*” she smoothly amended, “are dropped. Additionally, for his courage in helping to return my belt, he is to be considered a friend of the Nation, welcome on our lands and at our hearths.”

Gabrielle and I shared a dubious look and I made a mental note to remember to check his pockets before letting him leave after the party; otherwise it could end up being the shortest ‘friend of the Nation’ relationship he might ever enjoy.

“Apology accepted.” Autolycus sauntered forward and bowed with a flourish, leading straight into taking her hand and dropping a kiss on it, much to Artemis’ suspicious amusement. I didn’t miss the way she kept a firm grip on her belt until he released her again.

“This is wonderful,” Ephiny said, somewhat sarcastically. “But can I remind everyone that time is running out?” She pointed to the sky where the moon, visible now behind the parting clouds, was well on the rise. “If we don’t complete the ceremony, all of this is for nothing.”

Gabrielle went into what I call ‘queen-mode’—an impressive state of focused, no-nonsense I’d first seen evidence of the last time we were here—and handed Autolycus her staff, her face growing serious. “Ephiny, would you call everyone to order and have the musicians readied, please?”

Ephiny, obviously relieved, nodded and began herding everyone back into place. Eponin and her warriors took up positions nearby, vigilant and serious.

I could see the tension settle into Gabrielle’s shoulders, the way her hands curled into fists, hidden in the folds of her skirt. “Hey.” She looked at me, startled from some hidden thought. “You’re gonna do great.”

She smiled at me. The first real smile I’d seen from her in days. I couldn’t help but give her one back. “Thanks,” Gabrielle said, standing a little taller. Calmly, she walked to the edge of the clearing, near Ephiny and the other dancers, to wait, but she watched me until Artemis took her place at the top of the dais.

Not about to relax my guard either, I drifted back towards the edge of the dais, giving Gabrielle a nod in reassurance as she made a last second adjustment to her outfit and composed herself.

Artemis did the same, but I could see a glimmer of concern on her face, too. I glanced up at the moon and wondered—was it already too late? How far reaching might the effects be if Artemis couldn’t regain her powers? The slow, earthy rhythm of the drums drew my attention back to the ceremony and I watched, as before, the dancers began to sway and after a moment Gabrielle followed suit. In mirror image, Artemis

joined, so much more fluid and graceful than Dimitra had been. The dance between them as they approached each other was seductive and mesmerizing and my jaw hurt just watching it. I shouldn't still have been entertaining thoughts of breaking Artemis' fingers every time she touched Gabrielle, should I? If this kept up, I'd need to get outta here—fast.

Dimitra didn't have the belt anymore. The village was safe. The festival could continue. I shouldn't be feeling like this.

I watched the sky, the moon, hating how I felt and wondering again if it meant we were already too late.

* * *

XLVI. Save the Last Dance for Me

The rest of her personality quirks aside, Artemis was a surprisingly good dancer; smooth, aware, graceful—she even made *me* look good, which is saying something. By now I knew the steps well enough I could spare some concentration and I could sense something different in her, a change. When she turned me in her arms, pulling me against her body, I looked into her eyes and noted they had turned a white gold, the sun-warmed shade of granite. But instead of just the stone of her gaze, I could see other hues, greater depths, and I wondered if this might be a lasting touch of her brief brush with mortality.

“You're beautiful, Gabrielle,” she said, swaying us first one way and then the other. “My belly has been aflutter and you still manage to calm me.”

Despite the fact I *knew* I looked a wreck, stank and could move to Athens with the bags under my eyes, I still blushed. “That's very sweet of you. I'm glad you're feeling better.”

Artemis shook her head, sending her single braid dance along in the air between us as we moved. “I've never felt more alive than I do right now.” Her warm palm slid down my arm, her fingers locking with mine.

...step-step-turn-lean-twirl...

Was any of this working? I spared a glance at the women gathered around us, their eyes enraptured as the full force of the ceremony was realized before them. This was Brauronia and never before had the connection between woman and goddess ever carried more weight and substance to the Amazon Nation as now, when, for a breathless, terrifying day, it had almost all been lost to them. I could see smiles and some of them clapped along, swaying to the music.

The moon over Artemis' shoulder, as full and rounded as an expectant mother, gleamed bright and sharp in the darkening sky as it made its ascent.

...step-arms-at-waist-stretched-now-over-head-lean-back...

Artemis supported me as I dipped backwards, my long hair nearly trailing on the ground. In mirror succession, I did the same for her as she echoed my move. We danced close together and I heard her laugh softly in my ear. It was an unexpected sound and I looked at her quizzically. “What?” Had I done something silly?

“Your friend looks ready to chew an anvil in half.” Her shining eyes slid sideways and I followed suit to find Xena standing off to one side, her arms crossed and her jaw working in a slow grind from one side to the other. Someone definitely wasn't in a partying mood. “Do you think she has any molars left?”

I stared at Artemis in amazement; had she just cracked a joke? “Well...” I was all for encouraging a sense of humor, but I wasn't sure I wanted it to be at Xena's expense. “She's not one for parties. And we're not out of the woods yet.”

“I should not have said what I did to her earlier,” she said, changing the topic on me. Or so I thought. “She has been steadfast in her purpose, even when she had no further cause to help us.” A thoughtful look came over her face as she looked up at the night sky. We continued our dance.

“I was wrong,” she said suddenly, spinning us slowly.

“About what?”

“She *is* worthy of you.”

I blinked at her in surprise, taken aback by this continuing change in attitude. “Artemis...” What on earth to say to that? Unaccountably, I could feel the heat rising in my face.

“It took the loss of my immortality to see it, to feel it for myself. As brightly as the stars of immortality burn, it is a cold, chill light. But mortals... the human heart is a sun burning so fierce and hot, I wonder how it is you can stand it.” Taking advantage of my speechlessness, she smiled and leaned forward, her lips hovering just shy of my mouth. I waited for it, bracing myself for the contact, but she leaned back and pressed a kiss against my forehead instead, murmuring, “But having felt it—that fire—I know now why you do... and I envy her for it.” The touch of her lips was brilliant warmth pouring through me. The scent of jade and evergreens and wildflowers enveloped me and filled my senses. Unlike with Dimitra, this touch of power was as gentle and welcome as sunshine after a cold rain. I breathed into it, nearly gasping, as it trickled into me; goddess to mortal to the earth beneath our feet—the connection had been remade and restored.

Was it the moonlight or was it us that glowed so brightly? At the edge of my awareness, I thought I heard cheering and a chorus of voices, rising in some triumphant song. Artemis, smiling, her eyes lit with burgeoning power, let go one of my hands, turning us and reaching out with the other.

It was almost as if I was outside of myself, just watching instead of being there, at the center of it all. Artemis, her one hand in mine, reached out to Xena with the other. I could see the glower on her beautiful face, the wariness and suspicion, but Artemis stretched her hand out just a little further. Perhaps it was that extra effort, but I could see it then as clear as day how much Artemis had changed. Aloof and proud and solitary, Artemis had likely never known the need for anyone else, except perhaps in the manner the gods needed any mortal—to worship and revere them. But this... I could see the way Artemis looked at her, the way she grasped Xena's arm like a friend and drew her into our circle.

Xena's long fingers linked with mine and with Artemis', closing the conduit of power.

Her fingers twitched as it washed over her too, and she smiled at me, one of those smiles that sometimes haunt me in the kind of dreams I can't tell her about. On my other side, Artemis squeezed my hand, drawing my attention to her and she smiled too; a wild and carefree grin that suddenly shed the mantle of seriousness she'd worn almost from the second I met her face-to-face.

...turn-turn-turn-raise-arms-and—

Artemis suddenly ducked under our hands, slipping between Xena and I like in a children's game, but just as we would have had to turn and twist inside-out to follow, she let us go. Xena and I swung together and she caught my waist or risked a collision.

Artemis, alight with power and laughter, bounded forward and leapt onto the remains of a tree stump, spreading her arms wide to encompass the entire Nation gathered before her. "My dear Amazons! Heal what may, mend what will... all else is in Hades' hands and the Elysian Fields. Let us celebrate!" And from Artemis flowed a spray of light bursting forth from her hands to envelop the village, covering everyone like ripples moving outward in a lake.

Injuries were healed, decorations were magically restored to their former glory, and the village itself... who would believe me who hadn't been there? It was as if the attack had never happened—huts and pottery were made new, as if never burnt or shattered. My joy was tinged with bittersweet sadness that lives couldn't be so easily restored. I could see the same expression on other women's faces; the happiness tinged with a longing for a lost friend, a family member cut down before their time.

Xena noticed. I felt her fingers brush across my cheek and only then did I feel the wetness of a tear. Happiness, relief, loss and grief... the emotions felt so close to the surface. The corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile, but I could see that she felt what I felt and wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad. Her touch was comforting and I leaned into her, needing to feel the solidity of her even as I wondered how she'd react given our earlier fights. I needn't have worried; it was all swept away between one breath and the next as Xena wrapped her arms around me and hugged me close, the both of us watching Artemis, bathed in moonlight and fire, silhouetted before her elated people as she sang along with them.

It was a moment I'd see framed in my memory for the rest of my days; their faces upraised, smiling, laughing, cheering, their hands reaching out to their goddess, and Artemis... She balanced there a moment longer and then jumped down amongst them, mingling as if they were her equal. And who was who to say she didn't feel that way? Someone pressed a mug into her hands and she raised it into the air.

"To courage in the face of danger. To hope in the shadow of despair. To the queen and her stoic champion!"

A roar followed as others raised their own drinks to join in the toast to us.

Artemis, encouraged by the welcome of her Amazons, tilted her head back and downed her drink. And immediately started gasping and choking.

I laughed softly. "I could have warned her not to do that—Hydra's Piss has quite a kick to it."

“Is that right?” Xena drawled.

“Yeah,” I said proudly, looking at Xena, who gazed back at me with an indulgent smile. “I won the drinking contest, after all.”

“The Eyebrow” quirked even as she huffed a sigh. “I seem to recall you mentioning it right before you nibbled on me...”

Before I could blushing reply, Artemis—who had finally recovered her breath—held up her hands to gather everyone's attention. “A dance! We must have a dance—to assure the success of Brauronia!” A whoop went up in response from the Nation. The musicians, already primed, broke into a rousing reel.

Xena glanced at me, a pained expression on her face. “We shoulda tossed the belt in the river. She's worse now than when she had a stick up her—”

“*Xena.*” I backhanded her in the midriff.

The musicians' tune was spontaneously taken up by those who joined in to sing, and even Autolycus began to clap before he found himself captured by a couple of younger Amazons who began leading him through the steps. He waggled his eyebrows at us and grinned, apparently willing to let bygones be bygones.

“Go on, Champion,” Artemis called, her arms filled by a tiny girl still clutching her flower basket. “I would have the event marked with a moment equal to the occasion. Give us a dance to remember!”

When Xena didn't jump to action, I saw Ephiny raise her own mug, looking decidedly less annoyed with us now that the belt's influence had been removed. “Come on, Xena,” Ephiny said from the forefront of the gathering. “If you're too shy, one of us would be happy to take your place.”

Did Ephiny just wink at me?

Xena looked at Artemis and then down at me, and then shook her head. “Oh boy.”

“What's wrong?” I whispered. “This isn't on your list of ‘many skills’? Trust me; you can't dance any worse than I do.”

She bit her lip, clearly reticent about telling me what was on her mind, but she quickly muttered, “My foot's killing me.”

“Your foot?”

Another pained look. “Long story.”

The crowd was getting impatient. “Just lean on me and go with it,” I told her. “They're gonna eat us alive in a second.”

Her dark brows lowered. “Let ‘em try.” I could just imagine her thoughts of dismemberment and mayhem, most likely involving her chakram and an explosion or two.

“Xena.” I poked her to get her attention, and closed the space between us that she could disguise her injury by letting me lead in a sway to the music. The crowd,

satisfied for the moment, began pairing off as well, joining in all along the common area. Amidst the revelry and song, I could also smell cooking meat on the evening breeze. Out of danger, surrounded by friends, I felt relaxed and at peace for the first time in days. I hugged Xena, hearing her grunt from the force of my exuberance.

“What was that for?”

“Just glad everything's back to normal.”

She turned us, bringing my back to the gathering as she looked over my shoulder.

“Yeah? So you're not in love with hatchet-face any more?”

There was no missing the not-so-casual tone. “Xena, look at me.”

Wary blue eyes met mine.

“I was never in love with her.”

“She said...” Xena looked away from me, watching the other women in their costumes and finery dancing around the dais. “...she said you whispered my name.” Her gaze slid back to mine, suddenly open and vulnerable and so precious in her uncertainty.

I knew what she was referring to. I'd tried so hard to ignore it, forget it, avoid it... first from shame, then from desperate need, and now... Artemis had her belt back again. How could I possibly be feeling like this?

“Gabrielle?” She said softly, her brows pinched in worry.

“I did.” Swallowing against a suddenly dry mouth, I tried to speak to the odd expression dawning on Xena's face. “When it happened, when she did it... I... I got lost in it and-and I could have sworn... I mean... I guess I wanted it... to be you.”

The look of shy wonder was so endearing on her. “Doesn't it figure?” She chuckled self-consciously.

“What does?”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I thought it was the belt making me crazy. Or just Artemis.” Xena shook her head, looking almost bewildered. “I guess it was more than that.”

Have you ever known that sensation when your heart suddenly feels too big for your chest and you might explode from it? Or melt? Or maybe pass out from forgetting to breathe? On the faintest gasp of air I was able to manage my very coherent, very eloquent response: “Oh?”

The shyness changed into amusement and, her injured foot apparently forgotten, Xena swept me up into the pace of the dance, her smile brighter than the brilliant glow of the full moon above us. A cheer accompanied us and I laughed, caught up in our happiness as she danced us across the dais.

“Oh yeah,” Xena burred as she twirled me out to the farthest reach of our joined hands and then back into the warmth of her arms. “Oh yeah,” she said again, and I stared

into the face of my sun as she lowered her lips towards mine...

* * *

Epilogue - Memories in Moonlight

Solari shifted in her cushions, her one concession to the privileges of an elder, and looked down at all the young faces staring back at her, hanging on her every word. Each Brauronia the story had become more and more popular, harkening back to a time when Artemis had walked among them, until... well... she hadn't any longer. But they held to their traditions, celebrating the mysteries and the connections shared when the Nation came together even if their goddess no longer took part. Some hoped that someday—sometime in the future—Artemis would find them worthy again and return. Others took the stories for legend, quaint and meant to be only loosely interpreted.

But she had been there. She had seen it for herself, no matter that some of the younger Amazons scoffed and didn't think she saw them making fun of her old age. So what if she sometimes spoke to those who no longer walked among them? Didn't the dead still hear their thoughts?

The children, though... oh, the children. Every Brauronia they gathered at her feet, clamoring for the same stories over and over, and this one most of all.

“And then what, Auntie?”

She was always Auntie to the children, Auntie to even some of the elders who were young enough to be spry when she was already wishing her joints didn't ache so bad when the weather changed.

“Auntie?”

Such beautiful, innocent faces. Solari would never have thought she would grow to love children so much with their boundless energy and their quick laughter. She picked up the thread of her story. “All of us—me, Eponin, Regent Ephiny and Artemis, even Autolycus—we stood watching everyone, clapping and singing and sharing what was left of the Brauronia cake—”

“Not like when Lisa fell on it and cook had to use the spoon on her to get the frosting back before Regent noticed?”

“No, not like that. Just with plates or their fingers,” Solari clarified patiently as they giggled. She was used to the interruptions and questions. So very curious, the young. “Artemis shared her cup with us all and we felt truly a part of each other. And then she made her toast—”

A little girl stood, as if on cue, raising her small pottery cup in the air. “To courage in the face of danger. To hope in the shadow of despair. To the queen and her champion!”

The other girls cheered, making Solari smile in memory as she recalled responding in exactly the same way the first time she had heard it, with the deep-seated chills that raced up her spine. “Just like that.” She nodded and the girl sat down, pleased with herself. “We cheered, just like you. We'd taken down slavers, our own goddess

defeated her would-be replacement, and our Queen and her Champion, through challenge and hardship, had brought us to victory. Except for those we had lost to battle, we couldn't have been happier."

"And then..." another girl said, grinning around her missing two front teeth in anticipation.

Solari smiled back, nodding. "And then Artemis, happier than anyone remembered her ever being, called for a dance, asking Queen Gabrielle and her champion, Xena, to lead us."

"And they did."

"They were shy about it, but they did," Solari agreed, her thin lips pursing in an effort not to laugh aloud at the memory of Ephiny's taunt. Gods knew, Solari wouldn't have turned down a dance with the Queen.

"They were beautiful, weren't they, Auntie?"

Solari looked out beyond the children at the Amazons, dressed in their feathers and beads, swirling around the firelight and lost herself in the corridors of time. "They were so beautiful," she murmured, seeing the ghostly pageantry of memory play out before her wizened eyes as she turned to look at the dais. "Dressed in their feathers and finery, they were a sight to see. So strong and happy together. I envied them."

"Why?"

She looked down at the scrunched, but earnest expression of the children at her feet as they tried to understand. "Because they had each other, and because that was the way it was meant to be." She let out a long breath, remembering the way they moved together, even more fluidly than Gabrielle had with Artemis. "They danced in the moonlight and the firelight, Xena's dark head bent over Queen Gabrielle's golden one, speaking to each other so softly we could only guess what they might be saying."

Ephiny may have guessed, she recalled. Eponin had handed the Regent that dinar later saying something about big beads...

"Before the Nation, they danced across the platform and we loved them—for their beauty and their strength and their heroism—we loved them and wanted to be them."

Solari reached out her wrinkled hand with its gnarled fingers and cupped a little dark-haired girl's cheek, smiling as she added softly, "Most of all, we loved them because they loved each other, and we cheered loudest when Xena took Gabrielle in her arms and kissed her."

It was one of the most heart-lifting moments she had ever known and Solari smiled again, thinking of how Xena and Gabrielle had looked at one another that night and for the rest of Brauronia. Even now, the thought of them warmed the cockles of her poor, tired heart.

The dark-haired girl grinned happily as the others sighed in appreciative longing. "That's a beautiful ending, Auntie." The other children, even some of the formerly-scoffing Amazons whispered their agreement.

“Yes.” Taking a thin, but happy breath, Solari nodded, easing back into the comfort of her cushions. “It certainly is, isn't it?”

—Fin

(July 2003—March 2005)

No Amazon feathers were harmed or permanently ruffled during the production of this story, but Artemis was left feeling unusually frisky. Any allegations of squirrels meeting an untimely and gory end have remained unconfirmed as Xena could not be reached for comment.